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Stories

**WARNING - SLASH material (M/M sexual relationships),
 NC-17 level and some graphic photographs are contained in this E-ZINE.**

There may also be some controversial subjects in the stories, please remember that this is fiction, and is in no way meant to make light of any similar situations.

Proceed at your own **RISK**, If you don't like the material, then please click on [this link](#). Otherwise choose one of the links below.

Disclaimer: These stories have been betaed, but the author has the final say in how the story is presented.

Our authors appreciate feedback, please be kind.

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Det. James Ellison is a man with a problem; an injury, a mystery and a date with a psychic are just the beginning. 35K

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Kylia

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Novelist Blair Sandburg and Detective Jim Ellison are brought together to solve a case... and maybe find a whole lot more. 52K

Thief of Hearts

Morgana

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Captain Jim Ellison from Narcotics finds a thief in his home and loses his heart. 87K

Virtually Yours

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When a seemingly careless hacker begins attacking several telecommunications firms in Cascade, the trail leads directly to a particular computer engineer with something to hide. Will the Cascade Police Department's High Tech Crimes Division be able to apprehend the culprit, or are they hiding behind 'firewalls' of their own? 208K

 In The Beginning



In The Beginning - Lisa, Duncan's Twin

Jim Ellison sorted through his mail. When is the post office gonna figure out that Blair Sandburg doesn't live here anymore? Jim had personally gone into the local branch of the post office and submitted another change of address form, but obviously, the idiots couldn't read.

Sighing, Jim dug through his wallet, looking for the business card Blair had left with his new address on the back. Time to go straight to the source.

An answering machine picked up and a disembodied voice stated office hours and encouraged the caller to leave a message, man.

This is Jim Ellison. I just bought the loft you moved out of. I've got some mail here for you. I'll be home all day, today, if you want to come by and get it. 555-1014.

Hanging up, Jim set Blair's mail on the edge of the counter and went about opening his own mail. Once Jim was done paying bills, he finished filling out the application to the police academy. His back pay from the Army was almost completely gone, most of it a down payment on the loft, and the rest spent on living costs this last month, and now, after ten years as a Ranger, with an honorable discharge, Jim needed a job and serving the city of Cascade seemed like a viable option.

I'll take the application by the academy tomorrow. Jim thought to himself. No sense waiting.

Blair Sandburg climbed the familiar steps up to the loft. He had lived there for two years before the building owner decided he wanted to sell the individual lofts instead of continuing to rent them; Blair had moved out two weeks ago.

It felt weird knocking on the door of his former home, but he did, hearing someone moving around inside the loft. The door opened and Blair smiled at the man standing in front of him.



In The Beginning - [Lisa, Duncan's Twin](#)

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“Jim Ellison?”

“Blair Sandburg?”

They shook hands, nodding.

“Come on in,” Jim invited.

“Thanks.”

Blair closed the door behind him as Jim stepped over to the kitchen counter.

Turning, Jim handed Blair his mail. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks,” Blair said distractedly. “I’ve sent in two different change of address cards and they still don’t get it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jim agreed. “I filled one out for you also.”

“Guess they’re just idiots,” Blair mused, grinning.

“Hey, don’t talk too badly about city employees,” Jim chided, his smile lightening the impact of the words.

“Oh, man, I didn’t mean—”

Holding up his hand, Jim interrupted, “No, it’s okay. I’ve thought the same about them, but if luck holds, I’ll be working for the city in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh?” Blair said, quirking his left eyebrow. “Doing what?”

Blair’s little eyebrow maneuver made Jim’s heart beat double time and he stammered, “A-a cop.”

“Wow!”

They stared at each other for a long minute before speaking simultaneously.

“I should be—”

“Would you like—”

They laughed self-consciously.

“Go ahead,” Blair suggested.

Gesturing to the kitchen, Jim asked, “Would you like something to drink?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.”

Stepping towards the fridge, Jim rattled off the short list of what he knew he had on hand. “I’ve got water, juice, milk, beer, coffee. There might be a soda in here, but...”

“Beer’s fine, man.”

Grabbing two bottles, Jim twisted off the lids and walked back to where Blair was still standing by the front door. He handed one of the bottles to Blair and then motioned toward the couch. They sat on opposite ends and sipped their beers.

“So, what do you do?” Jim asked.

“Oh, I’m teaching at Rainier. I’m an anthropologist.”

“Really? What specialty?”

“Cultural anthropology. I’m really interested in...”

Their discussion continued through two more beers and a bag of pretzels Jim found. It was dark outside when Blair finally took a breath.

“Oh man,” Blair said, looking around. “I didn’t realize how late it was. You must have things to do.”

“Not really, Chief,” Jim mumbled, carrying the empty beer bottles to the trash.

Slipping his shoes back on, Blair grabbed his backpack and walked over to the front door. Jim met him there.

Looking into Jim’s sky blue eyes, Blair swallowed loudly. “I...I’d really like to see you again, Jim.”

Nodding, Jim smiled. “Me, too.”

“Great!” Blair said. “When?”

Tilting his head as if in thought, Jim said, “How about right now?”

“Now?”

“Unless you have something else to do.”

“No. Not a thing.”

Taking Blair’s backpack from him, Jim guided Blair back to the couch with a gentle touch on his back.

“So, what do you want to do for dinner?” Jim asked.

“Anything’s fine by me.”

Blair watched Jim dig through a drawer in the kitchen, coming back with several take out menus and the cordless phone.

They ordered Italian, cheese stuffed manicotti, salads and garlic bread, and Jim opened a bottle of red wine. They continued their earlier discussion about Blair's career and field experience.

"So, you never told me, what did you write your dissertation on?"

"Sentinels," Blair said around a bite of salad.

"What's a Sentinel?"

Blair began explaining about Sentinels, stopping once to clap Jim on the back after Jim choked on a sip of wine, but then picking up right where he left off. He talked on and on, elaborating on his own theories about the origins of Sentinels and how exciting it would be to find a modern day Sentinel.

It was nearly an hour later when Blair grinned sheepishly. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about what?" Jim asked, dumbfounded.

"I didn't mean to bore you with all that about Sentinels," Blair said, helping Jim clear the table.

"I wasn't bored, Chief."

Staring at Jim, Blair realized that it was true; Jim had listened intently to Blair's whole monologue and had even prompted Blair with questions, asking probing questions, showing genuine interest. Blair's heart filled with happiness; it felt good to be able to share his life's work with someone who was truly curious and interested. So many other people Blair dated seemed to tune him out when he started expounding on his passion.

In companionable silence, they stood side by side and did the few dishes, arms occasionally rubbing together, smiling at each other every time their eyes met.

Hanging the dish towel up to dry, Jim suggested, "Want some ice cream?"

Rubbing his stomach, Blair smiled. "I shouldn't..."

"But you will?" Jim grinned back.

"Yeah."

"Great! I have some vanilla and--"

"No, no, no!" Blair said, shaking his head. "Haven't you been to Benjie's?"

"Where?"

"Benjie's Ice Cream Shoppe. It's right around the corner. Best ice cream in Cascade."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Trust me."

Gesturing to the door, Jim said, "Let me try this ice cream and then we'll see if I trust your opinion."

"Deal."

Walking back from Benjie's, Jim admitted that it **was** the best ice cream in Cascade and Blair laughed so hard he snorted, and the more he tried to not snort again, the more he did. Eventually, they had to find a bench to sit on, both still laughing.

Later, Blair asked, "So, you're gonna be a cop."

"Hopefully."

"What did you do before?"

"I was in the Army."

"Really? Why'd you get out?"

Unable to actually believe Blair hadn't seen a newspaper, or heard a report on television, Jim thought Blair was being facetious, and answered harshly.

“Don’t you know?”

Shocked at Jim’s tone, but wondering what was driving the attitude, Blair asked, “What happened, Jim?”

Still not sure about Blair’s motives, Jim asked, “Where were you three months ago?”

Thrown by the shift in conversation, Blair answered, “Borneo. I got back to the states a week before I moved out.

“Jim, what happened?”

His attitude softened by the concern evident in Blair’s eyes and tone, Jim opened up and told Blair about Peru, about the crash and losing his men, about surviving in a foreign culture, about his eventual rescue and subsequent debriefing, keeping only the secret of his senses to himself. Jim didn’t speak about his feelings, yet Blair heard the anguish and fear and sadness in every word, and laid his hand on Jim’s arm, comforting as best he could, but Blair kept quiet, knowing unconsciously that Jim had never revealed these feelings to any other person.

Long after Jim finished talking, they still sat close together on the bench, the evening fading into the early morning hours. Eventually, they walked back to the loft, still not speaking about the myriad of emotions coursing through them. Both men were rocked by the depth of feeling between them and the fact that they had only just met. It was frightening and exciting at the same time.

Holding his backpack loosely in one hand, Blair searched Jim’s face. “Well…”

Jim’s eyes briefly met Blair’s, a wealth of feeling flooded Jim’s soul and he whispered, afraid to speak, but even more afraid not to.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“Then I won’t,” Blair whispered back.

Their hands touched, fingers entwined and clasped tightly together. Their linked fingers were like a lifeline in the chaos that was their lives; they were both reaching out, as rescuer and rescued.

And it was the beginning of everything.



The End.

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to Diana for always being there. Thanks to Patt for being Patt. Thanks to Mary for the beta. And thanks to the rest of my TFCS cause y'all are the best support and encouragement team in the world!

Dedicated to my Momma, cause she wanted to read something I wrote, and I sure as hell wasn't gonna show her the NC-17 stuff! :)

And like most of my stories, this one was inspired by a song. Lyrics to follow.

Yes by Chad Brock

(She's changed to He's)

He moved into my old apartment
That's how we got this whole thing started
He called and said that I had mail
Waiting there for me

I told him that I'd come get it
How could I know in just a minute
I'd be standing face to face
With my own destiny

Oh, and we sat there talking just like we were old friends
Then I asked him 'can I see you again?'
And he said 'yes!'
And I said 'wow!'
And he said 'when?'
And I said 'how about right now!'
Love can't wait
The I asked if he believed in fate
And he said 'yes!'

Days flew by just like a fast train
And nothing else has been on my brain
Except the thought of how he makes me
The man I want to be
He's the one that I want for a million reasons
Loving him is just like breathing
It's easy and it's obvious
That he was made for me

Oh then it happened on night looking in his eyes
Oh when I popped the question much to my surprise
He said 'yes!'
So we called the preacher, family and friends
And nothing's been the same since
He said 'yes!'



The End.

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 Ke Kali Nei Au



Ke Kali Nei Au (The Wedding Song) - Landis McQuade

"Sandburg put your shirt on. That's gotta be some kind of health code violation."

"Who are you? OSHA? First off dude, I'm on break. Second, I'm not hanging out in the parts of the building that get inspected- I'm not even inside. Third, you're the biggest contributor to the backyard militia Kincaid runs in his spare time, so I'm speculating it might not be the wisest move on his part to write you up because I'm outside sensualizing in harmonic convergence with my main squeeze Ge."

"You're still on company property. You should at least try to look respectable."

"I don't? That hurts man. I feel it right here."

"That's sunburn, Sandburg. Need I remind you this is a place of business and not your personal nudie beach?"

"Nudie beach? Do I look naked to you?"

"You looked debauched. Those jams slide down any lower you're going to get hauled off for public indecency. I get enough heat as it is. I don't need those yabbos thinking I'm running a prostitution ring on the side."

"How could they think that? Your hobby agenda's pretty full as it is. Where would you find the time? And besides does it look like there's anyone around to solicit? Private beach remember?"

"Just put the shirt on already."

"I am spiritually aligning myself with the gravity of all that is electric and magnetic in the universe. Go away. My atoms are down with being static right now. I'm sensing the application of double standards in practice here."

"Get that from your crystal bracelet did you?"

"Nope, just the normal powers of observation. You're more naked than I am. Well you are. It's math. There's more of you to be naked."

"I at least have a legitimate reason for being half naked."

"Yeah. Same as me. It's hot. It's Hawaii."

"I was surfing."

"Oh the sports reason."

"It's valid."

"Sure it's not more of the 'just because I'm 40something doesn't mean I can't flex with the best of the twentysomethings reason?' No need to get self conscious. I'll give you leeway. Your body is a temple to Kanaloa, a vessel to show reverence and respect, a physical libation if you will. But that's not really a reason is it? Are you blushing?"

"I like the feel of the water against my skin."

"Uh,huh, you could wear a wetsuit."

"I like good old fashioned cotton, not some synthetic threads and fibers created by nuclear physicists to use as bomb insulation then sold generically to sports clothing conglomerates that put in the lowest bid when they run out of money to build the bomb."

"You know, cotton's much more revealing than those polyurethane skins. Sure there's no ulterior self-inflation motive you're not including in your valid reason?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you."

"But you are."

"I'm not. My property. My rules."

"Jim hate to break it to you but volume 54's full already and they don't carry those leather bound journals you favor locally. Could be three weeks before you're officially able to add a new rule and move over to the left, you're blocking the sun."

"Always room for one more."

"You know technically no one owns anything."

"My property deed says otherwise. And who said you could take a break?"

"Definitive verbal proof of the double standards. You've been surfing all morning while some of us have been working."

"You were watching cooking shows on TV."

"I need to keep current. See what the competition's up to."

"You're the one who eagerly suggested you cover Maggie's shifts while she's on vacation. If it interferes with your tanning schedule maybe you ought to buy a tanning package at Megan's Outback Alternatives. Eight minutes a day a few times a week. You can even make appointments so that they don't coincide with your work hours."

"Artificial rays? No way. Those bulbs are way harsh. I'm soaking up collective energy Jim, trying to understand the source of being."

"Last time I checked your job description didn't list the contemplation of cosmology as one of the requirements needed to insure you get regular paychecks."

"And you do write the checks so you should know."

"Hey, skin cancer's skin cancer no matter what you think about while you're setting yourself up to get it. Opting for a natural source of radiation is simply prolonging matters. One that's liable to get me, you, or both of us arrested in the process."

"Chill. I wear sunscreen. And it's not like you've never spent time in a jail cell. What's with the rent boy references? It's disturbing. You trying to tell me something Jim?"

"I'm trying to tell you that I make these rules for your own good and I don't much want to waste good waves driving you to the doctor every day when you get cancer. Now put your shirt back on and get back to work, Bronze Boy. This isn't some movie studio coconut shack with fake palm fronds, white girls painted brown to look like Polynesian dancers and some goofy witchdoctor scaring the shit out of the tourists. And you're not some big kahuna incarnated as a spaced out surf shaman. So make like the food guru you are. I have Rafe covering the bar tonight."

"So nice to know you care. It makes me feel really special. It's my turn to run the bar. Rafe hasn't mastered the art of liquid fire yet. Don't rain on my gig man."

"Well, Dr. Sandburg, hate to ruin the pro bono counseling session scam you're running from behind the counter but your culinary expertise is part of the job description..."

"Which includes mixology."

"...so you'll have to play Dr. Therapy another night."

"All right, boss man, but I'm not cooking that crap you put on the menu."

"Oh no, no, no. This is not an experimental new-age organic back to the earth health food restaurant."

"It's a hopped up juice bar slash quick grub slash beach bum hangout. I get you. You know Jim, I may not be the sparkliest diamond in the display case but I sure as hell wasn't hit over the head with the stupid stick the day brains were passed out."

"I don't know about that Chief. Five earrings, that seashell hemp necklace whatchamacallit you're always wearing, I'd say you're plenty sparkly."

"I trained at a top notch culinary school and I'm tired of making do with frozen meat patties, canned soups, and bagged eggs."

"Calm down there buddy. I'm not denying you're good at what you do. It's why I hired you. But the locals happen to like comfort food."

"Jim dude?"

"What?"

"Is it Thursday?"

"Do I look like a calendar?"

"Hmm, yeah, actually. Didn't you supplement your income when you were in college by posing for Buff Build Magazine?"

"You crack me up kid."

"We're like soft celery man."

"Excuse me?"

"Every Thursday like clockwork we have this argument. We need a new routine."

"Every Thursday we argue about you going topless on company property?"

"Oh the details change but the argument's the same."

"And what argument is that?"

"What argument is that? Did I ever diagnose you as being severely listening deficient?"

"So we'll put the celery in the processor and blend things up a bit. We'll fight on Fridays instead."

"You're missing the point."

"Well Socrates last time I checked celery analogies weren't the electron microscope of finding the point. So I'll tell you what, when I find it I'll let you know. In the meantime one of us has to do the books."

"Well I'd offer to do them for you but then you'd like owe billions in back taxes."

"Just go do some slicing, dicing, cubing, peeling, and whatever else it is you do back there. And no tv. I never authorized that digital TV setup you think I don't know about."

"What's got you down, Blair?"

"This."

"Shrimp?"

"The shrimp are a metaphor."

"For what?"

"For everything."

"You been drinkin' those grass juice things again?"

"Let me ask you something. I've been doing this for what? Seven years now?"

"Blair, watch where you're waving that knife."

"Oh, yeah, sorry, Brown. Seven years is a big investment..."

"That's some time for sure."

"...and where the hell is my return I wanna know? Does he think I enjoy risking the integrity of good skin just so he can continue to blither about in extreme denial and not notice the open invitation that's been extended from like day one when he threw me up against that freakin' house-sized tree trunk?"

"Blair I think that's enough seasoning."

"It's supposed to be spicy."

"Spice is houndin' for sure but subtle's the word, you know? How about I do that? You sit on that sack of flour and tell ole Henry your woes, okay? I be listenin'."

"What's he waiting for, man? We're practically married."

"Can't get more domesticated than you two, except for the shakin the...eh, conjugal liaison part."

"Absolutely. So why does he waste all that time with those skenky bitches who are only after his drugs, money, or both when he's got me? He's had me. Don't give me that look. You know what I mean. If he **had** me had me he wouldn't be lookin' for love in the female bodies of stacked felons who can't even give good sex."

"He shares the details?"

"The guy's perpetually grumpy. I'm working on an assumption."

"That true. Go on."

"So I ask you, what more could Jim Ellison possibly ask for in a woman that he doesn't already have in me? Who else is he going to find that he can trust not to steal from him or to turn him into the Feds?"

"Blair?"

"What?"

"You do steal from him."

"Yeah but that's different. It's not for me. It's a philanthropic endeavor undertaken by yours truly to share the wealth, spread the smiles, sink the blood money into a more worthy pothole."

"And you've turned him into the Feds on numerous occasions."

"I do what I have to. It's not like they have twelve step programs for drug lords who want to jump jungle."

"S'pose not."

"I made sacrifices you know? I was only havin' a little walkabout in the rainforest, a last good-bye to irresponsibility and complete freedom. I was thinkin' fun, good times, ancient fertility rites. Never had any intention of not heading off to Europe in the fall and becoming one of the world's greatest chefs or at the very least getting my own cable show."

"Miscalculating your hike by forty miles and ending smack dab in the middle of Ellison's operation wasn't a part of your planned itinerary either if my memory's not fuzzy."

"And it was purely accidental that I misjudged the amount of firewood I needed to roast that wild boar."

"Or that the flowers you used for garnish weren't of the edible variety?"

"So cake decorating isn't my specialty. They made for excellent plating."

"In retrospect you did Ellison quite a favor."

"I did. I gave up everything for him."

"It's not like you had a whole lot of choice."

"The throw me to the snakes thing? Yeah, that was pretty piss in my pants scary. Pivotal moment in the decision making process."

"You regretting that decision Blair? That's what this is all about?"

"I gave up my hot line career to the top and agreed to work in some dilapidated beach shanty so that he could turn his back on a life of crime and go legit. What was I thinking?"

"He was threatening to kill you at the time. You weren't thinking. Besides, you were smitten."

"The adrenaline rush of my decade is no excuse for being so...so..."

"Hopeful?"

"Something like that."

"Sandburg, I don't be thinkin' that the manufacturer's purpose for the dough hook."

"El cheapo buys Simon a good mixer but I can't even fucking order premium liquor for my sauces."

"Be kind to the ears is a nice motto, wouldn't you agree? No? Damn, boy, Simon gonna be pissed when he sees that dent."

"Ha. Felt good. Shoulda done that sooner."

"Think you could shred veg without slicing off your finger?"

"Maybe it's time to think about a new career. College. Yeah, college, something like art history or archaeology, something like that."

"You give up the art? Nah."

"Nah. But I could take some classes."

"Blair, wear the glove. You'll be needin' those fingers when you get the man."

"It's filthy. When's the last time anyone put this in bleachy water? And aren't you a bit optimistic?"

"Blair, it's a kitchen, it's not supposed to be clean. Mama Brown didn't raise no stupid sons. I been around the man a lot longer than you and he was one bad motherfucker before you took a wrong turn and..."

"Burned his business to the ground? Killed all his employees?"

"Let me finish this. As I was sayin'...slammed that man into a far better reality and better personality. That's gotta mean something right?"

"Yep, translation- Naomi raised the stupid son."

"Blair? No seeds. Relinquish that zucchini. I'm done with this anyway. Uh, maybe zesting could wait for later."

"The hands, man, have to keep 'em busy."

"You just concentrate on keepin' that mind of yours churnin.' 'Cause what you need is a plan."

"What I need is a change of scenery."

"That's not the ways I sees it."

"Maybe you need glasses."

"You'd miss him."

"I'd get over it."

"Do you want to?"

"No."

"Good. Cause I like workin' for Mr. Ellison. He a good man underneath that hard exterior. And I like workin' for you too. This cookin' business a hell of a lot better than the janitorial duties he used to have me takin' care of, you know what I mean?"

"All too well."

"And you know that you be takin' off for parts unknown he be mowin' down whatever get in his path while he huntin' for you?"

"He is extremely territorial. Wouldn't want any dead bodies on my conscience."

"So's you need to be divorcin the man."

"Right, right. I get the restaurant in the settlement and he can have...what can he have? I don't think I own anything he wants."

"He can have your apartment. Of course it'll come fully furnished with you. That mansion of his be far too drafty for the two of you to be livin' when you get remarried."

"H. you are so getting a raise."

"Boy now you're talkin'. I'll buzz Rafe, tell him not to shake his bones this ways."

"I think I need to make a cake. It's been awhile since I exercised my expertise in the pastry arts. We're fully loaded? Pineapple? Coconut? Walnuts?"

"Daryl just brought over a delivery this a.m. I do believe I feel a headache comin' on."

"Nah, Jim'll just hand you a bottle of aspirin. Make it the stomach flu. Can't have you workin' with food when there's a likely chance you'll throw up all over it."

"Rumblin tummy, got ya. You kiss some sense into the boss man you hear? You know where the man keeps the ordnance? Just in case?"

"Who doesn't? I can clean this up. Get out of here. And H.?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"Anytime homeboy. "

"Sandburg, turn that music down now."

"Oh come on, I cannot work without rhythm. Hey, don't turn that off."

"Use your walkman. I'm trying to make phone calls."

"Your office is soundproof."

"Not entirely. I thought I told you that bandanna was not an appropriate hair net."

"And that baseball cap you want me to wear offers better coverage?"

"When I got the hair nets from the apron distributor you made it quite clear they were only to be used as a costume gimmick for playing Hispanic gang member working part time at the lunch counter. I thought I'd save myself continued harassment and offer another option."

"You ever gonna take that antidote for that repression virus overriding your system?"

"I have one customer complaint of hair in their food and you're permanently off bar duty."

"This isn't for the customers."

"Figures. What is it and why aren't you working on dinner prep?"

"Felt like doing a little baking."

"We have a baker."

"Simon doesn't work on Thursdays."

"Apparently no one does."

"Huh? Can you hand me a piece of parchment paper?"

"A pan liner?"

"Right. Thanks. You do dinner prep. I'm busy, as you can see."

"Rafe called in sick. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

"I know you're acting as the food and beverage manager but I think as the executive chef I have the right to have goddamn vanilla beans in stock if I want."

"They're a luxury. Vanilla's vanilla. Who'll know the difference?"

"I apprenticed in the gourmet ghetto, man, believe me, there's a difference. Anyone with functioning tastebuds would notice."

"Rafe? Know anything?"

"Do not put your fingers in that. We can afford some vanilla beans. Is it because you can smuggle moonshine in the vanilla jugs? I'm on to you. Next shipment man we're getting beans. Well Rhonda can't cover the bar and the tables and I refuse to work the back of the house by myself so I guess we'll just have to close then."

"I'll work the bar."

"Hello? I just told you I'm not doing pantry and line myself."

"Then I'll do it."

"And what? Have me hosting, serving, bussing, and bartending? I'll pass. Slice up that pineapple would you? No, no, not like that. Dice it. Oh never mind, here, open up the coconut and shred it. I'm not letting you anywhere near the pantry. Last time you helped you sent out all the Caesar's with pear vinaigrette dressing, mozzarella cheese and no croutons. Not acceptable. It took weeks of nightly specials to repair the damage to my rep. I'll share an insider secret with you Jim, when the food critic of the Cascade Falls Weekly writes up a review stating the chef at The Jaguar's Juice would better serve the public by patenting his sauces as a floor scrubbing agent it's not exactly the kind of advertisement that'll draw crowds."

"It wasn't that bad."

"Brackett, and I quote, said that I wouldn't know the difference between a banana and a plantain if they were shoved up my ass."

"Oh there's an attractive picture. It was a joke. He's quite fond of you."

"That's why he publicly reams my cooking skills every chance he gets. What are we still in the fourth grade? That's how he expresses affection?"

"No need to worry Chief. I got it covered. He knows if he tries anything I'll break his arm. Maybe both."

"Why not just shoot him?"

"What would be the fun in that?"

"As much as you're overdeveloped macho reptilian brain would like to believe that I'm a part of the property assets it'd be good to remind you Blair Sandburg, king of the spatula wielders, cannot be noted as anyone's credit in an accounting ledger."

"Ow, what did you do that for?"

"That was your physical clue to shoo. Now get out of my kitchen and go call Rhonda and give her the night off. No, on second thought give her the whole weekend off."

"You weren't smoking any of what Brown's growing in your herb garden were you?"

"Jim? Stop with the paranoia. The place isn't bugged, oh, okay so we have roaches on occasion, it's known to happen in humid climates, but all the hush hush crap is becoming droll. Brown's growing that crop of weed because you told him to."

"Crop? It's a lousy five by ten plot. Not much of a crop is it?"

"I am not discussing your inability to refrain from engaging in illegal activities right now. That's a whole philosophical and psychological argument that's best saved for a day when a hurricane's blowin' through town. And bring me a Mai Tai would you? I'm thirsty."

"You're not allowed to drink on duty. There's a tap. Get some water."

"Yoo hoo, Sandy"

"Megan what brings you to my backdoor?"

"What usually brings me here?"

"We're closed."

"What do you mean you're closed? I called in my order half hour ago. You didn't make it?"

"Kinda busy here Megan."

"That smells delish. Give me a piece and I won't be mad at you for spoiling my afternoon."

"Have some shrimp."

"It's raw."

"Japanese call that sushi."

"Not like that they don't."

"Back away. Eh, eh, eh, didn't your mom ever tell you eating cake batter would give you worms?"

"No."

"Well, it does. And this is my wedding cake, so back off before I'm forced to stab you with this cake tester."

"You're getting married?"

"I'm sharing the circle all right."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"If everything works out accordingly, yeah, tonight."

"What do you mean if it works out accordingly? What does Jim think about all this?"

"He doesn't know. Yet."

"I think you better tell him, Sandy. You'd sure hate to wake up to your new bride's corpse."

"That's not going to happen."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I don't think Jim has any intention of killing himself. Megan if you don't breathe soon you're going to turn blue."

"It's about damn time. Who's performing the ceremony? Why didn't I see this coming? I mean I realized that you and Jim were already a couple but it's not like you were *together* together you know? Like other couples I mean. His head hit a rock on a wipeout?"

"Nope, I finally realized I had a few choices in determining my fate. I could either tender my resignation...

"Which he'd never accept."

"...which he'd never accept."

"Or I could kill him..."

"Which you could never do."

"...which I've thought about a million, no trillion times, but I couldn't actually do it."

"Or you could take it out of your pants and..."

"Let's not go there okay? I was thinking I could stop the subtle approach that hasn't worked once in the seven years I've been trying it and go full out for a direct, front-line assault."

"Thatta boy. That's the way to think."

"Oof, Megan you're going to break a rib."

"Sorry. I'm just so happy for you Sandy. What time's the ceremony? What am I going to get as a gift? What am I going to wear? Most people give their friends a little warning you know?"

"Tonight's just us. Not official. I promise that if he doesn't dismember me we'll have Vince preside over the real deal and we'll have a big barbecue afterwards."

"Looking forward to it. I want all the details. All of them. Why, Sandy I do believe you're blushing. Where is Jimbo anyway?"

"In his office doing laundry."

"He has a washing machine in his office?"

"Not that kind of laundry."

"Oh. You owe me lunch mister. And save me a piece of cake, okay? Unless you added some secret ingredient I'm better off not knowing about."

"No secret ingredients. Everything's all natural."

"If natural doesn't work I have some new aromatherapy candles I've been working on that might help you out."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"See you later, Sandy."

"Table for two? Right this way please."

"What's that noise?"

"Here are your menus. Look them over and I'll be back in a few minutes with your water."

"Dear, are you sure this is the place Mr. Oliver recommended? It's fairly empty. That's never a good sign."

"We're here. We're staying. I'm not driving all over the island while you choose a suitable restaurant. You tell me where else within a 3000 mile radius we're going to find chilled white asparagus with chanterelles in tarragon vinaigrette?"

"Fine, but if you get food poisoning you'll have to call the ambulance yourself."

"That's my best sautoir."

"I told you what would happen next time you started banging on the pots and pans."

"You told me to turn down the tunes so I thought I'd create my own. Get some practice in. Back away man, before I beat you over the head with this."

"The kitchen accouterments are not your personal drum set, Sandburg."

"Back in the days of the ancestors they practiced multi-purpose usage of practically everything they owned."

"So go dry out a buffalo bladder and make yourself a set of skins. Until then refrain from any antics that may scare away the customers."

"Customers? What are you talking about it? We're closed."

"In fact we are open. I suggest you wash your hands and get ready for your orders. What's the special? Where are you going? Get your ass back in here."

"Oh, hello, are you our server?"

"No. I'm the guy who's going to politely suggest you eat elsewhere this evening."

"I've got a hankering for the halibut with saffron and verte sauce served with carrots and zucchini."

"We're closed for a private party tonight."

"We certainly are not. We'll be back with your drinks and appetizers."

"We didn't order anything yet."

"Cosmopolitan."

"I'll take a White Russian dear."

"You're fired."

"I quit."

"You can't quit after I fire you."

"Whoa. That's kickin. I just did."

"I will not accept your resignation. You're under the influence."

"Not yet I'm not. Sounds like a plan though. Here, have a shot. Fastest way to improve that surly disposition guaranteed."

"That wasn't a shot."

"Shot, half a pint, what's the dif? It'll all get you where you want to be."

"You want to talk about this?"

"Not really. I have some business to take care of first."

"You're starting to worry me."

"That doesn't look like a White Russian."

"That's because it's Midori. You'll like it. It's sweet. Here take the bottle. Give your husband the gin. I forgot something."

"This is highly unusual."

"So's this."

"Dear, that's a gun. Do something."

"Like what?"

"I'm not gonna shoot you. I just find it's a more effective way to get you to leave. Like I said this establishment is currently closed for a private party."

"Sandburg, have you lost your mind? Drop the weapon now."

"Hey? You I'll shoot."

"No need for violence. We'll leave. Here's my business card, dear. I'm a psychologist. You give me a call and we'll set up an appointment."

"Son, I wouldn't recommend that. Can I at least get some take out?"

"Jim grab the man some mints and crackers would you? And then kindly show them the way out. I have a cake to ice."

"I'm so sorry. Please accept this gift certificate with my sincerest apologies."

"That's some apology."

"I do couples counseling too. You boys stop by the office anytime. And cut the cutie some slack. He's just really frustrated. A little make-up sex he'll be good as new."

"You folks have a nice evening."

"Now you've done it, you've embarrassed him. We'll never be able to come here again. It is the best restaurant on the island."

"It's a beach shack, dear, and I was simply sharing my observations. It's about time that man boarded the clue bus, don't you agree?"

"I think you shouldn't meddle in other people's affairs."

"I was merely trying to encourage one."

"Joel?"

"Ellison we're going to have to make this quick. My kid's got a game tonight."

"What are you doing here?"

"Blair called. Said you needed some documents drawn up."

"That's right. He does. Hi Joel. How are you?"

"Oh for fuck's sake now what? Joel go home. Send me a bill okay? Blair apparently overmedicated today."

"Joel, sit down."

"Yeah okay. I can do that. Jim?"

"Sandburg, where did you get that?"

"In your toy box. I do intend to remodel but I'd prefer that I didn't have to rebuild, so take a pen and this pin will stay nice and secure. You have a deed to sign. Joel tie Jim to his desk chair and make sure the knots are tight and then we can get started."

"First thing when I break free I'm taking you to the loony bin Sandburg. Ouch, not so tight. My blood still needs to circulate."

"Joel, I'm impressed. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"That's none of your business. Like I said my kid's got a game. Can we hurry this up?"

"Sure thing. Jim's going to turn the title of this place over to me."

"I most certainly am not."

"Don't make me give Joel the duct tape. Joel, push him out of the way and you can use the computer."

"Gentle there. I said gentle. That's going to bruise."

"Stop whining. I'll kiss it better later."

"You'll what?"

"Ah, Joel, done already? Jim, start cooperating. I can forge this if I have to. Oh, good enough I guess. It's sort of legible. Thanks Joel. I'll make you some Emu chili. Have fun at the game."

"See you around Blair. Jim, I wouldn't move around like that if I were you."

"Joel, untie me."

"I'm going to be late."

"Easy, big guy, you're not going anywhere...except the floor. Joel did warn you."

"Come back here."

"Meditate for a couple of minutes."

"Sandburg."

"Hungry?"

"Diet pill companies have it all wrong. Grenades are the far more superior appetite suppressant."

"I wouldn't make a French dip for just anyone you know."

"How generous of you."

"You're welcome."

"I laid here for twenty minutes like some overturned turtle and..."

"You had an epiphany? All right, man, dive right in. Finally seein' the big picture? Took you long enough."

"You know if I didn't lo..loyalty...if I didn't possess some damn strange inexplicable loyalty to protecting that trouble finding ass of yours I'd pull H. out of retirement."

"No you wouldn't."

"Believe me when I say at times I am sorely tempted."

"But that would be futile because you'd just kill yourself and we'd be back in the same worn groove on the same broken record, only this time we'd be spinning in the afterlife."

"You know what's truly frightening, Chief? That I'm fluent in Sandburg speak."

"Perfect. Can we skip to the good part now? I'm not really in the mood to talk. Being last minute and all I couldn't get a ring or anything but I found this in the box of Lucky Charms you have stashed in that overstocked cleaning supply cabinet of yours. Careful there. That au jus is going to stain. What the heck? You don't need that shirt anyway."

"Sandburg!"

"Stop protesting. I'll keep you warm."

"Get off me."

"Shut up. I'm going to kiss you now."

"B-bla-mmph-mm."

"I think I could easily get addicted to this."

"Blair stop."

"You don't like that?"

"I like it. I like it. But I think we need to talk about this."

"The showing was always the best part of show and tell."

"I'm serious."

"So talk. I'm listening."

"I can't think clearly when you're doing that."

"Then I'm accomplishing my objective."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I love you, you asshole, and I'm tired of waiting for you to stop denying us this. You think I can't read subtext? Pounding me into that tree trunk was more than a demonstration of your male prowess. You were sporting some major feathers there man. So stop repressing and freaking out and let go. I've got you. I don't want to hear a thousand reasons why this is wrong."

"Sandburg, you talk too much."

"Jim?"

"That's a reason this is right."

"That's a good reason. But we have to stop."

"Huh, what?"

"I want some tradition. No sex until after we're married. And you haven't told me you love me yet."

"Blair, I love you."

"Oh that's convincing."

"I know 83 fatal methods to eradicate any immediate threat. I let you stand there holding a grenade, what's that tell you?"

"That danger excites you. Say it with meaning this time."

"I'll retire. Split the holdings between Kincaid and Brackett. I don't think they like the food industry any more than me. I'll open up a surf shop or something."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I do love you Chief."

"Like a brother or like you want to lick me all over?"

"That answer your question?"

"Hell yeah. I'd be seriously concerned if you ever did something like that to Stephen."

"That's disgusting."

"Totally. Let's get the cake and go home. I refuse to get married in your office."

"I'll lock up and meet you out front."

"Don't we need a preacher or justice of the peace for this?"

"For the legal version with guests. This is our ceremony. All we have to say is I do, eat the wedding cake and physically consummate the union of our souls. Voila. We're married. The public party comes later. You down with this?"

"I do."

"Do what?"

"Agree to marry you."

"Be specific man. The I do part comes after we make vows."

"Oh, okay. I vow to never cheat on you."

"What happened to honor, cherish, obey?"

"That's corny. And they took the obey part out a long time ago. I promise to put up with your bullshit. Better?"

"Somehow I don't think the point of vows is to insult your partner. I'll go first. I vow all that sickness, health, better or worse stuff."

"Oh this is stupid. I vow I'll be the best husband I can be. How's that? Can we have some cake now?"

"Say I, James Joseph Ellison take Blair Jacob Sandburg as my husband now and forever."

"Been reading romance novels have you?"

"Say it."

"I, James Joseph Ellison take you, Blair Jacob Sandburg as my husband now and forever."

"And I, Blair Jacob Sandburg take you, James Joseph Ellison as my husband now and forever. Kiss me James."

"Is that it? Blmmthnthbg. That's pretty good cake. What kind is it?"

"What kind is it? It's the best fucking Hawaiian wedding cake you'll ever eat. That's what kind it is. Now get those clothes off and get in that bed before I get really mad. No, no, no. That's my side. Scoot over."

"Sandburg you're going to break..."

"No, man, this baby's sturdy."

"These mattresses seen a lot of action? Goddamnit Sandburg, I told you not to do that. I think I have a concussion."

"You do not."

"I do. I cracked my head against the headboard on the way down."

"The couch folds out."

"No. I've been tortured enough for one day. I'm not moving. Ever. So let's just take this nice and slow. Think you can handle that, Mr. Hyperactive? Mmh, yeah, that's lovin'."

"Jim we're going to have to go buy another bed tomorrow."

"Maybe on Saturday. Your schedule's full tomorrow."

"And rings. We'll need to get rings."

"What about that mini vivarium you pulled out of the Lucky Charms? What was that for?"

"That was a 'you want to be mine?' trinket. You've got plenty of liquid George W's waiting to go solid. I'm thinking platinum. Maybe we should pick up some more sheets too."

"Sandburg, we've moved on to the physical consummation of the vows part. Stop talking."

"But....oh, sweet Jesus, James, do that again."

The End

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Chapter One:
Inevitable
Originally Published in My Mongoose: Many Faces of Blair

Dr. Blair Sandburg, a man usually noted for his intelligence, considered how he came to be dangling from that tree branch over a rushing creek of, undoubtedly, cold water. At least, he thought he was intelligent until that afternoon. After all, he was a full professor of Criminal Anthropology and a frequently sought after profiler. That took some brains, right? Maybe his landlady was right. She often posited that those with too many booksmarts usually were lacking in common sense. Of course, that remark usually came after a shouting match with his true love du jour and many slamming doors. But when Blair was at work, he was not prone to such drastic missteps. Nosiree, he had learned long ago, when he was seeking his first dissertation topic, exotic ideas and far flung theories did not make for a happy academic. He had learned the hard way not to seek the holy grail.

The branch began to groan.

"Heeeellllpppppp!!" Blair called again. The wind was howling up in a mocking response. He doubted anyone could hear him. Then, with his luck, the wrong person would.

The Cascade Strangler Task Force bought into most of his profile. Why couldn't they understand the importance of the location to the ritual? It was so clear to him. He had drawn them to the conclusion as simply and as logically as he could. And he was rebuked; then dismissed. A stray curl blew into his eyes. Great, he didn't have a free hand to brush it away. Maybe it was his hair or the jewelry. He's had problems with law enforcement types accepting him even with his writings as an introduction. No matter how accurate his profiles, there was still some unease amongst the brothers in blue with his appearance or his attire. That just wasn't going to change. He had to spend far too much time burrowing into the minds of freaks and psychos. He had to recognize himself in the mirror.

Blair had run into the problem before. But this time, it stuck in his craw. It was as though he had to make them listen. It wasn't really clear why he was so compelled to come to Cascade. That city had surfaced time and time again with serial bombers and other mayhem. He swore the area attracted it. But, when the case came up, Blair found himself drawn in. His presence hadn't even been necessary to present the report. Something made him go in person only to be rebuffed.

Captain Simon Banks seemed to believe him. Or at least he gave him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps it was his department's experience with David Lash. That one would still be killing if he hadn't had that encounter with a fast moving truck. Lash's MO and motivations were so strange that it would tend to leave an investigator open to any possibility. Thus, he was the one that suggested Blair seek out former Major Crimes Detective James Ellison. The sheriff, posted in the wilds of Mount Cascade, was a near recluse after a breakdown some years back. He'd had an impressive history as a soldier and policeman before that. Blair believed that even at half his former self, the man could track down the killer on his own turf. And then there were some very tantalizing details about the nature of the man's breakdown and his time in Peru....

The branch groaned again.

"Someone help me!!!"

But his current position of peril could only be blamed on his impatience. No one wanted to take him up to Ellison's outpost because there was a storm coming. The winter had brought some brutal fronts through that part of the state and no one relished getting stranded up there with the former detective. It seemed the Sheriff had quite a reputation for surliness. Blair didn't feel that he could wait. If his profile was correct, the killer would be lying low near his killing grounds but that wouldn't last for more than a couple of weeks. He didn't want another victim on his hands if he could prevent it. Something, and he assumed it was the case, was yelling loudly for him to go up that mountain. Thus, he got equipped and got directions and set off. He drove up the narrow gravel access road for as far as he could, then set out on foot along a barely visible trail to Ellison's outpost. Somehow, he lost the trail during a brief but hard shower. Then he slipped. He'd grabbed the branch just as he ran out of ground beneath his feet.

It took a moment for Blair to realize that someone was calling to him. He looked down briefly to see an olive colored cap with the Sheriff Department emblem on it.

"You must be Professor Sandburg," the man called up.

Even over the howling wind, Blair recognized sarcasm in the man's voice. "Can I get a little help here?"

"Sure. Why don't you try to drop the pack?" the man replied. "Then you can climb toward the trunk of the tree and drop to the ground."

"I don't know if I can hang on long with one hand, man."

"There is a release lever at the front on either strap," was the reply. "Just pull on them in turn."

Blair swallowed hard then complied moving as quickly as he could so he wouldn't be dangling by one hand for more than a few seconds. The pack slipped from his aching shoulders, but there was no splash.

"I've got it. Now try to move, Professor. That branch won't hold for long," the man said.

Blair did try. He moved one hand over to the other. Then, he moved the hand closest to the trunk over. The branch's groan became a snap. He felt it give way then there was cold and wet and sudden pain in his head then blackness.

Blair awoke slowly. The first thing he realized was that he was dry. He was, in fact, very warm and dry. Upon shifting his body on the fresh flannel sheets, he also realized that he was naked. The Professor sat up suddenly and then the pain in his head was back. It nearly blinded him.

"Easy there, Chief," a husky voice soothed. Gentle hands grasped his shoulders then eased him back on the warm sheets. Those hands felt wonderful. He could feel their imprint even after the touch was gone. "You've got quite a bump on your head."

"I'll say," Blair winced. "Thanks for the rescue, but how did you find me?"

"I heard you hollering," he replied. "I swear half the mountain could."

Blair peeked at his rescuer with one eye. Then, he looked with both eyes. It was quite a handsome face looking at him with pale blue eyes filled with concern and exasperation. He was far better looking than his photos. "It's time," he whispered.

"Pardon?"

"Sheriff Ellison, I presume?" Blair corrected himself.

"In the flesh."

Yes, far better looking in person. A gorgeous hunk of a presence with a buzz cut and a snug fitting tank top. The eyes had a few more lines around them but he was so much more of an intense presence. Blair felt something almost alive arcing between them.

"What's the matter, Chief?" Ellison asked softly. "You look a little flushed."

Blair slapped himself mentally. "Just my head, I guess."

"Let me check you out," Ellison said. He turned away and headed for a large first aid kit attached to a wall in the next room giving Blair a view of a beautiful denim covered ass. Questions. Questions would take his mind out of the gutter.

"How did you get me out of the creek?"

The Sheriff smiled briefly as he returned. "That wasn't easy. I'd just got that pack on my back.... what is in that thing anyway?"

He didn't wait for Blair to answer. He was gently tilting his head up to shine a light in his eyes. "Keep your eyes open wide, Chief."

Blair swallowed hard. "So you carried me and the pack?"

"I'm not superman," he said softly. "I used the water to support your weight and pulled you along by your shoulders. There is a service road by the creek where my jeep was parked."

"Clever. Medic Training?"

Ellison nodded turning off the light then carefully watched Blair's pupils. When he removed his hands, the Professor immediately missed it.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be any brain damage."

"Other than my hanging from a tree in a rainstorm."

"You said it," Jim smiled. It was a wicked mirthful smile. A smile Blair shouldn't be thinking about. "Hungry?"

"Oh, yeah. That trail was kicking my ass before the tree thing," Blair replied.

"I've got some chili going," Ellison said heading for the door.

"Ummm, Sheriff Ellison?"

"You can call me Jim, Professor."

"Blair... call me Blair."

"Yes, Blair?"

"Can I have some clothes?"

"Your strap-on armoire is next to the bed," he replied. "Shake a leg."

Blair didn't know how to respond to Ellison's jabs. They seemed playful. But he had been warned a great deal about the Sheriff's personality and temper before leaving. This warm, playful person was nowhere in those descriptions. Blair brushed aside his thoughts as the smell of food drifted to his nose. He hurriedly opened the backpack without trying to lift it. His arms felt like wet noodles. He pulled out a set of sweats and a pair of thick, woolen socks. There was a strong temptation to pull out his notes and start talking about the case but something told Blair his time would be better spent getting to know the reclusive Ellison. Besides, nothing could be done until morning at the earliest.

"Smells, good," Blair said upon entering the room.

The rest of the cabin was one large room efficiently divided into an office area, a small parlor and a kitchenette with a small round table for two. There were even some nice plants about for color. All the comforts of home, Blair observed, save for human companionship.

Ellison dished out the chili along with a big, moist piece of cornbread. It looked mouth-watering and tasted even better.

"Hmmm, this is amazing," Blair murmured. "The spices are perfect."

"I have to be careful. Sometimes seasoning really bother me," Jim replied. "I get so sensitive to even the mildest flavors that I can't stand to eat."

"Defensive cooking, huh?"

"Something like that."

Blair ate for a while in silence trying to figure out how to ask the next question. "And you heard me out there over the wind?"

Ellison shrugged. "Sometimes voices carry over the wind."

Blair hid his skepticism; that wind had been howling like a jet engine. Hearing Blair at all was unlikely. Hearing him well enough to find him was miraculous. Again, an inner voice told Blair to put the excited Professor away and just get to know this man.

"I saw the Jags jacket," Blair said. "You keeping up with the games?"

"Oh, yes," Ellison smiled. "I have a satellite and a small TV. Sometimes, I go to the tavern about ten miles from here. Even full, it's only five guys so it's never too noisy."

Blair let that comment pass as well. They fell into an easy conversation about that season of basketball while finishing off the pot of chili and cleaning the kitchen. It was so easy to be with him. Blair had never felt that so quickly with anyone. All his life he had been the outsider learning how to fit in wherever his mother decided to plant herself. Here, he felt as though he'd belonged all his life. Jim stayed near him. He readily met and held his gaze. He felt as though the man was beckoning him to be close. Then suddenly the warmth was gone. The Sheriff snapped his head toward the door.

"Jim?"

Ellison raised a hand to quiet Blair. Then, he headed for the door. Blair followed the man onto the porch and watched him carefully. The sheriff seemed to be listening and sniffing and feeling.

"Those showers this afternoon were appetizers," he muttered. "There's a big front coming through. You want a shower?"

Blair had been focusing on the human barometer and was thus a little slow on the uptake. "Huh?"

"We'll probably lose the generator in an hour. No hot water heater," he explained.

"Er, sure. I feel like my hair is full of tadpoles," Blair replied. "I'll be fast."

"Okay," Ellison nodded. "I'll make sure we have enough dry wood for the fireplace and stove."

He pointed Blair to a door off the kitchen then headed back outside. The Professor was glad to get away from Ellison for a little while. He was barely able to contain his excitement on any number of levels.

"He has the hearing -- that's for certain; and probably taste and smell," Blair thought as he quickly soaped and shampooed in the narrow shower stall. "And he did spot the release on the front of my back pack from yards away. I can't spook him. It's obvious that he's been through a lot. He isn't a specimen. He's a man... a warm blooded... gorgeous man..."

Blair rinsed himself wishing the water was freezing cold. "I have to stop thinking about that!"

He was toweling his hair in front of the fireplace absorbed in his thoughts and the warm glow when Ellison came back inside. He had been in motion for so long. Proving himself every single day. Always in motion, always thinking. It had been some time since he just sat and enjoyed the beauty of a fire and the sound of a storm.

"Oh, hi," Blair murmured when he realized that Ellison had been watching him. There was a tenderness and longing in the man's eyes that made him catch his breath. He had to calm himself before he could trust his voice not to shake. "Finished in seven minutes flat. There should be enough water for yours."

"Great. Everything is locked down," Ellison said softly. "You should sit on the sofa, Chief. That floor gets cold."

Blair nodded then yawned suddenly. The hike, the fall, the food and the shower all caught up with him. He was soundly asleep as soon as he settled back on the sofa.

Once again, Blair woke up very warm. It was almost too warm. It was the kind of warmth that made eye lids and limbs too heavy to move. He felt wonderfully safe and content even as what seemed to be the mother of all rainstorms raged outside. As Blair became more aware of his surroundings, he realized that he was spooned around something solid and breathing. Upon opening an eye, he discovered he was pressed against the entire backside of his host. But before he could work himself into a panic or distance himself, Jim chuckled.

"Don't sweat it, Chief. The floor's too cold even with a sleeping bag. Besides, I've shared trenches and pup tents with a lot worse," he rumbled.

"Thanks," Blair mumbled. "I think. Sorry to get so personal."

"The body seeks warmth," he shrugged. "The other thing is natural for men in the morning."

Blair resisted the strong temptation to roll away and try to disappear into the wall from mortification. Instead, he calmly sat up to put some distance between his body and that very warm rear end.

"You're very understanding," Blair replied drily. "Can I make you breakfast or something?"

Jim peeked back at him with mirthful eyes making Blair realize his faux pas. The Professor was beside himself. "You know, you are not exactly as advertised!" He said in exasperation.

Jim raised a brow then turned onto his back with a puzzled expression. "How so?"

"I thought you'd barely be civil. The image you have in Cascade is of a snarling monster," Blair replied.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," Jim mused. He seemed to regret that. "Would you be more comfortable if I ratchet up the asshole factor?"

"No," Blair said quickly. He fiddled with the pillow near Jim's head. "I like you the way you are."

"Thanks," Jim said softly. He smiled at him. "I've only recently started acting like a human being. I think Simon must have picked up on that when we spoke. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent you up here."

"Oh."

"Let's get some breakfast then figure out what the weather will do to your plans."

"Sounds great."

Jim was half out of bed when he leaned in towards Blair. "I wanted you to know something," he said very softly.

"Yes?" Blair asked trying desperately not to react to the blazing blue eyes boring into him.

"While I think it's probably an unwise idea," he whispered close to the Professor's lips. "I feel the same things you do."

Then he claimed Blair's mouth in a gentle kiss. Before Blair could respond by diving for tonsils, Jim pulled back. The electricity was there and stronger than ever. They stared at each other for a moment, then the Sheriff smiled.

"I'll start the stove."

Somehow, Blair got himself together and made his way to the kitchen table. The coffee was already percolating and the bacon was sizzling.

"You'll have to let me make lunch," Blair said. "I'm not used to being waited on like this."

"I need the practice," Jim said handing him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, man."

"Now, why don't you tell me why you think the Cascade Strangler is on this mountain?"

Blair nodded flipping through his notes. He went over the basic profile of the unknown subject or Unsub then focused on how all the victims had been killed at a place other than where they were found; the presence of spores on the body that were unique to the mountain and the amoebae found in the hair of the victims that comes from bodies of water in the region.

"I could buy the spores being carried on the wind in a few of the cases but not every single one. Nor can I buy the microbes migrating," Blair concluded.

"Why would he risk taking a victim from one place, travel so far only to bring the body back?" Jim asked.

"That's part of the thrill of the killing. There is the successful hunt and the thrill of the actual kill. The return of the body caps it off because it is a way of flaunting the fact that he has killed and gotten away with it. For these guys, the peripheral elements are as important as the act itself. You'll find, if you get the Unsub to talk to you, that there is a very elaborate fantasy woven around the killings.

"Why this mountain?"

"Any number of reasons. It may be the site of his first fulfilled fantasy. It may symbolize purity for him. Most likely, it's a place that he knows very well and feels comfortable in."

"He feels safe up here."

"Exactly."

"It makes sense," Jim said thoughtfully. "I read your report. There is no way the victims were killed where they were found. From the photos Simon transmitted, it looked like some of the victims had suffered from exposure. Why didn't they listen to you?"

"I think it's my hair," Blair quipped. "Or my earrings... or both..."

"Unfortunately, that could be, Chief," Jim replied as he dished out the eggs and bacon. "I know those men on the team. They're all very good, but most of them view profiling as one step removed from telephone psychics. Then, here you come with all of this..."

Jim ran a gentle hand over Blair's hair then caressed his ear lobes playing with the earrings.

"And sandals, too," Blair laughed.

Jim rolled his eyes. "All you needed were love beads."

"I gotta be me, man," Blair replied with a smile. Then, he sobered. "Otherwise, I'd get lost in some pretty dark places."

"I know," Jim said holding his eyes with a level gaze. "You've done some good work, Blair."

"You know my work?"

"I checked you out when Simon told me that I should help you," Jim replied. "I was impressed with the academic and field work."

"Thanks, Jim," Blair smiled. Much to his consternation he blushed.

Jim smiled at him. "I don't know if my beliefs will help much. We're likely rained in until tomorrow. The murder site will be obliterated."

"True, but he has to hole up somewhere," Blair replied. "There will be souvenirs."

Jim nodded. "We can run through the citations and complaints I've taken over my time here. If I understand your profile, he probably has been very anti-social out here."

"You may have even met him once or twice," Blair said. "His type likes to engage law enforcement personnel to find out if he's been detected or just to show how superior he is."

"To show that he's so clever he can hide right under their noses," Jim said.

"Exactly," Blair replied. "He is a man of amazingly low self-esteem combined with supreme arrogance."

They finished breakfast in a comfortable silence. Then, while Blair cleaned up the dishes, Jim checked the weather on his battery powered radio. He also let his superiors below know that Blair had made it to the cabin.

"The news is not good," Jim said. "That storm front is moving slowly. We're stuck until at least the morning -- maybe longer. But then, so is our adversary."

"Yeah," Blair murmured. He was disappointed.

Jim sensed it. "In police work, Blair, you have to wait for your moment."

"I know. I know... Long stakeouts and cold coffee..." Blair said.

"You don't like being dismissed," Jim said. "You want to prove them wrong."

"I want him not to kill anyone else," Blair muttered, "but that's part of it, too. I've had to give up on a belief I held once and I still regret it. I'm not letting that happen again."

Jim walked over to gently squeeze Blair's shoulders. "We all do what we think is best on a case, Chief."

"Sorry... I can be an impatient pain in the ass," Blair sighed.

"Oh, I don't know if you're all that impatient," Jim smiled. "I know that here are things you're dying to ask me about. I suspect there are things you very much want to do..."

Blair swallowed hard. He found himself once again looking at Jim's lips. He blushed again. "Just waiting for a good moment."

"You see," Jim said softly. "I knew you could. Let's get to work."

They split the files up. Jim took the front half of the alphabet. Blair took the rest. Again, he was surprised at the

easy comradery they shared. And he was intrigued by the potent erotic connection that simmered underneath the routine tasks they were doing. Being around Jim was like being near a purring cat. There was this buzz that lulled him or aroused him depending on Ellison's focus on him. At that moment, it was easy to concentrate on the work. Jim's intense blue gaze was on the files. Blair could tell that he was trying to visualize each encounter. He certainly made it easy to plow through the documents. The Professor was impressed with the orderliness and incredible detail in the reports.

"You should be doing my field notes," he commented. "These reports are amazing."

Jim smiled at that. "It's not that I have anything else to do, Chief. Simon Banks would give you a whole different perspective on me and writing reports."

Most of the reports were incidents of camping or hunting or fishing infractions. Blair noticed that the number of citations went down from Jim's initial time on duty to the present. The reports also had less confrontation in them and more education of the violators. Jim was telling the truth. He had been very surly early on. As he pressed further, he did find some odd residents but none that sent up a red flag for him. He put them aside for Jim to look at.

When they finished, there were six reports pulled. Jim glanced at them thoughtfully. Only two of them had property of any kind in the area.

"This one, George Muntz is a real whacko," Jim said. "But I wouldn't make him for this sort of thing. He's more of a Unabomber, anti-government, paranoid type. That sort of thing. Most of the folks here say he hasn't left the mountain in over ten years."

"So, he's in the 'no' pile?"

Jim frowned. "We should have a look at his place anyway. He is a pretty big freak and maybe he's fooled everyone up here."

"What about this one?"

"Ah, yes. Lester Pragg. He's big on my creep list but I've often wondered if he should be," Jim said.

"How so?"

"Our initial encounters were when I was still deep in my asshole period," Jim explained with a grimace. "I'm not sure if my opinion of him is entirely objective."

"But something still bothers you about him," Blair said. "I've noticed that others you tangled with in the past don't have that carry-over hostility."

"It's nothing concrete," Jim said. "But he'd ask me a lot about my job and my routine. He seemed to wonder how I could fill up my days patrolling such a sparsely populated area. Why I wasn't lonely. But those questions aren't unusual."

"Really?"

Jim shook his head. "The local ladies ask me that whenever I'm in town long enough to chat. They aren't as discreet about their intentions as certain professors are."

Blair found himself blushing again. He was really getting annoyed at himself over that.

"So why were his questions so annoying," he asked trying to refocus Jim's intense attention elsewhere.

"I thought he was implying that I was somewhere goofing off," Jim replied I even found out that he'd ask some of the townies about my whereabouts from time to time. Like he was checking up on me. The one time I wrote him a citation I was certain that he'd file a complaint."

"But he didn't?"

"Nope," Jim replied studying the file. "And he didn't pay the ticket either. He may have a bench warrant."

"What is he like physically?"

"Average looks," Jim replied with a shrug. "I wouldn't have looked at him twice if he hadn't been in my face. Average height, slight build. His family used to come up here on vacations, but he's pretty much lived in the cabin since they died."

Blair grew thoughtful. "Is he up here now?"

"I'm pretty sure I saw him in town yesterday. I know I saw that scruffy old van," Jim replied. "You like him for it?"

Blair nodded. "He fits the profile but I don't want to get my hopes up. We should get as much info on him as we can."

"I'll have Simon run his record and I'll contact the county courts to see if he has that bench warrant," Jim said., "That could come in handy with probable cause."

Blair felt hopeful. His spirits started to rise. So did his appetite. His stomach grumbled.

Jim chuckled at him. "Looks like it's time for lunch. Why don't you rustle up something while I try to get in touch with Simon."

"Okay."

Blair foraged in the small refrigerator and found the makings for a simple salad and some left over stew. He stoked the fires in the stove and the fireplace then began to heat the stew. Jim was having trouble getting through on the radio.

"Pragg, P-R-A-G-G. Yeah, I'll call you tomorrow. Out," Jim was practically shouting. He sighed putting the radio headset on the table. "I think he heard me. The static was pretty thick."

"Well, at least we got a line on him," Blair replied. "This stew smells great."

Jim took out the plates and set the table.

"So why did you come out here?" Blair asked quietly.

Jim shrugged. It seemed he was struggling for words. "Everything seemed to be too much. I couldn't eat or work or sleep. Even clothes got to be an intolerable weight on my skin."

"When did it start?"

"During this bombing investigation. I had been out in the woods staking out a suspect for a couple of weeks," he began. He ate some stew then paused. "I couldn't figure out what it was; it just kept getting worse. I ended up checking myself into the VA hospital that treated me after I got home from Peru."

"Did they recommend that you move out here?"

"Sort of. They noticed that I would do very well if I didn't have a lot of stimulation," he said. "They think I'm having some sort of post-traumatic problem with being in a city."

"Is that what you think it is?"

Jim shook his head. "No. It always seemed that there was a problem with things being too loud or too bright or too close or too everything sometimes, I could forget. It seemed to have been a help for me when I was in Peru, but once home, I really became unglued for a while. Being out here alone helped a lot."

"Why were you an asshole, then?"

"I was angry. I'd lost a career I liked after losing my Army career. It came on the heels of my divorce," Jim replied with a shrug. "I thought fate didn't like me very much. I couldn't understand why. I've always tried to be a stand-up guy."

Blair had to breathe very deeply and continue eating normally. Fate is right. He was going to attend grad school in Cascade but opted for Berkeley because of one of Naomi's old boyfriends. He would have found him! The being his advisors were certain didn't exist. All five senses. All this wasted time.

"Jim, do you know what a nose is? The occupation, not the part of the anatomy."

"Yeah, works for perfume companies."

"And wineries," Blair said. Then the Professor began a very careful conversation about heightened senses using the examples of the perfume and wine business; Vietnamese scouts, even safe crackers. The sheriff seemed to be listening. Blair wasn't certain whether he believed him or just liked the sound of his voice.

"I think you have a genetic advantage with all five senses," Blair continued as he moved to the heart of the matter. He told Jim of tribal Sentinels who used their gifts to protect their tribes. He was convinced that was how Jim survived alone in Peru. It was likely the Chopec knew what he was. Blair even told how he had wanted to

find one for as long as he could remember and how he gave up his search at the behest of his mother's friend.

"You think I'm one of these Sentinels?"

"I'm certain. I'm sure you were one for the Chopec in Peru," Blair said. "I think your stay at the VA suppressed it all until you were in those woods a few years ago. If I'd listened to my gut about grad school, I know I would have found you then."

"Maybe," Jim shrugged. "Or maybe I wouldn't have wanted to hear you then."

"Why did you get so mellow?" Blair asked.

Jim's expression grew wistful. "After a year out here, I began to remember the Chopec and my time with them. Not details, really but I remembered that the way I felt wasn't such a strange thing there. I was watching a rainstorm here when I remembered something their Shaman said about finding acceptance. From that comes peace and from that peace, your heart's desire and your life's work."

Blair listened patiently though his heart was in his throat.

"I realized that on the whole, I was very lucky. I was healthy. My Army pension and my current salary made me very secure financially. And this is a beautiful locale," he said. "I didn't really have a lot to complain about."

"So you stopped being angry."

Jim looked at Blair with such a warm expression of tenderness that his breath caught.

"And then Simon sent me you," he said softly.

Before Blair knew what was happening, He was in Jim's arms pressed against that long muscular body. He felt so content and so safe. The Professor found himself wrapping his arms around that broad back and pressing even closer.

"I think you listened to that inner voice when it most mattered, Chief," he murmured. "When I was ready and completely open to everything. And when there was a real urgency."

"Open to me?" Blair whispered. He moaned when he felt one of Jim's large, hot hands in his curls tilting his head back.

"To you most of all."

Jim was claiming his mouth once more. Blair wondered, as he lost himself in the feel of that tongue, whether this man was claiming a whole lot more. Somehow, he knew that his life was about to change forever and he couldn't find any reason to fight it. Especially when the change came with this marvelously hard body and an amazing tongue.

Blair moaned again when his mouth was abandoned for his ear. He swore he could hear Jim purring as he nipped and tongued at his ear. Somewhere in the erotic haze that was swiftly clouding Blair's brain, he remembered something about Sentinels bonding emotionally and sexually with their Guides. *I'll have to remember to tell Jim.* At that moment, Jim reached down with his other hand to squeeze Blair's ass and press him even closer into his erection.

Later, I'll tell him later.

For a man who presumably hadn't been with anyone in quite a long time, Jim Ellison had no problem remembering how things were done. Blair soon found himself naked and flat on his back in bed. The aforementioned Mr. Ellison was still using that tongue. He seemed to be orally cataloguing every centimeter of Blair's over sensitized skin.

"I thought " Blair gasped as his left nipple was being exquisitely sucked. "You weren't suppose to get overly stimulated."

"I'm doing fine," Jim murmured against the other nipple. He could feel the man smiling against his skin. "Just let me do the driving, Blair. Just let me..."

Blair moaned as Jim licked his navel. Dimly, the Professor realized that his lover was imprinting him on his senses. Every sense was focused on him. Jim was tasting him and scenting him. His eyes and his hands worshiped his skin. He was being claimed by this incredible man. Never had anyone made love to him so completely. And it only grew more intense.

Jim made his way down to Blair's very excited groin. He slowly ran hand his face through Blair's hair there inhaling deeply. He murmured appreciatively before beginning to tongue the straining erection. Blair arched off the bed. Jim had to hold him still to taste his fill of the turgid red shaft and the testicles nestled below.

"Jiiiiiiiiimmm...please..."

His Sentinel heard him. He felt that incredible mouth envelope his cock to the root. One of Jim's hands was pressed over Blair's heart holding him in so many ways. He clutched the sheets in a fierce grip lost in the wet heat of that mouth that was learning him in seconds. Where was his mind? He should have been panicked... would have been in any other circumstance. But it felt too right. It felt too good. For once, his mind let go. He gave himself to that man and that feeling and fell into a blinding light of absolute pleasure.

Blair came harder and longer than he ever had in his life. He was trembling and exhausted when Jim finally finished milking and licking his spent member then kissed his way back up to Blair's lips. The Professor didn't think he had anything left to give to this man. But then Jim growled against his lips.

"Mine..."

He claimed Blair's mouth again with even more vigor than before.

"Mine!" He demanded as the kiss ended.

"Yes... yes, yours, Jim."

The admission satisfied his lover on that issue, but his hunger was another matter. Blair felt his boneless body being turned onto his belly. Jim gently spread his legs settling between them to nip at his buttocks and lick his spine. Blair was still reeling in a post orgasmic fog. He barely noticed when Jim gently penetrated him with one, then two fingers. By the time he was alert enough to respond to the third one, Jim had found his magic button. Once again, Blair's brain shut down. He was all carnal need and response. He found himself pushing back on the fingers and moaning for more. Then Jim was deep in him and around him pulsing and surging within him. He was hard again and straining for release. Jim was there too stroking him dragging him into the upward heady spiral. And he was loving it. He loved being free of his constantly moving mind and being reduced to the elegant simplicity of need and fulfillment. Jim pumped into him and stroked him and it went on and on until they were covered in sweat. And just when Blair thought he had parted company from his mind forever, Jim hit that spot once again and Blair came again gasping his tormentor's name. Then, he felt Jim clench and moan filling him. The Professor collapsed onto the mattress.

Blair awoke with a start alone in bed. For a moment, he thought he'd dreamed making incredible love with Jim Ellison. But he was sore in places that had nothing to do with the hike the day before.

"Jim?" He whispered.

"I'm right here, Blair," Jim said as he came through the door. He was carrying a bucket filled with steamy water. "I thought you might want to clean up and I just never got around to whittling that two-person tub."

"Well, what can you do?" Blair smiled. He moved to get up, but Jim gently pushed him flat against the mattress.

"Let me," he whispered before kissing him into stillness.

Jim then soaked a washcloth and began the sponge bath.

Blair watched him intently. "Maybe it was better that we met this way. Falling for the subject of the research is such a major no-no. As it is, we're treading on some questionable ground professionally."

"I don't know if I would have liked the idea of being a subject. I have to tell you, Chief, I was not the most open and forthcoming individual then," Jim said as he gently cleansed Blair's skin. "I do like this idea of falling for me though."

"What about professionalism?"

Jim turned him over to cleanse Blair's tender bottom. "I made sure we ran makes on our suspects before I laid my lips on you, Chief."

Blair sighed as he was patted dry then turned back into Jim's embrace. "Point taken."

They snuggled in silence under the comforter enjoying the sound of the rain. Jim was stroking Blair's hair

absently. Neither man was close to sleeping.

"You know how to help me control this," Jim murmured.

Blair nodded against his chest. "I'm fairly certain I can. I think I was meant to help you."

Jim squeezed him for a moment. "Maybe I can go back to the Cascade PD."

"Maybe," Blair murmured.

"Wait. I'm being selfish," Jim said. He maneuvered the man in his arms until they could look at each other. "I shouldn't assume that I know where you want to live."

Blair gently traced Jim's lips gazing at him solemnly. "I don't want to leave you. I've waited so long to find you. I'll have to tie up some loose ends with my job, but I don't think Cascade will turn down a full time profiler."

"How many loose ends, Blair," Jim asked quietly. "How long?"

Blair saw fear in his new lover's eyes and he didn't like it. Sentinels and Guides aren't meant to be separated even by a distance that a three hour flight would cover. "You must have some vacation time. Come with me."

Jim smiled at Blair then kissed him gently. "Okay, but we have to catch our perp first."

"Okay. Sounds professional."

"Let's get a little rest while we can."

Blair found that he liked falling asleep in Jim Ellison's arms. He found he liked waking up in them as well. He really liked waking up with the man if being kissed senseless was involved. Blair was barely aware that he was really awake before he was half way to orgasm.

"Jim... wait..wait..."

"What..." Jim murmured. He raised his head from the nipple he had been torturing with his tongue. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"Lord, no," Blair gasped. "It's just... let me do something for you."

"You are," Jim replied softly. He leaned up to capture his lips briefly. "You're letting me learn you."

Blair gasped. "Oh, man."

He was using those senses on him. There would be no place where this man couldn't find him. He would know every nuance of his body's reaction to everything. He would know him better than anyone ever had.

Jim paused hovering above him.

"You're afraid," he whispered. He held Blair's gaze forcing the young man to be honest.

"Not of you, Jim," Blair replied. "I've never been really close to anyone for long. Maybe I'm afraid I won't cut this kind of commitment."

Jim looked at him for a long time. "Yes, you can. A man with self-doubt couldn't be a profiler. And a well-thought of one at that. You know that I'm yours."

Blair caressed the broad shoulders above him. Those eyes were so warm and tender. Blair knew he was thinking too much. There was a time when a moment like this would have been lost because of his doubts and worries. But he knew he wanted, and needed, this man that he'd waited so long to find. Thus, in answer to that statement, Blair angled himself up and set his lips against his lover's inviting general ravishment. Jim obligingly rendered his brain to mush then fried what was left with the orgasm.

They ate leftover stew for dinner then curled up on the sofa to enjoy the fire. The rain continued as though it would never stop. Blair didn't care. Jim wanted to talk about being a Sentinel, so Blair happily complied. He talked about how Jim could learn to control his senses and the practical applications behind the theories. Jim told him about the great loft apartment he had in Cascade and of the great guys he had worked with in Major Crimes. They began to make plans for beyond the mountain.

After one last check of the radio which was still not working, they headed for bed for the night. When Blair came out of the bathroom, he found Jim stretched out naked on the bed gazing at him expectantly.

"Turn out the lights, Blair," he said softly.

Blair complied and the room glowed golden from the candles Jim had lit on the night stand. His Sentinel was beautiful in that light. He considered Blair with almost dreamy eyes.

"Learn me," he whispered.

Blair somehow made his legs move. He straddled Jim at his groin settling there provocatively. The Professor knew that his patience wasn't that of his lover's but he would do his best before lust absolutely took over. He used his hands first petting the soft short hair on his head then gently tracing his fine facial features. Jim closed his eyes in pleasure allowing Blair to kiss his eyelids before moving to his mouth. While Blair kissed that mouth to his fill, his hands roamed the chiseled chest fondling the taut nipples until Jim moaned and moved beneath him.

Blair slid down that wonderful body imprisoning Jim's thighs. Meanwhile, he used his mouth to taste the Sentinel.. He found that Jim's ears were sensitive to sucking and that nipping at the curve of his neck made him gasp. Licking and nipping at the nipples made him arch off the bed and his navel was delicious.

Oh, but nothing compared to tasting that beautiful cock. And nothing made Jim more responsive. All the while he laved and sucked, Jim moaned and gasped and writhed and clutched at sheets. It was an incredible rush controlling such a powerful body. Blair played with him enjoying his taste and his scent while using all of his control to bring Jim to the brink and pull him back until they were both half crazy. He finally really went after his lover sucking with all he could. Jim gasped his name shooting into his mouth.

Blair crawled up his lover then collapsed onto his chest. Jim petted his hair.

"You're one quick study, Chief," Jim sighed.

Blair smiled against his chest. "Always have been. Wait until I've done more research."

Jim chuckled. "Heaven help me."

The storm ended sometime during the night. Morning was bright and beautiful. While Blair heated wash water for the two of them, Jim tried to get through to civilization on the radio. By the time there was enough water warmed, Jim was coming into the bathroom with a scowl.

"Who did you get?" Blair asked.

"Captain Piller," Jim replied. "He's been on the phone with Banks off and on since we spoke yesterday. Seems Pragg was spotted heading off the mountain just before the storm really hit. A state trooper almost had him turn back, but Pragg convinced him that it was safer to head for the interstate rather than back up."

"He didn't run him, I take it?"

"No, but he piped up when Piller put out an APB yesterday after talking to Banks. Seems the reason Pragg is holed up here is a long string of convictions from peeping tom stuff to actual assault," Jim said.

"He fits the profile like a glove," Blair whistled.

"Yeah. Banks and a crime scene team are en route now that the weather's clear," Jim said. "We're supposed to meet them up there. I hope someone spots him."

"Don't worry," Blair said grimly. "He's coming back."

"Why?"

"He wasn't running, Jim. He was going hunting," Blair replied.. "The timing is right, and the rain has made his killing field pristine again. He went down there to find another victim."

They washed up and dressed quickly. Breakfast was what they could carry in hand and bottles of water. The pair was on the road in less than a half an hour. The morning was breath taking in it's beauty. The air was absolutely delicious.

"Wow, it's beautiful," Blair murmured. "It even sounds beautiful. Are you sure you want to give it up for a dirty, noisy and smelly city?"

Jim shrugged. "I loved the city when it wasn't overwhelming me. Besides, I can do so much more than writing tickets to campers. And this isn't where your work is, Chief."

"Jim..."

"I'm not giving anything up, Blair," Jim said glancing at him. "I'm gaining so much."

They rode in a comfortable silence up the very faint mountain road. It was muddy on either side but generally passable. Jim slowed to a stop as they reached another road which branched from the main one. There was a mail box at the juncture with Pragg printed on it in box letters.

"Can you tell me how to see and hear up that road so I'll know who's there?" Jim asked.

"I think so," Blair replied.

Jim listened as Blair quietly coached him in focusing one sense then piggybacking the other. All the while he kept his hand on Jim's to keep him grounded. The man was absolutely still for more than a minute. Then, he closed his eyes and relaxed into his seat.

"Jim?"

He looked at Blair in amazement. "That was incredible, Chief. I could see all the way into the cabin. I could hear everything there."

Jim eased the jeep onto the private road. "No one around for miles."

Blair was still reacting to seeing an actual Sentinel in action. "Good... good... I'm sure you'll know if that changes."

The cabin was large. It looked very much like a family vacation spot. There was a deck with a barbeque but the property didn't look well maintained. The landscaping had overgrown. The cabin needed repair. The rain storm had been hard on the structure.

"We can't go in until the warrant and the team arrives," Jim said. "How do we find his killing ground?"

They climbed out of the jeep. Blair looked about the property. "It may not be a formal path but it's a route trod upon many times over the years. Even after all this rain, you should be able to see it."

Jim nodded wandering a little ahead of Blair. They headed around the back of the property. Jim began to move a little faster towards the east. Blair couldn't see the path but followed quickly keeping his eyes on Jim's back. They walked for about ten minutes before stepping into a clearing amidst the trees.

Jim stared at the ground for a moment with a frown. "The rain did a number out here. Whatever was on the grass is undoubtedly half way down the mountain. If this is even the place."

Blair looked at the secluded place. It was very serene surrounded by the trees. There was just enough light to illuminate the area. "I'm sure it is. Let's begin with scent."

Blair stepped closer to Jim placing a hand on the small of his back. "Let's try what we did earlier. Let the other senses fall away until there is only scent. I'll be here to keep you from getting lost."

Jim closed his eyes then slowly inhaled. He held it then repeated. His head tilted as though he was hearing something or perhaps remembering something. Blair watched this incredible man in rapt fascination. When he stilled for a moment too long, Blair rubbed his back.

"Jim... Jim..."

The Sentinel opened his eyes with a shudder. "I'm okay, Chief."

"What did you find?"

Jim looked at him sadly. "There are dead bodies here. How can that be when he took them back to town?"

Blair thought for a moment. "He may have buried them here in the beginning. But then there isn't the thrill of flaunting the kills. This may have been too secluded for his escalating fantasy."

"I'll have to get a cadaver dog up here," Jim said. Then, he went still again. His eyes focused on something in the trees.

"What is it Jim? What do you see?"

"I'm not sure," he replied quietly. "Come on."

Jim moved with quick, sure steps in between the trees. He stopped suddenly then knelt near the base of one tree with particularly large roots. He reached down into the mud then pulled out a purple leather ladies pump with an fm heel.

"Victim number three had a missing shoe," Blair said. "A purple leather pump."

"She probably ran and lost it in these roots," Jim said. "He either couldn't find it or didn't bother. Simon is just at the beginning of the private road."

The forensics team found a treasure trove in the cabin. There were personal mementoes from every victim known to law enforcement and some from three others. There was physical evidence of the presence of several victims. Finally, the cadaver dogs found remains for at least five victims. Simon and Captain Piller were impressed when it was all tallied.

"There are going to be a lot of people eating crow over this, Professor Sandburg," Banks said shaking his head.

"That's okay. I'm used to it," Blair replied. "But it was Jim that put it all together."

Banks smiled warmly. "The Ellison touch. I knew it wouldn't be gone for good. Man, if I could get you back to Major Crimes."

Jim smiled back. "Maybe you can, Sir."

"Really?" Banks said quietly. "You wouldn't be pulling my leg?"

"No, sir," Jim said. "I want to tell my superior. But as soon as I can arrange a replacement. I'm resigning my post here."

"When could you come back?"

Jim looked at Blair. "Two weeks after?"

Blair nodded.

Banks noticed the look between them but said nothing.

"And I was wondering, Captain Banks," Blair piped up. "If the Major Crimes would be interested in the services of a criminal anthropologist and profiler? It seems I'll be taking a position at Rainier University."

"After this case, you could write your own ticket," Banks said.

"Great," Jim said with a happy sigh. "All we need is Pragg."

"I think I can make everyone very happy," Piller said. "I just got word from the state troopers. They picked up Pragg coming up the mountain. The girl he had in the van is shaken up, but fine. Great work, men. Beers are on me when we get to town."

Jim told Captain Piller while they were having beers at the tavern. Banks spent the evening trying to get Blair to tell him how he could reach his best detective when no one else could. Fortunately for Blair, Jim wasn't anxious to prolonged the outing. He knew that their lives would change when they left the mountain. He would have to share Jim with his cases and with his co-workers. They had barely become acquainted. He wanted as much time as possible to know this man. He wanted to make sure the other parts of their lives never came between them. At one point, they looked at each other and Blair knew that Jim felt the same way. A short while later goodbyes were said and they headed back to Jim's cabin.

Later, after the post-case lovemaking and a long shared shower, they clung to each other in bed under the seductive warmth of the comforter.

"It will all change when we get to Cascade. We will be pulled by so many factions," Blair said. "So many people will want parts of us. How will we stay focused?"

"We're ready for it, Chief. We're older and wiser," Jim said holding him close. "I've lost my mind in front of my co-workers and survived. I have no face to save. I don't care what people think about me. You have your degree and your reputation."

Blair thought of himself as he was at the beginning of Grad school. He may have been able to get Jim to listen, but what a rocky road it would have been. He snuggled closer to Jim.

"I'm glad fate didn't wait any longer. I really like being here," Blair murmured making sure Jim knew that he meant in his arms.

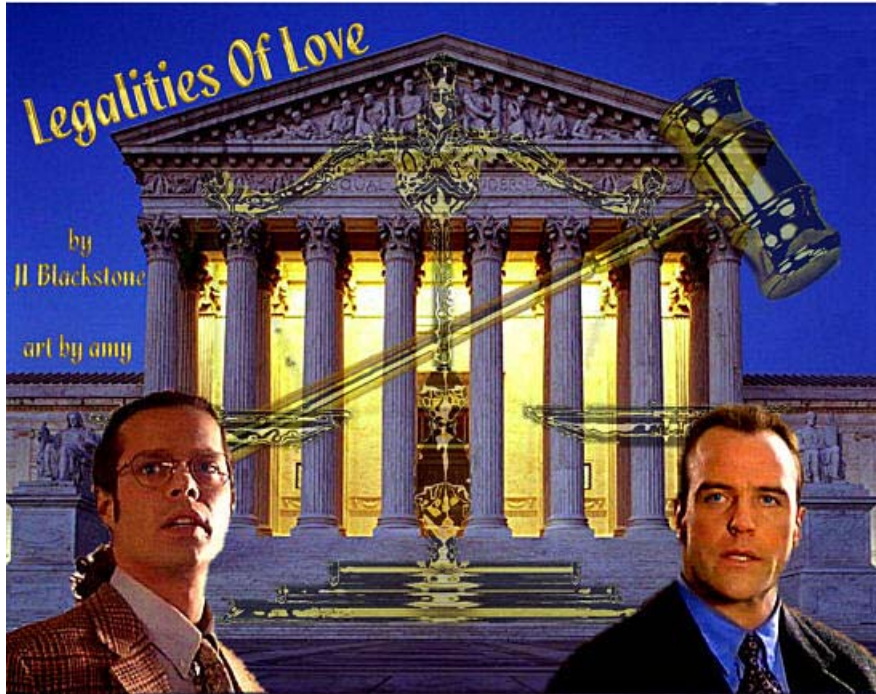
"The feeling is mutual, Chief," Jim sighed. "Stay a while?"

"I think I can arrange that," Blair replied. "I've got several decades to spare."

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Legalities of Love



Legalities of Love - J. L. Blackstone

Chapter One

A finger punched the silver intercom button. "Mags, call the courthouse and find out what position the Cleveland case is on today's docket."

"Sure. Remember you have a new client coming in this afternoon, a John Lindsey."

His long red-brown curls shook slightly as he gave an absentminded nod to the disembodied voice. "I remember. I'm just going to run out and file this brief, as soon as I finish it, that is..." Blair's voice trailed off as his eyes focused on the wording of the full disclosure request for Ellison Enterprises. If he didn't get access to the company's files, his case was going to be dead in the water.

He rubbed his eyes tiredly; it had been a long night. Blue eyes scrutinized the request for the seventh time. It seemed pretty tight. No vague loopholes which that schmuck Brackett could take advantage of to bury him in paperwork. The head attorney for Ellison was a real dick. Brackett took pride in taking any and all delaying tactics, be they unethical or not, just to wear him down until he had no choice to drop the class action altogether.

Blair's face tensed at the very thought of giving up. He would never hang his clients out to dry. For some, he was their last hope of getting some kind of help for the disabling injuries they had sustained. Blair popped his neck as he stood up to relieve some of the pressure he was feeling before he strode to the door.

"Cleveland is seventeenth on the docket," Margaret said as she heard the door behind her open. "I've already called the Nathaniels and told them to be at the courthouse tomorrow morning."

"Great. Type this up for me, Mags," he softly requested as he stood behind the middle-aged redhead.

Green eyes flicked up to the tired young face hanging over her. "You look like death warmed over," she commented as she accepted the piece of paper.

Blair ran a tired hand through his long hair, "Yeah, it's been a long couple of days." He gave a tired smile as he blearily looked around his

assistant's office.

Blair felt like he was just coming up for air, which wasn't far from the truth since he had spent the last couple of days researching precedents in the basement. Any other time, he would have allowed his intern to do it, but this case was special. No slip-ups, no matter how small were tolerable. The stakes were too high.

"I'll go shave, and make myself more presentable."

"I think that will be most advisable, sir," Mags said in a dry tone, extremely pleased when Blair laughed out loud before going back into his office.

Margaret raised her eyebrows at her boss' quick return only ten minutes later. Now it was her turn to laugh. She shook her head in bemusement at the blue jeans and the brightly covered vest as she handed him the folder containing the request for full disclosure. She should be used to it after working with him for two years.

"I promise I'll change clothes before the new client arrives," Blair vowed with a bright smile before turning to leave.

"Oh, by the way," Mags sang to the retreating back, "There's a new clerk at the courthouse..."

"Oh, there is?" Blair casually inquired as he froze in the doorway.

"Her name is Vanessa."

A flash of a broad smile was briefly seen before the door closed.

Chapter Two

Jim Ellison stared balefully at the stack of papers sitting in front of him. He sighed as he started going through the pile from legal. Concern soon wrinkled his forehead as he read the succinct but damning accusations made by one Blair Sandburg, attorney at law, on behalf of the 231 complainants against Ellison Enterprises in the case of the fatally defective Sentinel motorcycles produced from 1991-93.

Furious fingers punched the extension for the legal department. "Get Brackett in my office, now!" he barked, slamming the receiver down.

He was agitatedly pacing in front of the full length windows when the head attorney arrived.

"What is this class-action lawsuit about, Brackett?" He demanded with a wave of the papers he still held.

"Sandburg's just some kid who thinks he can make a couple of bucks," Lee dismissed in a condescending tone.

Jim's eyes narrowed at the man's arrogance. "There's no merit to the allegations?"

Brackett's silence was answer enough. "Damn it! I want all technical specs for the Guardian model from that time period. Analyses, tests, everything, got it Brackett?" Jim snapped as he stepped closer, violating the other man's personal space.

Lee's face was expressionless as he met the steel-eyed glare and only gave a slight nod of acknowledgement before turning on his heel.

Jim threw himself down onto the leather couch, totally deflated. He didn't think it would be this bad. It had only been three years. How could his father have done it? Jim snorted slightly to himself. He knew how. William Ellison only cared about the bottom line. But his father knew how important the motorcycle division was to him. It was his baby. Hell, he had designed the first model. If only Carolyn hadn't gotten sick...

He slowly got to his feet, shaking off the rest of that particular thought. Worry flared in the light blue eyes as he considered what else his father and Steven had done in his absence. Jim spent the rest of the morning reviewing the company's other divisions, immensely grateful to discover that one of the junior executive vice president's had enough backbone to keep the rest of the businesses on target without sacrificing morality in the pursuit of the almighty dollar.

Simon Banks had even managed to improve the lower performing steel division. According to projections, it would even make a profit this year. He would have to meet this intelligent man. He needed someone he could trust as his Senior Vice President. Steven wasn't up to the job. This lawsuit was proof of that.

When the three boxes from legal arrived mid-morning, Jim was resigned to finding out just how bad the situation was. It didn't take longer than an hour for all his suspicions to be confirmed.

In July of 1992, Sentinel Motorcycles had changed suppliers. Cyclops had used substandard materials to construct the fuel line in the Guardian models which resulted in potential fuel leaks within several months of normal usage. Fifteen hundred motorcycles were made and sold before the defect was discovered.

Jim went stone cold as he read the sterile memo from the motorcycle division's Vice President, stating that it was not worth the money to order a recall.

"Cynthia, get Garrett Kincaid to my office," he requested into the phone's receiver.

"Right away, Mr. Ellison."

"Also, get me Blair Sandburg on the phone." Jim wanted to get this class-action business settled today.

"Come in," he said in response to the light knock.

"Garret Kincaid to see you, Mr. Ellison," the pretty young secretary introduced in a bright tone.

"Thank you, Cynthia," Jim said without even looking up from the paper he was reading. He waited until the door softly closed before speaking again. "Mr. Kincaid, you're fired. Your severance package will be honored. Clean out your office and leave."

"But, you have no reason to fire me, Mr. Ellison," Garret angrily said to Jim's head since the other man's attention was still on the paper in front of him.

Jim picked up the phone, "Cynthia, please escort Mr. Kincaid out."

Garret stood dumbfounded as the door opened and the pretty blonde motioned for him to leave. He stumbled only slightly as he walked out the door.

"Mr. Sandburg is at the courthouse, Mr. Ellison. He won't be back in the office until two," Cynthia informed him as she slowly drew the door closed.

His forehead was wrinkled in consternation when Jim looked up. "He's in court?"

"No, sir. He's filing some papers with the county clerk."

"Get me his office on the phone."

"Yes, sir."

Beep. Beep.

Jim picked up the phone.

"Blair Sandburg's office. May I help you?" a woman greeted in a professional tone.

"This is James Ellison. I want to speak with Mr. Sandburg."

"He's at the courthouse at the moment. If it is urgent, I'm sure you will have no trouble finding him there," she suggested.

Jim ran a frustrated hand through his hair; he really wanted this matter taken care of today. "What does he look like?"

"He's got a medium build and long brown hair--the security guard should be able to direct you. I'm sure you'll have no problem spotting him."

"Thank you," Jim said frowning at the woman's amused tone.

Chapter Three

Jim briskly walked into the office the security guard indicated. His steel blue eyes narrowed in irritation. Sandburg wasn't here. The only person in the office was some hippie college kid flirting with the clerk. He strode over to the couple.

"Vanessa, isn't it better for you to form your own judgment. Don't rely on the opinions of others..."

"Excuse me," Jim cut in, silencing the rest of whatever Romeo had been about to say. "Would you be able to tell me where I can find Blair Sandburg?"

A confused expression crossed the pretty brunette's face as she gestured to her left. Jim looked down into a pair of blue eyes brimming with mischief.

"Blair Sandburg. What can I do for you?" the young man asked with a laughing smile.



Shock held Jim's tongue still for a few seconds as he took in the long reddish curls framing a very striking face. "You're an attorney?" he asked, surprise coloring his voice more than he intended.

The young man only laughed, "Yes, for three years. Now what can I do for you, Mr...?"

"James Ellison."

The smile vanished from Blair's face. He quickly straightened up and gestured Mr. Ellison away from the counter. "And, what would you like to talk to me about today, Mr. Ellison?" Blair asked.

Jim tensed at the sarcasm coloring the rich vibrant voice. The deep blue eyes no longer held the cheerful mischief either. He found that he missed the sparkle in the young man's eyes. Jim gave himself a mental shake. Now was neither the time or place for that sort of thinking. "I've come to settle the lawsuit you have pending against us."

"Propose a settlement, you mean?" Blair corrected him as he crossed his arms over his chest. Blair couldn't wait to hear what sort of offer the tall good-looking man was about to make his clients.

"No, settle. Ellison Enterprises is prepared to do whatever it takes to rectify the situation; to compensate for any injuries that resulted from the faulty fuel line of my motorcycles."

Blair's eyes filled with suspicion. "Forgive me for my disbelief, but what the hell are you trying to pull?!"

A small smile ghosted across Jim's face at the man's passionate response. "Maybe this will help, Mr. Sandburg." Jim pulled out the affidavit he had legal draw up before coming to the courthouse. It was, after all, the only thing lawyers seemed to trust.

Blair's eyes narrowed as he read the incredible words. A dumbfounded expression covered the handsome face. "Anything my clients want?"

"Yes, within reason, of course. Although, I don't know how one can make up for the loss of a loved one." A shadow haunted the pale blue eyes. "But we'll try our best. That is another thing. I want to personally talk to each of your clients. I'm sure you can arrange that?"

Blair gave his head a small shake, "Of course, that can be arranged but it will take several days..."

Jim dismissed the young man's concerns with a wave of his hand. "Apologies need to be made in person. Here's my card. I've had my legal department begin drawing up the forms which each complainant will have to sign after we reach each respective agreement."

"This is very unusual, Mr. Ellison. I'm not sure if some of my clients..."

"I understand. Those that do not want to meet me can negotiate their settlement through you. Call me when the arrangements have been made."

And with a slight nod Ellison left, leaving behind a completely shell-shocked attorney.

Chapter Four

How Blair made it back to his office he never remembered. He collapsed into the first chair he saw with his mind still a mass of confusion.

"What's the matter with you?" Margaret asked with a smile on her attractive face as she walked in from the copy room. "You look like you got knocked upside your head."

"He settled," Blair said in disbelief with an undercurrent of outrage in his voice.

"Who?"

"Ellison."

"James Ellison? You're kidding?!"

Blair shook his head, "No, here!"

Margaret walked over and took the paper he held out. She ascertained the relevance of the document after reading only a few sentences.

"Ellison Enterprises intends to make full reparations to any individuals injured or inconvenienced by the defective fuel line in the Guardian model manufactured by Sentinel motorcycles during the years 1991-3. Signed by James J. Ellison, CEO," she read aloud in an incredulous tone.

"Well, it's a very good thing he found you." She added in a light tone.

Blair laughed out loud, dispersing the tension he had been feeling ever since he had looked up into a pair of intense blue eyes and heard the name James Ellison. He shot to his feet. "Call the troops, starting with Becky. Ellison wants to meet with each of them in person, if it's possible, to negotiate their settlement. Here's his card, I'm sure you and his secretary can work out the details," he rattled off, his mind moving at the speed of light.

He rushed into his office, trying to figure out how he was going to free his schedule for the next couple of days. Trial tomorrow...

"Ahem...Blair?"

"Huh, what is it Mags?" Blair said with a distracted glance up at the woman standing in his doorway.

Margaret just sighed and walked over to pick up the suit lying haphazardly across the couch.

"Oh yes, of course. New client at two. I'll change my clothes, don't worry about it."

Margaret just shook her head sadly in response, but a bright smile covered her face as she closed the door behind her.



Chapter Five

Although Ellison said he wanted to meet with each of his clients personally, Blair didn't put much stock in it which is why he was shocked to find the CEO of Ellison Enterprises waiting for him in his office two days later. He was sure that Ellison would send Brackett to perform the legalities.

Jim caught the surprised blue eyes and smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Sandburg."

"Blair, please, Mr. Ellison," he corrected, quickly covering his shock. Damn it! He seemed to be always off his game with this man. "I should be used to it by now," Blair muttered under his breath as he walked around his desk with his back towards Ellison.

"Used to what? And call me Jim."

Blair turned startled. "Oh, nothing important...Jim."

This time Jim hid the smile the other man inspired. His eyes skimmed down the face noting the sapphire stud in the left ear. The wild curls were tightly confined in a ponytail this morning with a navy-blue Brooks Brothers suit completing the picture. I guess this is his 'conservative' look, Jim mused. He didn't have the heart to tell Sandburg--Blair that it had just the opposite effect.

With the loss of the distracting wild curls, the blue eyes and distinct features became the main focus. Not to mention the full lips, which hinted at a passionate nature. The suit only magnified the constrained energy that seemed to exude from the trim muscular body.

Jim gave himself a small mental shake at the turn his thoughts were once again taking. "Shall we get started? First up is a Ms. Reynolds, I believe."

"Yes, Becky...she's a bit sensitive," Blair began. He was very concerned about the possible effects these 'interviews' might have on some of his clients, such as Becky. Just one thoughtless remark about the scars on her face from the imposing man could destroy the fragile balance that Becky had created since the accident. However, the penetrating look Ellison gave him silenced anything further he was about to say. He

would just play it by ear.

"Mags, please send in Becky," he requested into the intercom.

Both men stood as the door opened to reveal a young woman wearing large sunglasses and a scarf over her head. "Good morning, Becky." Blair walked around his desk to hold the pale slightly trembling hands within his own. "This is Mr. Ellison," he introduced with a slight nod to Jim who came up on his left.

"Ms. Reynolds, please have a seat," Jim gently requested, holding his left hand out with the palm upwards. Becky hesitated for a millisecond but after a glance at Blair, placed her hand in Ellison's and allowed him to help her sit.

Blair watched in astonishment as Ellison immediately pulled the other seat over to face hers so he could talk to her in a more intimate fashion.

"Ms. Reynolds, I want to apologize for the needless suffering that I've caused you and your family. I know that I can never make up for your losses but I'd like to try to help you in any way possible. Tell me what I can do to make your life better."

Silent tears slid down the face hidden behind the sunglasses. She took a deep breath and slowly reached up and took off the sunglasses to reveal the pit marks on the right side of her face where pieces of burning metal and gasoline had struck her on that horrible day three years ago.

Jim didn't flinch from the sight but only continued to look steadily into the light brown eyes. It was with distinct grace that she pulled off the scarf and shook out what remained of the hair she had left on her head due to the burns.

"Can you give me back my face?!"

"We can try," Jim simply replied and squeezed the hand he still held in his.

Blair watched, stunned, as the man proceeded to inform Becky what inquiries he had made on her behalf with some of the finest plastic surgeons in the world. He even managed to make Becky laugh, something which Blair had never heard her do in the year since she had brought him her--this case.

That wasn't the only shock of the day. He watched in fascination as Ellison charmed everyone, including old Rick Patterson who had lost his right arm, into a satisfied settlement that would leave it unnecessary for him to ever have to worry about money in his and his children's lifetimes. It seemed his suspicions about Ellison's intentions were completely wrong.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

"Thank you, Carl, for agreeing to see me," Jim said as he shook the man's hand.

Carl nodded. "Blair, thanks for everything."

"See you later, Carl."

"That's it for today," Blair said as he walked back towards his desk after seeing the man out.

Jim just nodded as he continued to look out the window at the view of the mountains in the distance. All that needless pain and death. He shook his head sadly. Well, he could only try to make it up to each of them.

Blair joined the other man at the window, thrusting his hands in his pockets casually.

"Tough day."

Ellison nodded, his eyes glanced briefly down at the shorter man beside him. "Yeah." He turned to face the other man. "Thank you, Mr. Sandburg for all your help today."

Blair held up his hands in protest, "Hey man, all I did was set up the appointments. Everything that happened today, YOU did, I was just along for the ride."

Jim stared silently down into the blue eyes for a couple of minutes before turning to pick up his coat. "I guess I should be leaving."

Blair bit his tongue to keep from asking him to stay. Something inside him didn't like the idea of Jim spending the evening alone. Huh? Where the hell did that thought come from? Blair silently groaned. Ellison's straight, you numbskull!

Jim had revealed during one of the interviews that he too had lost a wife and understood the depth of loss. 'There's no future in these sort of thoughts, you idiot!' Blair silently chastised himself as he followed Ellison to the door.

"See you tomorrow, 9:00 am," Ellison casually said as he strode through the door. "Till tomorrow. Ms. Childers," Jim said, bidding farewell to the woman, who was putting on her coat as he passed through the outer office.

Blair stopped by Mags' desk but continued to watch the proud head and broad shoulders until they were lost to sight.

Mag's low whistle startled the man standing motionless beside her.

Blair turned to her with his eyebrows raised questioningly.

"That is one good-looking man!"

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Blair said as he turned away and walked back into his office. "Night, Mags."

Chapter Six

Blair stood looking out at the bay wondering when he had become such a masochist. The sound of the laptop booting up behind him echoed loudly in the still apartment. He turned with a sigh and ignored the little voice inside his head that was saying this was a mistake.

He pulled up the Cascade Times and opened a search query for "Ellison, James J."

"Why are you doing this? The man is the epitome of everything you despise, from his classic Armani suits to his Rolex. Everything you swore you wouldn't get involved with again," he argued silently with himself as he watched the tiny hourglass on the screen.

He clicked on the first link the search brought up. A picture of a funeral service with a solitary attendee immediately filled the 15-inch screen. Although the man was in silhouette with the sun setting behind him, Blair instantly knew that it was Jim. He quickly shut off the monitor. His eyes blinked with the afterimage of the man looking down at the casket, grief radiating from the stiff stance and down turned head.

Carolyn Plummer-Ellison. She had only been thirty-five at the time of her death.

Chapter Seven

Blair stepped, dripping, out of the shower just in time to hear his answering machine pick up.

"Mr. Sandburg, I've postponed the Cleveland case until March 15...."

He grabbed the receiver, "But excuse me your honor, another month? There've already been two continuances!" Blair argued.

"That is my decision. If you have a grievance, file the proper motions. Edwards requested a continuance this morning in my chambers which I granted," Judge Sinclair said in a warning tone.

"Of course, your honor. Thank you for calling," Blair said through gritted teeth and hung up. "Damn it!" He threw the towel he'd been using to dry his hair across the room. Of course the man had granted the continuance. It didn't escape his notice that Sinclair had failed to tell him on what grounds he had granted it. It was well within his purview but it sure as hell didn't help that Edwards worked for Windhom, Jaurez and Price.

He glanced at the clock. "Great, just great," he muttered, "I'm probably going to be late."

Blair wasn't late but was still in a foul mood when he arrived. "David, where's Mags?" he instantly asked the intern who was sitting behind his assistant's desk.

"She's in the board room helping them set up."

He nodded at the news. Ellison had arranged for a catering service to provide refreshments and meals. Everything possibly needed for the days he was to meet the clients, all at his own expense, of course. It was nothing for the billionaire in terms of cost but it had just been the first indication that he was a thoughtful man with a truly generous nature. A fact which had been fully revealed throughout yesterday's events.

"Fine. I need you to call the Nathaniels. Tell them that Judge Sinclair has granted a continuance of their case until March 15. Thanks."

Blair walked slowly into his office, not at all surprised to find Ellison there drinking a cup of coffee.

"Morning," Jim greeted taking in the haggard looking face. He had tensed when he heard the irritated voice minutes before in the outer office and wondered what had gotten the young attorney's ire up. "Long night?"

"I had some work to do," Blair said as he opened his briefcase and took out the laptop.

"You know what they say about all work and no play..." Jim teased unthinkingly.

Blair gave the other man a sharp look. The tone sounded almost like flirting. He shook his head slightly. 'Yeah right, Sandburg. If that isn't wishful thinking I don't know what is' he silently chided. "Shall we get started?"

Jim nodded and sat down across from the other man.

"John Wood is next..."

Chapter Eight

Blair sighed as he rubbed his neck tiredly. His eyes focused in on the other man who was getting slowly to his feet. It seemed like he wasn't the only one feeling the long day.

"Long day," Jim said, echoing Blair's thoughts.

"Yeah, it was, but that's basically it. The rest will send in their proposals by mail or fax," he responded while turning to power off the computer behind him on his right.

Ellison nodded, his blue eyes staring thoughtfully at Blair before reaching into his left breast pocket and drawing out an envelope which he placed on the desk before the attorney.

Blair turned from the laptop screen at the sound. His eyebrows rose at the envelope. "What's this?" he asked while opening it and unfolding the check it contained. He looked up, startled at the amount. Sixteen million. "This is too much."

"If you hadn't taken Ms. Reynolds' case, the defective fuel line would have never been brought to my attention. No, please," Jim cut off the young man's protests. "This is just my way of expressing my gratitude. I want your clients to get their full settlements and not have to worry about your thirty-three percent."

Blair looked slightly guilty at the last statement.

Jim nodded knowingly. "You weren't going to ask for your percentage, were you?"

The attorney shook his head and then smiled wryly. "No, how'd you guess?"

Jim shrugged into his coat, "You're a good man, Blair." He turned to leave but suddenly twisted back to the still seated man. "You hungry?"

Blair stared silently up at the other man for a few seconds before replying. "Sure, starving."

"Would you like to join me for dinner?"

"Yes."

"Do you like Italian?" Ellison asked as he watched the other man put his coat on.

Blair nodded as he joined Jim at the door. The outer office was empty. Margaret had left half an hour ago, as had David. "Where are we going?" Blair asked as he locked the main door and then followed Ellison down the hall towards the elevators.

"Cappello's. Ever been there?"

"Yeah, a couple of years ago."

"The cannelloni is fantastic," Jim said to him as they walked into the elevator.

"Sounds good."

Blair paused and shifted uncomfortably when they exited the elevator into the parking garage.

"We'll take my car. You don't mind, do you?" Jim asked with a casual glance at the other man.

Sandburg shook his head 'no.' It was no problem. Right! Being alone in an enclosed space with a man who had the ability to make him hard with just a glance. A straight man at that. He really did like to live dangerously.

It was a quiet ride. Both men felt no need to disturb the night's stillness.

"Shall we?" Jim said breaking the silence and gesturing towards the restaurant after handing his keys to the valet.

Blair nodded and stepped inside, the solid presence at his back making a shiver run up his spine. Jim's proximity made him oblivious to the maitre de's obsequious spiel along the way to the table.



"What would you gentlemen like to drink this evening?" the maitre' de asked as the two men seated themselves.

"Just water," Blair replied. He wanted to keep all his wits about him, although that wasn't hoping for much since it didn't seem like his head was the one making the decisions tonight.

"Brandy."

"Very good, Gary will get them for you. Enjoy your meal," wished the maitre de before scurrying away.

Blair looked around the restaurant. It didn't look like it had changed much in two years. "Thank you," he said, accepting the glass the waiter put down in front of him.

Gary handed them the menus and said simply, "I'll give you some time to look over the menu, gentlemen."

Ellison nodded. That was one of the things that kept him coming back to this place, the efficient staff. That, along with the good food. He smiled at the thought, looking across the table to find a matching smile on the attorney's face. "What's so funny?"

Blair's smile broadened as he met Jim's eyes. "Nothing really, I was just thinking that it's been awhile since I've been to a restaurant without prices on the menus."

"How long has it been?" Jim asked, intensely curious. The expensive suits that Blair wore bespoke a prospering business.

"Two years," Blair replied before quickly changing the subject. "So. are you going to order the famous cannelloni?"

"Yes, you?"

"The same."

Jim smiled. For some reason it pleased him immensely that Blair was going with his recommendation. "So, tell me, why Law?"

Blair laughed. "Most people who know me would say because I was a born debater. I have a big mouth and what better use for it than to help people get what they are entitled to."

"Against big bad corporations."

"Yes."

"You never wanted to be a criminal attorney?"

"I was. First year out of law school, I was a defense attorney. I disagreed with some of the...politics the firm I worked for espoused, so I left. What about you? Have you always worked for Ellison Enterprises?"

Jim nodded, his lips twisting wryly. "I began learning the business when I was thirteen, although I got my degree in Engineering and Technical Design."

Blair took a sip of his water, wondering what Ellison was thinking as he looked at him so intently. "What are you thinking about?" he asked before he could stop himself and was shocked at Jim's reaction.

Ellison actually felt his cheeks flush, a reaction he hadn't had since he was fifteen and got caught looking at a pornography magazine. "I was wondering why you pull your hair back?" He admitted, his gaze shifting momentarily to the ponytail before returning to the blue eyes which were now filled with amusement.

"Well," Blair began with an undercurrent of laughter, "as you so politely phrased it at our first meeting, I don't look like your typical attorney. This keeps it much simpler and seems to annoy the judges less than when I walk into the courtroom or chambers with my hair down. I seem to remember getting a lecture from his honorable self, Supreme Court Justice Townsend on appropriate hairstyles befitting a member of the legal profession."

"The Supreme Court?"

Blair gestured negatively with his right hand. "It wasn't a case. I was just there to deliver some papers and he waylaid me in the hallway. Of course it didn't help that I was wearing a Grateful Dead tee-shirt."

Jim chuckled at the sight Blair must have been then. It was something he wished he had seen.

Their food arrived and the next few minutes were spent with exclamations of delight as each tasted the cannelloni, declaring it the best they had ever had.

Jim watched the brandy swirl around the glass before bringing it up for a sip. "Are you married?"

Blair shook his head, his mouth occupied with swallowing. "No," he paused, his eyes looking downward for a second, "I'm sorry about your wife."

Jim looked out across the sea of faces in the restaurant. "Thank you." His eyes soon returned to the man seated opposite him, "Ever been close?"

"Nope, besides I don't think anyone could put up with my schedule for very long."

"So you're not involved with anyone right now?"

Blair frowned and shook his head "no."

"Good, I would hate to think that I was getting you in trouble," Jim said in a teasing tone while he discreetly motioned for the bill.

"Wait," Blair called out to the waiter who seemed to magically appear and disappear with Ellison's credit card in the blink of an eye.

"I invited you to dinner," Jim reminded him in a resolute tone.

Blair gritted his teeth in irritation. That tone brought back some bad memories. He took a long drink of the chardonnay he had ordered once the food arrived, wishing now that he had asked for something stronger.

"Why settle now after all these months?" Blair asked. It had been bugging him ever since the day he had first met the tall handsome man.

Jim sighed. "I wasn't aware of the problem--the defect or the class action. Steven, my brother, was running the company with my father's council up until three weeks ago. It's no excuse. The defect should never have happened. Those motorcycles should never have been sold. It was reprehensible that they were. My father and I hold vastly differing ideas of acceptable business practices." He stared intensely at Blair's nodding face.

"I take it my legal department had you running in circles," Jim said with a sympathetic expression.

"And into walls," Blair said with a small chuckle, "There were times when I wanted to strangle Brackett."

Jim's eyebrows lifted at the underlying vehemence in the comment. "I hope he wasn't too hard on you?"

'You have no idea,' Blair thought grimly. "Let's just say we had a personality clash and leave it at that." His firm tone effectively ending the subject.

"Shall we go?"

Blair nodded.

Silence fell once again in the confines of the car until Ellison pulled into the empty space next to Blair's roadster.

"Nice," Jim commented.

"Thanks. I restored her myself," Blair said proudly.

"Can I take a look?"

"Sure."

Both men got out and spent the next few minutes under the hood listening to the engine. "Sounds sweet," Jim judged.

"She runs even sweeter."

"I bet."

Blair reached up and closed the hood with a soft slam.



"You're losing this," Jim softly said, his hand reaching out to catch the black silk tie falling from the now loose mass of curls.

Blair's left hand instantly reached back to grasp the hair tie and his hand met Ellison's instead. Both men froze at the touch. Blair looked slowly up, not daring to breath.

Jim's hand tightened and he tenderly brought Blair closer as he bent down to meet those full lips with his own.

Blair watched as Jim bent down, his body completely wired. His lips parted at the first touch, anxious to taste the other man. Pleasure coursed through him as the tongue ruthlessly took advantage, exploring his mouth so thoroughly that it left him breathless.

"I like your hair down."

Blair blinked at the incongruous comment. "Okay."

"They're having a party for me at the Smirnoff Center tomorrow. Will you join me?" Jim asked as he continued to look down into the dark blue eyes.

Blair swallowed nervously, "A date?"

Jim nodded and Blair heard himself answer, "yes."

"Good." Jim bent down and kissed him again, this time chastely. "I'll pick you up at 8."

He released his grip on Blair reluctantly and stepped back. He watched as Blair got into the car and shot a smile in his direction before turning and driving away.

A matching smile covered Jim's face all the way home.

Chapter Nine

It didn't take long for reason to catch up with his balls, only four blocks, in fact. Fuck! Blair hit the steering wheel. Hard. He welcomed the pain since it helped clear his head. Well, one thing was perfectly clear. Jim Ellison wasn't as straight as Blair had thought.

He laughed at the inane thought. The big problem was that Ellison was a defendant in one of his cases. Okay, so Ellison Enterprises had settled but some of the agreements hadn't been formalized yet. It was an ethical grey area to be sure but it still might be questionable for him to fraternize with Jim. He couldn't afford to give any of his enemies any extra ammunition.

Blair sighed as he parked his car in his parking space and made his way up to his apartment.

'Hmmm,' he thought suddenly as he got into bed. 'He hadn't asked Jim why they were giving him a party. That might be important.' he mused as he fell asleep.

Chapter Ten

Blair adjusted his tie for the thousandth time, staring with frustration into the mirror. It just didn't look right. Maybe it was his hair? He stared at the long curly hair reaching past his shoulders. When had it gotten this long? He needed a haircut. Normally when he wore a tux he automatically pulled his hair into a ponytail, but not tonight. A flush crept up his face as he remembered the feel of Jim's hand buried in his hair when they had kissed.

He softly sighed. Blair hadn't been this nervous for a while. Doubts filled his head wondering if this wasn't about to be one of his monumental screwups. He frowned at the tie he had just re-done. It still didn't look right. He was just about to re-do it when there was a knock on the apartment door.

Blair took a deep breath before opening the door. Showtime.

Jim's smile broadened as he took in the younger man. He gave a low chuckle as he walked into the apartment. "You do it deliberately, don't you?"

He shook his head, slightly confused. "Do what?"

"Dress conservatively knowing how much it emphasizes your exotic good looks," Jim said, eyeing Sandburg's tux. It was one of the most classic tuxedos he had seen in the past twenty years. He was surprised that it didn't have tails.

Blair gave a husky laugh and looked away. "I plead the fifth, besides, I do like it when their faces tense up disapprovingly."

Jim snorted softly. "Here James Dean," he said, holding out the violet orchid boutonniere, exactly like the one he was wearing. "Let me," Jim heard himself astonishingly offer. He kept his attention on the flower, and tried to ignore the younger man's aching close body. The slight curve he could feel as his fingers brushed lightly against the left side of Blair's chest, instantly evoking erotic images of a bare muscular chest. If he wasn't careful, they would never make it to the party.

Blair stared, mesmerized at the rugged face so close to his, feeling the strong fingers brush against his chest as Jim smoothly fastened the eye-catching flower to his left lapel.

"There," Jim said and quickly stepped back breaking the intense moment. "Shall we go?" Blair could only nod.

Chapter Eleven

"Aren't you curious about the party?" Ellison glanced in Blair's direction while he maneuvered the car through the evening traffic.

"It's to celebrate your return to Ellison Enterprises, isn't it?" Blair replied, immediately adding in response to Jim's questioning look, "I read about it in the paper." He didn't add that he had also read the society gossip column which celebrated the return of one of the most notoriously eligible bachelors to Cascade. Evidently, William Ellison's eldest son had cut quite a path through the female population before marrying Carolyn Plummer. Blair wondered if he had cut an equally wide trail through the male population?

The ride didn't take long and soon Blair found himself staring up at a huge crystal chandelier.

A frown covered Steven Ellison's handsome face as he observed the guest of honor arrive late with his...date. He motioned to Brackett who happened to be nearby. "Lee, who is that...man with Jim?"

Lee turned around, his sharp eyes instantly focusing on the pretty face of the long haired man standing next to his boss. "Blair Sandburg. He's an attorney," Brackett stated quietly, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the blue-eyed lawyer.

Both men paused just inside the ballroom, a waiter immediately appearing to offer them champagne, which they accepted.

Blair looked around. Hors d'oeuvres had been set up on a table to the left of the ballroom. "What, there wasn't a dinner?" he teased.

Jim grimaced and glanced sideways at Blair. "No," he said firmly, "I vetoed the dinner."

Blair laughed knowingly. He would have vetoed the whole thing, although he did enjoy a good party, just not this kind.

Jim tilted his head in the direction of the food, "Want to get something to eat?"

"No, I'm fine."

"I'm starving, I skipped dinner. Keep me company?"

"Sure, lead on McDuff."

Ellison smiled, a thing he seemed to be doing a lot lately.

They hadn't made it three feet before an attractive middle-aged woman stepped into their path. "Good evening, Jim," she greeted first before turning her eyes towards his companion.

"Helen. This is Blair Sandburg, a friend of mine. Sandburg, Helen Grassleaf."

"Hello."

"How are you doing, Helen?"

"Good, it's great to have you back, Jim. We all missed you."

"It's good to be back. How's Hal and the kids? How's Anne liking Dartmouth?"

Helen beamed. "Anne's doing great. She's made the dean's list for the fourth straight semester."

"That's great. I knew she'd do well. We're on our way to the food; care to join us?"

She shook her head. "No, I'd better not. I've already gorged myself enough for one night. I think I'll go save Jerod from Betsy. She's been boring everybody about the latest quarterly reports from R & D."

Jim chuckled knowingly. "Same old Betsy. Good luck."

The men continued on their way. Jim just waving 'hello' to the numerous calls of "Hey Jim" and "Welcome back, Mr. Ellison."

Once at the table, Ellison immediately began eating. He ate three little sandwiches within the first two minutes to Blair's delight.

Blair watched, bemused. Jim reminded him of a little kid. He certainly didn't seem to be the uptight billionaire Blair first met in the courthouse. All right, so maybe he had formed an erroneous impression based on Ellison's financial status, but more often than naught his first impressions were right on target much to his chagrin.

Blair picked up a slice of honeydew melon and some strawberries. "Are those sandwiches any good?"

Jim nodded, "Especially the chicken salad. Have one." He placed the little sandwich on Blair's plate and stared expectantly at him.

Blair took a hesitant bite; he'd had a bad experience with finger sized sandwiches at the age of thirteen that he had no wish to repeat. He smiled and nodded. "Pretty good. And no, I don't want another one," he said quickly, halting the man's move to get him another sandwich.

Ellison shrugged and looked across the crowd. "Would you excuse me for a minute? I see someone I need to talk to."

"Sure, I'll be here," Blair responded with a small smile. He turned around and was gazing down at the food to see what else he might like to try when someone walked up close behind him. He turned with a bright smile, "Back so..." He froze when he saw who it was.

"Good evening," Lee Brackett drawled. "How are you doing this lovely night, solicitor?"

"Fine," Blair responded, pasting a polite expression on his face.

Lee's blue-grey eyes gleamed. "I would say that you're doing more than fine."

Blair tensed at the insinuating tone. "What the hell does that mean?"

On the other side of the ballroom, Jim tensed and motioned to the man talking to him for silence.

"It seems you had a bigger fish in mind. Congratulations."

"Listen, you arrogant schmuck! I turned you down because I have no patience for assholes." Blair picked up another champagne glass and walked away, exuding indignation with each step.

Jim frowned as he turned and scanned the heads for Sandburg. His gaze immediately finding Brackett's instead. He had always wondered why the head of the legal department had personally overseen this class action lawsuit instead of pawning it off on one of his assistants. It seemed he now had his answer. Jim grit his teeth at the thought of Lee and Blair together.

"Jim, are you all right?" Bob asked, not liking the expression on his nephew's face.

"I'm fine, please continue with what you were saying," he requested although his eyes continued to scan around for a curly head of hair.

Chapter Twelve

Blair stalked angrily away from Brackett. What a dick! He needed to get some fresh air. He maneuvered between the cliques and towards the balcony with a skill learned long ago.

He leaned his forearms against the railing and took a deep breath to relax. It was a beautiful night.

"So, you've finally come to your senses!"

Blair turned around with a sigh. He had just thought this night couldn't get worse. Blair stared into the arrogant green eyes, his back immediately tensing at the pleased expression on the man's face. "I'm not here for you...or to be seen with the right people."

A frown formed on the man's face. "So, why are you here?"

"I came with a friend."

The man's face darkened warningly, "Who?"

"None of your business."

The man took a step forward, but caught himself before he took another. "You are my business, Blair, and always will be."

Blair flushed and looked away, right into Helen's face.

"Blair, I'm so glad I found you. Jim asked me to come find you," she explained pleasantly.

"Where is he?"

"Back where you left him, at the food."

"Tell him I'll be there in a moment, thanks."

Both men patiently waited until the woman was out of hearing distance before continuing.

"You're here with James Ellison?!" The man's eyes narrowed angrily.

"Yes, and if you'll excuse me." Blair turned to leave but was halted by an iron grip. He looked pointedly down at the hand on his forearm and then back into the green eyes.

"I'm not done with you, yet."

Blair stepped closer to the other man. "Let go."

The man held on a few seconds more before releasing him. "This isn't over."

"It was over a long time ago," Blair called over his shoulder as he walked away.

Lee smiled as Blair Sandburg passed within two feet of him without realizing it. He had been captivated by the little exchange the attorney had had while out on the balcony. It seemed Blair did indeed have a taste for the bigger fish.

Brackett wasn't the only one who had caught the balcony incident. Once Helen had returned with Blair's message and location, Jim had immediately used his hearing to eavesdrop.

Jim scrutinized Blair's face as he followed the attorney's path across the ballroom, curious about Blair's connection with Paul Windhom, an old family friend. The obvious answer made his right hand whiten on the champagne flute. He pasted a smile on his face as Blair finally approached.

"Hi. Get lost?" The question came out with more of a bite that Jim intended.

Blair frowned slightly. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing," Jim said in a more normal tone. "Feel like getting out of here?"

"Do I? No offense, but this isn't my kind of party," Blair said with a grin.

"Mine either, but you do what you have to do."

"Only if you choose to," Blair breathed, startled at the sharp look Jim gave him. There was no way he could have heard that. A frown formed on his face as he thought back to the other time Jim had reacted to something he had said, which he couldn't possibly have heard. "Where are we going?" he asked as they approached the car.

"Feel like going to a club?"

Blair nodded, "Great idea, man." He hadn't wanted the evening to end just yet. He had hardly gotten any time alone with the sexy man.

Chapter Thirteen

"So, did you have an okay time?" Jim asked casually as they got into the car.

"Fine."

"Good. I hope you weren't too uncomfortable...since you didn't know anyone at the party."

Blair's face tightened slightly. "Oh, I knew a couple. As an attorney, you meet lots of people," he replied in a casual tone.

Jim nodded. That sounded reasonable but that little conversation with Windhom was way too personal for a simple acquaintance. He felt his jaw tense at the unasked question. It was none of his business. Ellison took a deep breath as they pulled up outside of the club.

"Want to get a drink?" Jim asked as soon as they entered.

Sandburg shook his head, "No. I think I've had enough for tonight."

"There's a table over there," Ellison pointed out as he herded them towards it.

Once seated, both men instantly reached up to their respective ties. They laughed as their eyes met.

"I hate wearing ties," Blair declared, pulling his tie off and stuffing it in the right pocket of his trousers.

"I'm not too fond of them myself," Jim stated as he too completely removed his tie. Both men relaxed, enjoying the pulsating rhythm of the music. Jim grinned when an old Smiths' song began playing, "Shall we?"

Blair nodded enthusiastically.

"Mind if I lead?" Jim asked as they walked onto the dance floor.

"No," Blair replied as he placed his hand on Jim's firm shoulder, something he had wanted to do all night. His heart immediately accelerating at the touch of the strong hand on his waist, pulling him even closer.

Ellison smiled at the slight tremble that coursed through the body he was lightly holding. He took a deep breath, enjoying the aloe smell of the curly hair as it caressed the right side of his face. Jim pulled back slightly and looked down. The deep blue gaze catching his in an intense dance of desire.

Blair's breath hitched. He raised himself slightly and gently guided Jim's lips down until they met his. Blair moaned when Jim parted his lips, allowing him to slip his tongue into the hot mouth. God, Jim tasted good. Blair pressed himself even closer to Ellison until there was no more room.

Tongues twirled, curled and brushed against one another in a forceful dance of personalities. Blair gasped as he gently disentangled himself from the kiss, amazed to realize that Ellison had him firmly anchored by a double-handed grip on his butt. "When the hell did that happen?" he thought dazedly. "I think," Blair began.

"We should get outta here," Jim finished, reluctantly letting go of his hold on the firm buttocks. He kept hold of Blair's right hand all the way to the door where his hand instantly moved to the middle of his back, unwilling to break the connection.

Blair paused in the cool night air while he waited for Jim to open his car door. He turned his head just as he was about to get in, anxious for another kiss which Jim instantly supplied.

Sandburg's deep breaths reverberated through the car when he finally managed to get in.

Jim shot a grin in Blair's direction as he sat behind the wheel and quickly got them moving. "Your place?"

"Definitely."

Blair kept rubbing his hands up and down his thighs, being careful not to accidentally brush Jim in any way. He was too damn old to have sex in a car. Shit, the drive didn't seem to take this long earlier.

As soon as they parked outside the building, Blair was out of the car like a shot with Jim not far behind him. Both men knew better than to touch each other in the elevator on the way up to the apartment.

Sandburg set a new speed record for unlocking his door; instantly rushing in and turning around to meet Jim in a passionate kiss. He pushed Jim back against the door, closing it as he ran his hands down the broad shoulders and slid the black jacket off as he explored the contours of Jim's jaw line with the tip of his tongue.

Jim let out a deep groan. One hand reached up to bury itself in the mane of curls while the other gripped Blair's hip, pulling him hard against his groin. He pulled back the hair, bringing the delicious mouth back to his for a long deep-throated kiss.

Blair reached down and unfastened Jim's belt, gently unzipping the slacks before reaching in to brush against Jim's cock. He encircled it with his broad hand and then gently pulled his mouth away, letting them both catch their breaths.

Anticipation filled the air as Blair stared into Jim's flushed face. "Blair, will you let me?" Jim panted, his eyes drowning in the dark blue pools.

"Yes," Blair breathed, his cock hardening even more at the thought. He brought his mouth back to Jim's, whispering, "Yes, oh yes" against the parted lips before delving once again into the wet heat.

Jim reached down and gently drew Blair's hand away from his cock. He wanted to make this last as long as possible. He rubbed his face against Blair's grizzled cheek before moving to nuzzle his ear, all while unfastening Blair's slacks.

Blair moaned into Jim's chest at the feel of the hot hands cupping his bare buttocks. He didn't remember ever being this turned on before. "Jim," he panted, wanting only an end to this delicious torture.

Ellison blinked, trying to form a coherent thought, "Which way to your bedroom?"

Blair shook his head. No way was he going to make it that far. "Sofa," he replied carefully moving backwards so that neither one of them tripped over their pants. He was so busy trying to undo the buttons of Jim's shirt, it wasn't until the back of his knees bumped into something that he realized they were there.

Jim's hands had been equally busy. Blair's jacket and shirt were now trailing wide open, revealing a mass of curly chest hair, which he instantly began to comb through with one hand while his other reached into his pocket for a condom. "Do you have anything to use for lube?"

Blair thought for a millisecond before reaching back to thrust his hands between the seat cushions. A triumphant smile burst across his face as he pulled his hand out after a couple of seconds with a tube of KY jelly in it.

Ellison's eyebrows quirked but at the moment all he really felt was relief. He quickly put the condom on, despite the distracting hand caressing his bare chest.

Blair squeezed out some lube into his hand and reached down to gently encircle Jim's cock. With a few strokes, he coated it generously.

"Blair," Jim growled before pressing his mouth down to capture the full lips. He stepped back at the gentle push against his chest.

Blair quickly moved to a kneeling position facing the back of the couch. His breath hitched as Ellison moved up achingly close behind him. Hands gripped the back of the couch as he waited anxiously.

Jim pressed up against Blair's body completely still for a few seconds before reaching around to pull Blair's face sidewise for a kiss.

Blair reached behind to clutch Jim's hair. He was dazed when the kiss ended. Just one thought was clear. "Please, Jim."

Jim gave a low laugh, which made Blair shiver with need.

Blair tensed slightly as cold lubricant was spread inside his hot passage before quickly being replaced with a blissfully hard cock. His toes curled as it edged slowly inside. He let out a deep breath as the delicious invasion continued until he could feel Jim's scrotum pressing up against his buttocks.

His hands tightened on the couch as Jim slid almost completely out before sheathing himself back to the hilt inside him again. Blair began to tremble uncontrollably from the pleasure of the long deep strokes which lightly brushed his prostate on each return trip. It didn't take long before he was panting, wanting, needing more...

Jim gladly obliged by pulling Blair back tightly against his chest as his thrusts became hammerings.

Blair welcomed the rough thrusts. Each one pushing him ever closer to the edge. Jim held Blair's hips still as his cock shoved deep inside, again and again. Blair came with a shout as Jim continued to wildly thrust.

Muscles spasmed around his cock, heightening Jim's need. His thrusts became frenzied as his balls tightened. He plunged as deep as possible into the trembling body and came with a groan.

Jim lay with his chest pressed against Blair's back, panting for several seconds before he recovered enough to gently withdraw from the slightly shivering body beneath him. "Are you alright?" Jim asked softly. Concern shone from his light blue eyes.

Blair rested with his head on the back of the couch, too tired, too sated to move. "I'm fine. Just enjoying this feeling."

Jim chuckled against the back of Blair's neck causing a shiver to run up his spine.

"You've got to be kidding me?" Jim exclaimed incredulously, looking down at Blair's slightly hard cock.

"I don't think even I can get it up again after that," Blair explained with a tired smile as he moved to lay down on the couch with Jim behind him.

Both men didn't realize just how tired they were and soon fell deep asleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Blair tried to shift his leg, and wondered why he couldn't move. He soon remembered why as the feel of the body pressed up behind him made the memory of last night come flooding back. Jim's hand was around his waist and their legs were entangled. Some time during the night, it seemed that Ellison had managed to fasten his pants while he had not.

Mirth bubbled within Blair as he realized what they must look like, especially him with his pants around his ankles and shoes on.

"What's so funny?" Jim rumbled against the back of his neck.

"Shoes," Blair managed to say between chuckles.

Jim grinned, amazed at how good he felt this morning. Happiness...it had been awhile. He reached up and touched one of the curls which

glinted red gold in the bright morning sunlight. "Blair?"

Blair glanced back at the serious tone before closing his eyes, waiting for the axe to fall. He knew Ellison was too good to be true. Without even realizing it, he tensed slightly as his mental defenses went up. "Yes?"

"What are your plans for today?"

Blair blinked in surprise. His hand reached down and patted Jim's thigh. "Let me up."

Jim got up on one knee, which allowed Blair to roll over flat on the couch, then he settled back down between Blair's now parted legs.

Blair stared thoughtfully into the light blue eyes above him. "None, why?" he asked with a guarded expression although the press of Jim's body against his groin was doing its best to distract him.

Jim smiled. "I want to spend the day with you but I have an appointment later this morning. Care to join me?" he invited as he bent down to kiss the full lips.

Blair parted his lips welcomingly. He moaned slightly at the tongue's first quiescent foray before plunging deep inside. Blair sucked on the intruder, eliciting a groan of pleasure from deep within Jim.

Ellison's light blue eyes were gleaming when the kiss ended. "Well?"

Sandburg shook his head in a daze. Oh right. "What kind of appointment is it?"

"My realtor. I'm looking for a new place."

Blair tensed defensively. No, that was heading into dangerous territory. He opened his mouth to politely refuse when Jim added, "I'd really appreciate it. I hate looking alone." Blair gave a mental sigh. "Okay."

"Great!"

Blair stared up at the handsome face above him. Jim seemed so much younger, freer...more open in the morning light. He reached up to pull the rugged face down to his for another electrifying kiss.

A grin covered Blair's face as Jim began to nuzzle and lick his way down his body. His cock hardened as Ellison's hands got into the act as well. Blair's back arched as Jim's mouth engulfed the head of his cock. So intense was the pleasure that he didn't notice the caresses on his butt until a startling finger thrust elicited a sharp stab of pain.

"Oww!"

Jim lifted his head concerned. "Are you all right?"

Blair nodded with an embarrassed smile. "I don't think I'm up for that again, just yet."

"Sore?" Jim inquired with a slight grin.

"It's been awhile," Blair said simply as he watched Ellison stand up.

Jim jealously wondered how long it had exactly been and with whom. "Hungry?"

Blair swung his legs off the couch as he sat up. "I could eat," he quipped, adding at Jim's salacious grin, "FOOD."

"I'll make breakfast while you take a hot shower. It should help with the soreness."

"You cook?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Jim responded as he walked into the small kitchen.

Blair pulled up his underwear and pants before walking around to the front of the counter which separated the two rooms. He watched in amazement as Jim moved around with the ease of long familiarity as he pulled out food and began to well...cook.

He was shaking his head as he walked through his bedroom to the bathroom. "He can cook too, unbelievable."

Out in the kitchen, the smile on Ellison's face got even broader.

Chapter Fifteen

Blair thrust his head under the hot water. "Aaaaah." The water felt wonderful as it flowed down his body. He winced slightly as he turned around to let the water hit his lower back. Oh yeah, it had been awhile all right. Only six years. Which wasn't to say that he hadn't had male lovers. He was just usually the one who was on top. He grinned at the thought. For some reason, he couldn't see Ellison as a bottom. He shrugged and began to get on with the actual task of getting clean.

He was still fastening his blue jeans when he stepped out into the living room. Blair let the smell guide him out onto his balcony where Jim had set up breakfast. His forehead wrinkled at the artfully arranged cantaloupe and honeydew melon slices on a plate in the center of the table.

"Great view," Jim said casually.

"Yeah, although I'm hardly ever here," Blair admitted as he sat down and picked up his fork.

"I think I'd like to have a view of the Bay," Jim decided. He was tired of manicured lawns. The suburbs had never really been his style, but Carolyn had wanted the house. He forced a smile. "That'll narrow down the number of properties we'll get dragged to, right?"

Blair had seen the sadness flicker in the sky blue eyes and wondered what had caused it. He nodded before looking down at his plate. The first bite was hesitant but at the spicy taste, he began eating with gusto. "How'd you know I like spicy food?" he asked as he took a sip of orange juice.

"The half dozen take-out containers containing Kung Pao, Szechwan, jambalaya..."

Blair held up his hand to stop the list. "I give," he said laughingly.

"Leftovers are only good for a couple of days you know. Some of the dishes weren't even recognizable," Jim remarked in a disapproving tone.

Sandburg just shrugged completely oblivious to how the tight royal blue t-shirt stretched sexily across his chest with the motion.

"I take it you don't cook?" Jim drawled, shifting slightly in his chair.

"Actually, I do. I've just been busy lately." Blair looked over at the other man, letting his gaze fall to the wrinkled shirt. He flushed as he remembered how the shirt had sustained the damage. "Shower's free. What time is your appointment?"

Jim checked his watch. "We have forty minutes." He paused as he opened the balcony door, "Did the hot water help?"

Blair grinned. "I'm good to go."

Ellison stepped back and leaned down and kissed the smiling mouth. "I'll remember that," he whispered against the parted lips, then straightened and went inside.

Chapter Sixteen

Jim didn't know exactly what to expect when he walked into the bedroom but it wasn't a wolf's den. Penetrating silver eyes greeted him from the large forest mural covering the wall opposite, which featured a wolf pack running through a forest, with the alpha male above on a cliff warning off all enemies.

Ellison stared at the alpha's glowing eyes, which seemed to warn him to tread carefully as well. Jim laughed at the whimsical thought and continued on his way to the bathroom, discounting the flash of grey fur he saw for a millisecond out of the corner of his eye.

Blair strolled into his bedroom looking for his other Nike hiking shoe. The sound of the shower instantly making him imagine how Jim's smooth muscular chest would look glistening with droplets.

The intense lust that flooding him at the thought startled Blair. Last night had been too quick. He hadn't had the chance to really appreciate the tight body the way his dick was demanding him to. In fact, last night's encounter didn't seem to have taken any edge off at all, merely the opposite. He couldn't wait for the next time and that scared the hell out of him. Blair frowned. Relationships just didn't seem to work out for him.

He walked over to the closet and began rummaging for a shirt that would fit Ellison. Blair picked out a blue silk shirt, which was just a little too big for him in the shoulders but should fit Jim perfectly.

Jim walked out of the bathroom, not at all surprised to find the other man in the bedroom.

"Here, this should..." Blair began as he turned around but trailed off at the sight of Ellison. Jim was bare-chested, wearing just his black slacks, which only magnified the handsome man's sexual aura. "Or maybe I'm just not getting enough," Blair muttered under his breath.

Sky blue eyes looked questioningly at Blair but Jim said nothing.

"This should fit you."

Jim nodded while he accepted the shirt. "Can I borrow a pair of socks, as well?"

"Sure, what color?"

"White."

Blair's lips twitched. He was an argyle man himself but he did have a pair of white socks. He tossed them to Ellison and leaned back against the dresser to enjoy the view.

Jim casually sat down and pulled on the socks extremely aware of the blue eyed scrutiny. "Problem?"

"No, just...are you sure you want me along? Looking for a place to live is sort of personal."

Ellison's lips twitched slightly upwards as he looked down at his feet. "No pressure, counselor," he stated and looked up at Blair.

Blair looked away and out the bedroom window, trying to fight the smile that was threatening to break across his face and losing. "Okay, fine. Let's go," he said with a laugh and started for the door.

It was Jim's turn to enjoy the view as he followed the other man out.

Chapter Seventeen

Blair let himself tiredly into his dark apartment, immediately noticing the flashing red light on his answering machine. He walked over and looked down at the machine, hesitating for only a second before pushing the play button, knowing and dreading who...what he was about to hear.

The suave arrogant voice permeated throughout the apartment, displacing the quiet serenity. "There are some things I wish to discuss with you. I'll be having a late meeting at the Tower. I'll expect you at nine."

Blair frowned. Well, that blew his plans all to hell. He would just have to prepare for court tonight instead of tomorrow before work as he planned. Putting off the "requested" meeting with Windhom would end up only causing him more grief. The man would just turn up at the most inopportune time and place for another discussion.

A smile flitted across his face at the smooth clipped tone of the next caller. Jim. "I'm just calling to thank you for helping me out today with the apartment hunt. Till Tuesday."

He began unfastening his shoes thinking back on the day's events. Apartment hunting with Ellison hadn't been so bad. In fact, it had been sort of well...fun. Of course, it helped that he had been accompanying a billionaire who was looking for a new place.

Once Jim had informed the real estate agent that he wanted someplace with a spectacular view of the bay, it hadn't taken long for Jim to find a place. The loft was perfect, Blair had admitted to himself as he had walked on the beautiful hardwood floor and looked at all the windows. The view of the bay dominated the room. A penthouse apartment. It seemed to suit Jim to a tee. He sighed and rose to walk over to his desk. Time to get to work.

Chapter Eighteen

Jim peered into the refrigerator, looking for something to eat. A saran wrapped piece of chicken looked promising. He dug around for the container of mashed potatoes he had come across earlier. Ellison had begun regretting his rejection of Blair's dinner offer for the last couple of hours. But he had wanted to get started on packing his things and arranging to move into the loft as soon as possible. He would be tied up in meetings all day Monday and he really didn't want to spend another night in his father's house.

He had just gotten used to living without so many people constantly about. He had forgotten what it was like to have a full-time serving staff. Jim sighed as he sat down and began eating. It would be nice to have his own place again.

"Jim, I've been looking for you. Where have you been all day?"

"Good evening, Steven. What can I do for you?" Jim greeted his brother pleasantly.

"Jim what the hell is wrong with you? It was all right when you were in college to...to experiment. But now. It would have killed father if he had seen you arrive with that, that man to your party last night. You spent the night with him, I suppose?" Steven asked with a disgusted expression on his handsome face.

Jim's face tightened into an unreadable expression as he stood and took a step closer to his brother. Blue eyes met grey unwavering. "Steven, I'm only going to tell you this once. My private life is none of your business. Stay out of it."

Steven shook his head. "You're not serious. Jimmy, come on! I thought you were done with this crap. You were married, for Christ's sake."

Jim laughed and shook his head slightly. "Done with what, Stevie? Being bi-sexual. I'm sorry, but things don't work that way, little brother. Get used to it."

"Get used to it. Get used to what? That longhaired pretty boy that you embarrassed the family with at the party? Well I have news for you, Jimmy. You're not the first rich man to be enthralled by Blair Sandburg."

Jim's face darkened.

"That's right. According to this preliminary report Brackett was able to put together today, Blair Sandburg lived with Paul Windhom while

he was in law school. Furthermore, it appears Windhom was the one who paid for the whole thing--law school, the clothes and that snazzy car of his."

Jim grabbed the report Steven was waving around and began to read it.

"Sandburg dumped Windhom two years ago. I guess he had no more use for the old man. Not when he could get a younger one," Steven added in a smug tone.

"Get away from me, Steven." Jim growled while staring coldly into his brother's eyes.

Steven knew he had crossed the line and made a hasty retreat. He had never seen actual hatred in the ice blue eyes before. He wouldn't want to be in Sandburg's shoes when his brother got done with him.

Jim stared in disbelief at the words in the report. It appeared that everything Steven had said was true and it certainly fit the exchange Blair had had with Windhom at the party. There was something between the two men, that was for certain. He just couldn't believe that Blair had taken advantage of Windhom. Sandburg didn't seem the type to be so mercenary. Just the opposite in fact, more a bleeding heart liberal. Jim gritted his teeth. He needed some answers, and there was only one person he wanted them from.

Chapter Nineteen

Blair straightened his back before stepping into the main dining room of the Tower and immediately headed towards Windhom's usual table in the corner. The best one, of course.

He nodded to the seated man as he pulled out his chair and sat down. "Good morning." Paul Windhom silently stared at the handsome man for a few seconds. "What is going on, Blair?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You're the one who asked to see me," Blair responded and then turned his attention to the waiter. "Morning Tony, I'll have eggs and bacon."

"The usual? You got it, Mr. Sandburg."

"James Ellison," the man ground out with a hard look.

"What? You jealous because someone else got to show me off?"

Windhom's lips tightened into a thin angry line.

Blair shrugged. "I'm dating him."

Disgust raged in the green eyes. "So you're going to persist with this insanity?"

"What insanity is that? My life? I will date who I want and live and work where I want. I won't be your little puppet. I had enough of that when I was in law school."

Silence fell as the two men stared balefully at each other.

Blair sighed and looked down at the table for a moment before back to the face, which many would say was still as handsome as ever.

"Look, I'm sorry. I tried to be the person you wanted, but I couldn't do it. Let me go."

Paul gave an elegant snort at the pretty little speech. "Enjoy your meal."

Blair watched, irritated as the distinguished looking man left without another word. Paul hadn't heard a damn word he'd said, except that he was dating Jim. 'Great, just great,' he sarcastically thought as his breakfast arrived, knowing that the controlling man had no intention of admitting defeat. 'Not when it came to him.' The stakes had just been raised in his little ongoing battle with Paul Windhom the Third.

Chapter Twenty

Blair walked into his office whistling. "Hey Mags, I thought you'd be gone by now. It's past six. Get outta here. Go have a life," he teased.

The expression on Margaret's face didn't change as she whispered, "Mr. Ellison's here. He's been waiting for you for over an hour. He doesn't look too happy." Actually, that was an understatement. Margaret had never seen a man so cold and expressionless in her life.

Blair frowned, his gaze instantly going past her towards the closed door. "Go on home, Margaret. I've got this."

She nodded and beat a hasty retreat. She didn't want to be around when the shit hit the fan, which it undoubtedly was about to.

Blair walked carefully into his office. "Jim, I thought we had plans for tomorrow?" he pleasantly began as he walked towards his desk and placed his briefcase down. He carefully kept a neutral expression as Ellison rigidly advanced to stand directly in front of him.



"Did you used to live with Paul Windhom?"

Blair forehead wrinkled slightly, "Yes, what about it?"

"He paid your way through law school?"

Blair nodded his head. "I worked as an intern at his law firm during law school and for the first year after I passed the BAR."

Jim's face tightened and he turned away to stare outside the window.

"What is this all about, Jim?"

"This is about you and Windhom!"

Blair spoke confusedly, "There is no me and Windhom. I walked away from that life years ago." Well, he started this day out with a meeting from hell and it looked like he was going to end it with one as well.

Ellison's hands clenched into fists at Blair's words.

Blair ran a hand through his hair, suddenly remembering that he still had his hair pulled back. He took out the clasp and shook his head, letting the mane of hair down with a sigh.

"I didn't know you had a problem with Paul Windhom. I thought he was a friend of your family."

"He is," Jim said stiffly and turned around, temporarily stunned at the sight of the riot of curls which were down around the bewitching face.

"Look Jim, I'm tired. I've had a long day, so just tell me what this is all about."

"You're no longer involved with Windhom?" Jim asked with the hope that Blair would tell him the truth.

"Involved?" Blair was puzzled for a few seconds at the curious choice of words until realization dawned. Stormy blue eyes stared into Ellison's judgmental face. Blair let out a bitter laugh causing Jim to flinch.

"No, I'm no longer INVOLVED with Paul but I was in the past." Blair fell silent and waited for Jim's reaction. He hoped that this time he was wrong and Jim didn't turn out to be a royal bastard like the last one.

"You slept with him for money?" Jim asked disbelievingly.

"No, I never slept with Windhom, although I did let him buy my time and regard for awhile."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means just what I said. Now, let me ask you something. Why the hell is it any of your business whom I have or haven't slept with in the past? Who the hell are you?" Blair demanded stepping around the desk and up into Ellison's face.

"I'm the guy who fucked you yesterday morning, or have there been so many since then that you've forgotten?" Jim instantly caught the right hook Blair swung at him and the left hook a second later.

"You son of a bitch!" Blair struggled for only an instant in Ellison's arms before stilling.

"I'm sorry. That remark was out of line. I just," Jim paused, and released his hold on Blair. He turned away before he continued in a destroyed sounding voice. "I just couldn't believe it when I found out. I like you. I don't want to believe that you had sex with me as some sort of nefarious scheme."

"I didn't." Blair sighed as he sat on the edge of the desk. He needed to put an end to this game he was playing. He watched as Jim began to pace back and forth before the windows. "I slept with you because you made Becky laugh and you are sexier than hell."

Jim froze and turned questioningly towards Blair.

"Paul Windhom is my father."

"Your father?" Jim repeated as he walked back to stand before Blair.

Blair nodded. "My full name is Blair Thomas Sandburg Windhom. Much to my father's chagrin I started going by Blair Sandburg almost from the very beginning. My mother was the complete opposite, personality-wise, from my father. She was a wild carefree soul who traveled eight months out of the year and took me along with her. Dad indulged her, something I only dimly remember. Well, with the places we went to, it wasn't smart for people to know you were from a wealthy family because kidnapping for ransom was a real possibility. So we dropped off Windhom and just used Sandburg. Mom died when I was twelve and I came back to the States; it just seemed natural to go by Sandburg as a way to remember her."

Jim frowned as he dimly remembered someone trying to introduce him to little Thomas who was hiding under the rosebushes when he was twelve or thirteen. The five year old hadn't come out and he had forgotten the whole thing until now. "Little Thomas Windhom.." he muttered as he gently cupped Blair's chin.

"Huh?" Blair asked as looked up into the light blue eyes.

Jim gave a slight shake of his head. "Just remembering something. I think our fathers tried to introduce us when I was twelve," he explained with a laugh.

Blair grinned at the thought of growing up with Jim. It would have made the teenage years a hell of a lot more interesting. "Speaking of fathers, mine gave me the riot act this morning...about you."

"He did?"

Blair nodded. "That was what I was talking about when I told you I walked away from that life two years ago."

"Being Paul Windhom's son."

"Yep. Dear old dad was under the unwarranted impression that I was going to work for Windhom, Juarez and Price. Play the dutiful son at cotillions and marry a girl fitting my station."

Jim laughed.

Blair gave a sly grin. "He wasn't too pleased when he found out I was bi-sexual. Although, it's better than me being gay. I mean there was always a chance that I'd end up marrying." The hand that was caressing his face froze. "Jim?"

"I don't think I like the idea of you marrying." Jim bent down and placed a light kiss on the lightly trembling lips.

A smile was on Blair's face when Jim pulled away. Blair pulled Jim closer between his parted legs. "I said WAS. You're going to have to learn to pay close attention to words, Ellison. You're dating a lawyer."

"Anything you say, counselor."

Then words became unnecessary as their lips met again.

The End

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Inspired by the Ordinary - Tangent

"Blair. Come on, it's time for dinner."

Blair blinked and looked up from his laptop. He'd been totally lost in the scene and kind of willing to stay lost. Who cared about food when the right words were flowing like water? "I'll eat later," he assured Jim, but got a steely-eyed glare in return.

"Eat now. You've been writing all day without a break. You're going to warp your spine, spending so many hours hunched over the computer."

Blair grinned, stretched luxuriously. "You'll just have to give me a massage later. That'll fix me."

Jim smiled back, but his eyes were determined and his jaw was set. "No massages--or anything else--unless you eat something, Chief."

"You're such a nag." Blair saved his work and powered down his computer. The writing mood was broken but he'd gotten a lot accomplished already. And dinner smelled delicious.

He wandered over to the table. Jim had already dished out dinner, so Blair took a second to savor the smells, the careful arrangement of food. Really, Jim was an artist when it came to cooking. A temperamental perfectionist like the best of them. His talent had been going to waste before Blair moved in. He'd been living on such a stereotypical cop diet that it had been a surprise to Blair the first time Jim had actually cooked for him and produced a meal better than almost any he'd had before. He'd known about the senses by then, but he hadn't known how well Jim could use them when it came to something he cared about, like detective work, like food.

"I'm going to make Will consider going into the restaurant business in the next book," he decided, finally twirling some pasta on his fork. Jim had already dug in but looked up with a sigh when Blair mentioned Will.

"Don't you get tired of writing for the same characters?" he asked, as he always did. It made him nervous to be the inspiration for the main character in Blair's most popular series.

"Never do." Blair took his first bite, closed his eyes and moaned. "God, Jim. I love it when it's your turn to cook."

Jim chuckled. "Me too. It's nice to escape tofu and rhubarb every now and again."

"Now, now. I don't even remember the last time I tried something that experimental."

"I do. I definitely, definitely do."

Blair opened his eyes and grinned. "So maybe in the next story, I'll have Will quit the force and open a restaurant where they serve nothing but tofu and rhubarb, you remember it so well."

"And what will John do? I don't see much call for anthropologists in the restaurant business."

"John will sit in the dining room and make notes on human interaction and who's enjoying what meal. Invaluable knowledge, really." Blair twirled more pasta on his fork as he thought about it. He'd just been joking but maybe that was a good idea. Will'd been suffering from a little burnout lately and John was about ready to give up on curing him of it. Maybe this case, the one he was writing now, would send Will over the edge and into business for himself. He and John could still get sucked into cases. Lots and lots of cases, hopefully.

"I love living with the inspiration for my best characters," he said and Jim rolled his eyes.

"Sometimes I hate being that inspiration. I can't live up to Will's superhero status."

Blair rose out of his seat, leaned across the table to kiss his partner. It was meant to be just a quick peck but he lingered, drew it out. Jim tasted of alfredo sauce and red wine, spices and heat and himself. Delicious.

"You're a superhero to me," he murmured against Jim's lips. Jim smiled, slowly, a little reluctantly, but it was a real smile. Blair sat back down. He was half-hard and a little uncomfortable, but that was part of the pleasure, really. Drawing it all out until every heartbeat was a reminder of what he felt for Jim, until every inch of his skin felt taut and achy and sensitive.

They ate in silence for a while. But Blair was nearing the halfway point in this newest novel, and it was time for Jim's favorite question--

"This going to be the book where they fall into bed together?" Jim asked. Blair laughed.

"Man, you ask that with every book. Sometimes I think you're the one that started the whole will they/won't they debate."

Jim's expression was smug and cool. "It's not will they/won't they to me," he said. "The only question is **when**."

That was really the only question Blair had, too. Will and John had been working together for five years, edging a little closer to loving each other in each book, and Blair was nearly sick of making them wait.

The next book, he thought, and once the decision was made it felt right. He'd have to make an outline right after dinner, while the ideas were still fresh and new and perfect. If he waited until he was done with the newest book, he wouldn't be sure that the ideas were any good. Better to get them down and remove any doubt.

He had to worry a little bit, though. He had a lot of fans who weren't going to be happy if John and Will hit the sheets together, never mind that he'd been building up to that over the course of twelve books. Not many were homophobic at all, he was sure. They just wanted to see their beloved characters with wives and children and normal, happy lives.

It wasn't going to happen like that, which was too bad for those fans. His characters were exceptional people, and they were going to live exceptional lives, which would make the moments of intimacy and day-to-day life all the sweeter.

He cleared his plate, still thinking of all his characters had gone through, the rewards that were waiting for them just around the corner.

"I don't want our sex life to be the inspiration for theirs," Jim said as they washed dishes together, his expression suddenly alarmed.

Blair grinned. "Don't worry. John will totally be the top." Jim tangled big, soapy hands in his hair, growling a little. Blair laughed and ducked, dancing out of reach.

"I'll show you tops," Jim said, a huge grin on his face. His eyes were already changing, darkening. Blair loved watching Jim's arousal build--his body was so gorgeous, his expressions ranging from glorious and hot to so gentle and tender that it made Blair want to weep. Their sex life wouldn't be the inspiration for his characters', but he'd make sure that John and Will were just as hungry, and just as sweet.

Jim was his real-life Sentinel, and the inspiration for all of the extraordinary things that Will could do. But he was also ordinary, a strong man with flaws and talents, and that was what Blair liked best about him. That was what inspired him the most.

Jim caught him by the fridge, his wet hands sliding down Blair's arms to his wrists and latching on. He backed Blair against the cool metal and settled their bodies together, so close that Blair had to work at taking deep breaths.

"The dishes," he said, making a game out of avoiding Jim's mouth. "You're so anal about your kitchen, so we better stop playing and do the dishes."

"Screw the dishes," Jim mumbled before latching his mouth onto one of the cords in Blair's neck. Blair arched his back a little and moaned, his hands gripping Jim's tight ass and squeezing.

"You need a shower," he said through another moan. "You smell like gunpowder and that crap coffee they give you at the station."

"That idea, I like," Jim said, and he pulled back. Blair gripped him hard again, not **really** wanting to stop, and Jim grinned. "You need a shower too, Chief. You smell like your computer. We better take one together."

"Water conservation?" Blair asked, sliding out from between Jim's body and the fridge, ready and willing to conserve as much water as Jim wanted to conserve. Really, shower sex was some of his favorite sex--he loved soaping Jim's body, watching the bubbles slide over hard muscle, touching smooth skin slicked by water. He loved going down on Jim with the tropical scents of soap and shampoo steaming around them, the water pouring over them; that reminded him of the jungle where they'd spent their first vacation working on Jim's senses and his novels. He loved curling up with Jim in the tub after, both of them boneless with satiation.

"Water conservation is too trite a reason," Jim said decisively, allowing Blair to pull him towards the bathroom. "Don't let John and Will use that as an excuse for shower sex. Use...the massage head and an experiment."

Blair laughed, but the idea seemed **really** hot. Maybe I will use that, he thought, herding Jim into the bathroom and starting to strip him. Or maybe I won't give them an excuse at all. Maybe they'll just want to touch each other and the shower will be a nice, warm, exciting place to do it.

Yeah, he liked that idea.

"You're so cool," he told Jim, grinning. His mind was just racing with ideas for the novels, with images of him and Jim in bed, on the couch, in the shower. He loved it when ideas came faster than he could even recognize them.

Jim nodded gravely, pushed off his pants and boxers, twisted to turn on the shower. "I know I am," he said, looking over his shoulder while he tested the water temperature. "That's why you love me."

Blair laughed, kissed Jim's shoulder, nipped. "When you're right, you're right," he said. "Give the man a cookie."

Jim turned back around, covered Blair's mouth. "Give the man a good, hard fuck," he breathed, and Blair moaned, losing the ideas for novels and focusing entirely on Jim. That was something else he loved--his partner inspired the books, and then made him forget them. Never happened before Jim, not that much at all had happened before Jim. Blair'd just been an aimless wanderer, a man without a purpose. Naomi's son, just like his mother. Then one day when he walked into the police station, searching for inspiration, he'd looked up and into the most amazing pair of blue eyes God had ever created. Wham, bam, instant reason to live.

Jim had given him the courage to straighten out his life. The support to use his talent for storytelling. The love he had needed to stabilize his life. In return, he'd given the ability to work with the heightened senses instead of against them, a partner who could watch Jim's back when it was necessary. His relationship with Jim...was just amazing.

"I'll give the man anything he wants," he promised, and stepped into the shower. Jim followed, already hard as a rock and ready for anything, and Blair settled down onto his knees. He looked up into Jim's eyes, waiting while he twisted his strong hands in Blair's curly hair. Love softened the moment and they both smiled.

Life was very sweet.



END

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 Learning to Fly



Learning To Fly - VampyrAlex

PART 1

~~In my life there's been heartache and pain
I don't know if I can face it again
Can't stop now, I've traveled so far, to change this lonely life
I want to know what love is, I want you to show me
I want to feel what love is, I know you can show me
I'm gonna take a little time, a little time to look around me
I've got nowhere left to hide, it looks like love has finally found me~~

*****@*****

San Francisco, 1996

James Ellison looked out the window watching the heavy rain pouring down from the sky. He sighed wearily, his finger tracing a falling drop against the glass.

"Why Cascade?" he asked softly to the person behind him.

Stephen shrugged slightly. "Why not? We haven't been there in years, bro. It's our hometown, the place where we grew up. And we haven't been on vacation together since we were kids," he replied softly. "You can't go on like this, Jim. You don't go out anymore except to go to work. You spend most of your time locked in your room staring out the window... You have to start living again. Carolyn wouldn't want you to waste your life away."

Jim's heart contracted painfully in his chest at the reference of his dead wife. It seemed like only yesterday since she and their unborn child had died in that damned car accident, but in reality, three years had gone by. Three long years in which life stopped having interest; in which nothing mattered except his pain.

Stephen moved closer, resting his hand on his brother's shoulder. "There are other cops in Frisco, Jim. Let them take care of the bad guys for a change. Matt can keep an eye on things at the race track for me while we're away. Come on vacation with me... please, bro?"

Jim looked at his younger brother and tried to smile in spite of the pain inside him. "Okay, Stephen. I'll go back to Cascade with you."

*****@*****

Cascade, a few days later

Blair watched the group of people settling down in their seats and smiled brightly. "Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to Cascade Tours. My name's Blair Sandburg and I'll be your guide for today. We will be traveling through some of the most beautiful and picturesque sights in Cascade, Washington. I hope you have a pleasant visit."

His eyes fell on the soulful face of a man looking blankly through the window. From what Blair could see he was a tall man, possessing a powerful body, muscled and with broad shoulders. His clear blue eyes seemed to see right through you, and his chiseled features and set jaw combined, gave his face a strong and beautiful look. Blair was no stranger to the male sensuality but it had been a while since he'd seen such an amazing specimen.

He checked the passenger list and found the man's name was James Ellison, and that he was traveling with Stephen Ellison, probably his brother. It was against his better judgment to get involved with the tourists but he couldn't help the wishful thinking. Ellison was definitely the type of man he would have liked to get to know better.

During the tour, they stopped several times to visit some museum, park or other tourist attraction, and Blair couldn't help watching Ellison closely. The sadness surrounding the man was so strong it was almost a living thing. Somehow, the sadness he saw in Jim drew him in. Maybe someone had broken his heart just like Sam had broken his.

Sam had finally left him after two years of sharing their lives, their hopes and their dreams, and he was feeling terribly lonely. Truthfully, their relationship had been doomed for a long time, they were too different, and soon after they got together the fighting had started. It was a blessing that they never got married like they'd planned in the beginning.

But after two years of living with someone, he was feeling the loneliness and emptiness of his life with a vengeance. Maybe that was the same kind of pain Ellison was feeling, maybe in a way they were kindred spirits. Blair couldn't help thinking he wished he could find out.

*****@*****

After the tour ended Stephen dragged his brother around Cascade, taking him to the places they used to hang around while growing up. They even visited the house where they'd lived as children, but there was no one there. Stephen wasn't quite sure if he was disappointed or ecstatic about his father not being home. Things between them were difficult. William Ellison was a hard man to get to know and neither of the brothers had seen their father in over ten years.

They were walking back to their hotel when a voice called out to them. Both Stephen and Jim turned to see the tour guide, Blair Sandburg, run towards them with a camera in hand.

Stephen tried to stifle a smile. His plan was beginning to take form. As soon as he'd boarded the tour bus he'd noticed the young tour guide and how handsome he was. Beautiful face, with long auburn curly hair, huge ocean blue eyes and a nice sturdy body to match. Knowing about Jim's bisexuality and noticing the glances Sandburg kept throwing his brother, Stephen decided to do a little matchmaking. He'd left his camera on the bus and prayed the right person came to return it. Apparently, his prayers had been answered.

"My camera!" he exclaimed, hoping to sound convincing. "Thank you, Mr. Sandburg. I keep forgetting it everywhere. It's a miracle I haven't lost it yet!" he chuckled slightly, ignoring Jim's confused frown.

"Blair, please. And it's no problem," the young man replied, returning his smile. "I spotted it in your seat when I was leaving the bus and decided to bring it myself."

"Well, thanks anyway. May I be so bold as to ask what you're going to do tonight?"

Blair blinked, clearly surprised at the question. "Uh... Well, I'm a little tired, so I was going to go home and make some dinner," he answered, softly.

Stephen raised an eyebrow, knowing he was grinning like a moron, but not caring in the least. "What? No way, Blair! What do you say if I take you both out for dinner? It's the least I can do after you so kindly returned my camera!" When Blair remained silent, he pressured. "Well?"

"Uh... I... um... sure..." Blair stammered, obviously not expecting being steam-rolled into having dinner with the two brothers.

Stephen slapped him affectionately on the back. "Great! That's settled then. I'll just go up to the room and get a coat, then we can go. Jim, you want anything?"

"Um, no," Jim replied, looking a little shell-shocked himself.

"Okay, be back in a minute then," Stephen told them, running to the elevator.

He pressed the button for their floor, but instead of going to their room, just stood in the corridor. When he thought enough time had gone by, he went back down and met with the others, with what he hoped was a regretfully enough expression.

"I'm sorry, guys. I won't be able to have dinner with you after all. I just got a call from my assistant, Matt, he's having some problems at work and I'll have to help him through. I'm supposed to call him in ten minutes so we can start," he turned to Jim, "but Jim can go with you, Blair. Can't you, bro?"

Jim sighed and gave his brother a murderous look. He should've seen that coming. Stephen knew he wouldn't be immune to the charm of a good looking and seemingly intelligent man like Blair, but to just throw him like that at the other man... His little brother could be really pushy sometimes. They were definitely going to have a long talk. Later.

"Sure, why not?" he replied, giving Blair a small, but genuine smile.

"Have fun!" Stephen grinned inanely as he watched the two men leaving the hotel.

As soon as they were out of sight he went to the bar and asked for a drink. He felt too energized to go to his room and he wasn't all that tired. Actually, he was feeling quite pleased with himself. And it wasn't like Matt was really waiting for his call, he thought with a rueful smile.

*****@*****

Jim looked around the 'La Cueva', the Peruvian restaurant Blair'd brought them to. He hadn't been able to remember any good restaurants, so he'd let the younger man choose.

"Why a Peruvian restaurant?" he asked curious, as they were shown to a table.

Blair smiled brightly. "I was in Peru a few years ago. I love the South American culture, so when I finished college I decided to go there and just traveled aimlessly for a while. I lived with a few tribes, made a few friends, then got homesick and came back," he grinned. "Their food was one of my favorite things. Some of the more spicy stuff can give you indigestion, but if you know what to pick..."

Jim smiled back. "So, what made you decide to become a tour guide?"

"Well, I really enjoy connecting with different people, different cultures. This was as close as I could get without having to travel the world. Plus, as anyone who knows me would tell you, I love to talk," he grinned impishly. "Give me a small group of people and I'll talk their ears off for days if they'll let me. Anyway, what about you? What do you do?"

"I'm a cop in San Francisco," Jim replied, half expecting the young man to grimace or make some kind of remark. Nowadays 'cop' seemed almost like a dirty word. You confessed to be one and people immediately looked down on you.

But Blair merely gave him a inquisitive look. "Really? What's it like being a cop?"

"It has its ups and downs. Mostly downs these days, it seems," Jim replied, feeling a thread of his depressive mood returning.

As if sensing the dark cloud hovering over them, Blair turned suddenly serious eyes on him. "How about you telling me some of those ups?"

Jim chuckled, and shook his head ruefully. "Oh, there's been a few. Um, let's see... I remember this woman who called us with a complaint that she had been burnt in a drug deal. She claimed that a man had sold her a rock of crack cocaine but when she brought it home, it looked like baking powder. We tested the rock and verified that despite its appearance, it really was cocaine. Obviously, the woman was arrested for drug possession," he grinned as Blair began to laugh.

"I can't believe she actually called you guys and complained about the drugs she bought! How stupid can you get? Got anymore like that?"

"When I was a rookie detective, I was partnered with this guy called Jack Pendergrast. We caught this thief once and no matter how hard we worked on him, the guy refused to name his accomplices and where they kept their stash. So my partner decided to trick the moron. He placed a metal colander on the guy's head and connected it with wires to a photocopy machine. He then placed the message 'HE'S LYING' in the copier and pressed the copy button each time he thought the thief was lying to us."

"You're kidding!" Blair challenged incredulous.

"Nope," Jim grinned. "And believe it or not, the guy believed that contraption was a lie detector and confessed to everything we wanted and more!"

They laughed softly for a while before a comfortable silence settled over them. "So, you have anyone in your life at the moment? Romantically speaking, I mean?" Blair asked suddenly.

Jim took a deep shuddering breath. "Um... Not anymore, no. My wife... she died three years ago in a car accident. It's really weird how life works, you know? One minute you're a happily married man, soon to be a father, and all of a sudden... your life just blows up in your face."

"I'm sorry," Blair grimaced. "Open mouth, insert foot."

Jim shook his head and tried his best to smile. "It's okay, you couldn't have known. What about you? Married? Single? Single but spoken for...?"

"I was together with someone for a couple of years but she left me some months ago. Said she wanted her freedom back and I was in the way," Blair shrugged. "So I let her go."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Like you said, it's okay. It's time to look to the future and make a new start," Blair stated with a smile, his dark blue eyes locking with Jim's for a long moment before looking away.

They left the restaurant not long after that and Jim took the young man to a quiet bar for a late drink. They spent a lot of time talking about themselves, what they liked and didn't like, finding they had more in common than they thought at first.

Both were surprised with the feeling of familiarity they felt towards each other, like they knew each other for years and not only a day. For the first time in years, Jim let himself relax and just enjoy being in someone else's company. A man that seemed to have seen his fair share of the ugliness in the world, and yet, had retained his humanity and his zest for life.

*****@*****

It was close to three in the morning when Jim walked silently into their hotel room, not wanting to wake his brother up. His efforts were in vain though, because as soon as he sat on his bed, Stephen turned on the light.

"So, how was dinner?" he asked with a smirk.

"You're terrible, Stephen, you know that?" Jim grinned at his imp of a brother, then let out a deep breath. "It was... nice. I... he's a good man. I won't bother denying that I feel attracted to him."

"You're saying that like it's a bad thing, bro."

"It is. You know I'm bi, being with another man wouldn't be a problem. But... Stephen, you know I'm not a one-night stand kind of guy. For me it has to mean something, I'm too old to fuck around. I don't know if I'm ready to face it all again; dating, getting to know the person, getting involved. Besides, we're here on vacation, not permanently. My life, my work, everything that means anything to me now is back in Frisco."

Stephen shook his head at his brother. "Jim, you're making a big deal out of nothing. I'm not saying you have to marry the guy! I'm just saying it's time you started to enjoy life, to take chances. I saw the way Blair was looking at you the whole day, bro, and I can see you like him as well. Take the chance, you're too young to just let yourself die like you've been doing. You both feel the attraction so go with it. Don't expect too much and don't expect too little, but enjoy what you can with Blair whatever the outcome might be. If you don't, you'll

spend the rest of your life asking yourself 'what if'. Get what you can out of life, man."

Jim threw him a mock-glare. "What is that? Stephen Ellison's life philosophy?"

"Definitely! I should write a book; I'd make a fortune. And so you know, it's never failed me before. Through all the good and bad times it's been worth it."

Jim nodded, then grinned ruefully. "I guess if you feel that way, you'll be pleased with what I'm about to say."

His brother just raised an eyebrow quizzically and waited.

"Tomorrow is Blair's day off so we're going out. He's showing me some of the sights the tour didn't include and also his favorite places in Cascade. Maybe it'll jog my memory and I can show him some of my old favorite places."

Stephen's wide grin was answer enough that he was happy with the news. He winked at his brother. "I want to know all the details afterwards..." he said with a smile, and Jim laughed.

"Stephen, you and I are definitely going to have a talk about your meddling in my life. Which reminds me, how's Matt?"

"Matt?" Stephen asked softly, feigning a completely unconvincing innocent look. "He's fine. Why?"

"Are you really trying to make me believe that you spent the night on the phone with him working? Or that the carelessly forgotten camera on the bus was an accident?"

Stephen sighed. "No," then he grinned. "But it worked, didn't it?"

Jim growled and threw him a pillow. "Go to sleep, Stephen!"

"Yes, sir! Going right to it, sir! In fact, I'm asleep already, sir!"

"Moron!"

*****@*****

The next week went by in a blur. The two men spent all of Blair's free time together, going out and just enjoying each other's company. Blair had taken the other man to the Grandview Zoo, the Chinese Gardens, to Chinatown and Little Havana, with a little stop in Little Russia for some traditional cuisine.



Jim was returning the favor, driving Blair's car through the Cascade forest roads, remembering past camping or fishing trips, both enjoying the conversation and the music coming from the radio. Suddenly, Jim's senses went on overload. One moment everything was normal, the next the radio was too loud, the light was too damn bright, the earthy smells were making him nauseous, and his clothes were too heavy and harsh on his skin. He managed to stop the vehicle at the side of the road before completely losing control.

Blair looked at him frantic, seeing the older man nearly collapsed in his seat. "Jim! Oh, My God! What's wrong?!"

The sound of the young man's frightened voice drove Jim's hands to his ears, trying to block the noise, his eyes squeezed shut against the light. "Please..." he pleaded in agony. "Help me, Blair... I can't..."

The young man didn't know what was going on or what he should do but something made him whisper back. "What's wrong with you?"

"E-everything is too high... the light, the sounds..."

Blair blinked stunned. It couldn't be. What Jim was describing... Feeling his heart about to explode in his chest, he forced himself to calm down and think about what to do for a few minutes. He wanted desperately to reach out to the other man but was unwilling to cause any more pain. All of a sudden an idea came to him.

"Got it!" he exclaimed loudly, making Jim moan. "Sorry," he whispered softly. "Jim, I want you to picture something that you can control... picture a dial."

"A... dial?" Jim gasped.

"Yes, like in a radio or a television. Go with me on this. Picture a dial."

"G-got it," the older man stammered through gritted teeth.

"Okay. Now, underneath that dial is the word 'sound'. I want you to imagine yourself turning it down, sort of like the volume control on a television set. I'm going to start talking in a normal voice. I want you to turn the dial down until it sounds normal. Can you do that?" he asked, already with his usual voice tone.

"Yeah... I think it's working... keep talking..."

"Has this ever happened to you before?"

"Yes, before this vacation with Stephen... a surveillance job... stayed alone for almost two weeks in an isolated cabin in the woods. I thought it was my body just... reacting to its surroundings..." he let out a deep breath. "Sound is okay now."

"Good, let's go to another sense then. Picture the dial, this time with the word 'sight'. Do the same thing, turn it down until the light feels normal to your eyes."

During the next half an hour Blair helped Jim control his senses through the dials on each one. Finally exhausted, both fell back on their seats.

"God, I'm exhausted!" Jim huffed. "How did you know what to do?"

Blair shrugged. "Instinct, I think. Jim, you said this happened before. What happened exactly? Loud noises that shouldn't be loud? Smelling things that no one else could smell? Weird visuals? Taste buds off the map, right? A hyperactive tactile response?"

"A what?"

"Extra sensitive touchy-feely."

Jim flushed slightly, but nodded. "Yes. All that happened to me. What's wrong with me? And why is it happening?"

"Well, I think that for some reason your surveillance job as you called it, brought your senses online. Had this happened before the time at the cabin?"

"Yeah, when I was a kid. But I guess it went away after a while. What... I mean..."

"Jim, when I was in Peru, I stayed with a tribe called the Chopec. It was there that I first heard of Sentinels."

"Sentinels?" Jim interrupted, a confused look on his face.

"Yeah. The idea goes something like this -- in all tribal cultures every village had what was named a Sentinel, someone who patrolled the border."

"A scout."

"No, more like a watchman. This Sentinel would watch for approaching enemies, changes in the weather, movement of game. Tribe survival depended on it."

"Okay. But what's this got to do with me?"

"A Sentinel is chosen because of a genetic advantage. A sensory awareness that can be developed beyond normal humans. Now these senses are honed by solitary time spent in the wild. The Chopec had a Sentinel, Enqueri, and the tribe's Shaman, Incacha, was his Guide. Enqueri was just like you."

Jim stood silent for a long time. "Okay, let's say I buy this. Why is this coming back now?"

"I don't know exactly. But it was caused by the time you spent in that cabin alone."

The older man let out a deep breath. "This is too much information at a time. Can you drive us back to Cascade? I'm better, but I still don't trust myself behind the wheel."

He turned to the young man when he realized his senses were a bit high again and all focused on Blair. They seemed to be under control, but he could hear the young man's heartbeat, feel the heat coming from the lithe body or smell the wonderful scent that was unique to Blair. It was a little enervating.

Unaware of the inner turmoil going on within the man next to him, Blair looked into the clear eyes locked on his and nodded. "Sure, Jim."

Jim moved and Blair sat behind the wheel of his car. An hour later he was leaving Jim's hotel after making sure he was okay and going back to his loft to rest. He was beyond tired but feeling a new strength inside that made him feel wonderful. He was finally breaking through Jim's protective walls and now he would get to help him with his Sentinel abilities. Life couldn't get much better than that.

*****@*****

PART 2

~~I can't fight this feeling any longer.
And yet I'm still afraid to let it flow.
What started out as friendship,
Has grown stronger.
I only wish I had the strength to let it show.
I tell myself that I can't hold out forever.
I said there is no reason for my fear.
Cause I feel so secure when we're together.
You give my life direction,
You make everything so clear.
And I can't fight this feeling anymore.
I've forgotten what I started fighting for.
It's time to bring this ship into the shore,
And throw away the oars, forever~~

*****@*****

The next day Blair went back to Jim's hotel room to check on the older man. Jim smiled brightly when he saw the young man and let him in.

"Hey, Jim! How are you feeling?"

"Hey, Chief! I'm doing okay. You want a beer?"

"Sure. Where's Stephen?"

"Went to visit some old friends. Told me not to wait up for him, so I'm guessing he'll have dinner with them and then go out somewhere."

They sat on the couch sipping their beers. Jim turned to the other man and sighed softly. "I suppose there's no chance of getting rid of this thing, is there? My senses?"

Blair shook his head. "I haven't got a clue on how to turn them off, sorry. But maybe I can help you control them. I've been thinking about a number of tests we can do to help you. You game?" he asked, with a smile.

Jim couldn't help but smile back. "I'm game," he answered softly.

They spent most of the day doing tests and learning how to control Jim's senses. After a few hours he was able to dial them up and down easily or piggyback two at the same time to increase their use. Thanks to Blair's energy and sense of humor, they managed to have a fun time, and both were relaxed and content by the end of the day.

"God, and to think my brother had to drag me on this vacation!" Jim chuckled, shaking his head. "I've been having such a great time, and I found that no matter what, I still love Cascade."

Blair turned to him and smiled softly. "I hope you're loving me a bit too..."

Their eyes locked, clear blue on ocean blue, and Jim swallowed loudly. "Blair..."

Blair kissed him then, moist, warm lips capturing his and possessing him thoroughly. There was a faint moan from the mouth against his, then a pair of surprisingly strong arms wrapped around him and Jim was kissed like he'd never been kissed in his whole life. He tightened his own grip on the young man and pressed Blair closer to his body, unable to feel anything but the heat of the mouth on him.

When Blair reached for the buttons on his shirt and began unbuttoning them, Jim came back to his senses and grabbed hold of his hands, lacing their fingers together. "Chief, wait," he begged, breathlessly.

"What's wrong?" the young man looked up at him with a worried expression.

"There's nothing wrong. It's just that... I like you a lot, actually, I think I like you too much," he stated with a rueful grin and was pleased to

see Blair grin back. "But this is all going too fast. We just met and I... uh, I wasn't expecting this, it took me by surprise. Would you be too upset if I asked you to slow down a bit?" he queried, almost fearfully.

Blair shook his head and smiled gently. "No, you're right, Jim," he sighed. "I just got a little overwhelmed for a moment. It's been a long time since I felt such a connection with anyone, if ever. I certainly never felt anything like this with Sam or any of the people I dated before. We'll take it as slow as you want Jim. I promise."

"Thanks, Blair," Jim smiled gratefully, then grinned mischievously. "Can we cuddle for a while?"

Blair chortled, "Sure, Jim."

Jim gathered the young man in his arms and they snuggled together in one of the twin beds, enjoying each other's warmth and looking at the world outside through the window of the hotel room. They stayed that way for a long time, hands caressing lazily, both lost in thought. Finally, after a while, Blair couldn't take it anymore.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Jim chuckled softly. "They're not worth it, Chief. I was just thinking about life. In less than a month I'll have to be back to Frisco, get on with my life. I don't want..."

Blair's fingers on his lips stopped him. "Shhh... It's okay, Jim. I know. I don't want you to go either. Let's not think about it for now. Let's just think we have three long, infinite weeks, ahead of us. Let's make the best of it. Live each day at a time."

*****@*****

During the next three weeks, they spent every waking moment together, getting to know each other better, learning each other's secrets, falling in love with the other.



Blair had never felt like this before, not even with Sam. He felt ecstatic, nearly drunk on love. Jim made him feel loved, safe, so very happy, so alive... He couldn't stand the thought of losing him, but denied himself the need to ask the older man to stay. It was Jim's life and Jim's decision and he wasn't going to influence him, no matter how hard he wanted to.

Jim, on the other hand, had found in Blair the perfect mate. Someone to love, to share his life, his dreams, to be by his side through the good and bad times. It was as if the accident in which Carolyn died had broken his wings and now he was learning to fly again. And all he could think of was soaring in the skies with Blair by his side. But... would he be able to?

*****@*****

It was their last night together. They enjoyed a nice, romantic dinner at Blair's loft and were on the balcony watching the darkness taking over Cascade. The young man felt all his resolve crumble to pieces and turned to the other man, grasping his arms tightly as he spoke.

"I promised myself I wasn't going to ask," he began, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. "but... Jim stay with me in Cascade... please. I know every relationship has obstacles to overcome, especially if you're in a same sex couple. We'd have to face a lot of bull and I know you have a life back in San Francisco, but dammit... I love you!"

Jim's sorrow-filled eyes regarded him sadly. "And I love you, Chief. But like you said, I have a life back in Frisco. I have a job there, my brother, my friends..."

"And your memories," Blair finished, sounding defeated. "I can't fight against a dead woman, Jim. That's not fair. You're so afraid to let her go, to love again, of getting hurt again... I'm not saying our love will last forever. My mother always told me that in love never and forever don't exist. I don't believe that. I want to spend forever with you. I can't promise we'll be happy ever after but unless we try, we'll never know."

The other man shook his head. "It's not that easy, Chief. I'm sorry, I can't."

"And if I go with you?" Blair ventured hesitantly.

Jim looked the younger man in the eye. "You'd do that? Give up everything and go with me?"

"Yes, I would. Nothing means more to me than you, Jim."

"I don't want you to do that, Blair. This is where you live, work, where your whole life is. If you went with me, you might end up resenting me for making you give up everything. I wouldn't be able to live with that."

"But..."

"Blair, please..." Jim whispered softly.

He started to walk inside but Blair grabbed his wrist gently. "Wait. Please... stay the night. I just want to hold you one last time..."

They stayed in a loving embrace for a long time, both looking up at the stars and wishing they could stay that way forever.

*****@*****

Everything was packed and ready to go. Jim was looking out their hotel window while Stephen finished getting dressed. He was thinking about Blair and everything he'd said the night before. How the real reason why Jim wouldn't stay in Cascade was because he was afraid to let go of Carolyn, because he was too afraid of loving again, of hurting again. Blair was right, deep down he knew that. He really was afraid. What he didn't know was if he was strong enough to fight that fear.

"Bro, you done packing?" he heard his brother ask.

"Yeah," he replied flatly.

His heart began to beat painfully in his chest at the thought of having to leave Cascade, at the thought of having to leave Blair. Maybe he could fight the fear after all. He turned to his brother suddenly.

"Stephen... I'm not going back to Frisco. I'm staying in Cascade... with Blair."

"Finally!" Stephen exclaimed, then smiled and hugged Jim tightly. "Then go. Love makes the world go round, bro. Don't let it escape your grasp. Go to Blair and let him make an honest man out of you. It's about time," he grinned widely.

They stayed in each other's arms for a moment, then Jim left. No more running. Like Blair had said before, it was time to look to the future and make a new start... Together.

*****@*****

Blair was seated in front of the television watching mindlessly some old movie and feeling miserable. He'd tried calling the hotel in a last desperate attempt to change Jim's mind about staying or letting him go with him to San Francisco but he had checked-out already. Two minutes too late. The best thing in his life was gone for good.

A sudden knock on the door brought him back from his misery. He rose from the couch and opened the door, freezing at the sight before him. A pair of sky blue eyes laughed at him and a sexy purr queried softly, "You think there's room in there for one more?"

"Jim!"

Before he could utter another word, Jim hugged him tightly, spinning him around the living room, both laughing like lunatics. When he finally got too tired, Jim set Blair down gently.

"You're staying?" the young man asked, fearfully.

"I'm staying. You were right. I am afraid of getting hurt but with you I'm willing to take a chance. I have to. I love you, Chief."

"I love you too, Jim," Blair replied with a huge smile, pulling the older man to the stairs and into the bedroom. "Come on, let's begin our future together. I've been wanting to do this for a month," he grinned cheekily and Jim chuckled.

Once upstairs, they divested themselves of their clothes and tumbled back on the bed. Jim landed on top of the young man, moaning at the erotic slide of their naked bodies against each other, at the feel of Blair's legs wrapping around him, pulling him closer. They were both frantic, hands and mouths touching wherever they could reach, mapping new territory for safe keeping.

Jim felt Blair's hands slide down his back to his buttocks, squeezing his cheeks gently until he gasped, his hard cock throbbing between their bodies. His greater weight pressed Blair down on the bed, one thigh sliding between his partner's legs, but Blair didn't seem to mind judging by the needy moans and whimpers coming out of the arched throat.

He heard Blair groan out loud, lifting his hips to grind them into Jim's, spreading his legs wide in an invitation Jim couldn't refuse. The young man handed him a tube of KY taken from the nightstand and Jim began coating his erection thoroughly, then poured some more onto his

fingers. Locking eyes with his lover, Jim began to caress Blair between his legs, fingers teasing the opening to the young man's body. He slipped a finger inside; Blair's ecstatic moan was the sexiest thing Jim had ever heard.

The older man shuddered as Blair moaned again as the second finger went in. Jim added the third finger, stretching his partner, arousing him and preparing him for the moment when they would be as one.

There was a little pain as Jim slid in, so he held still and waited until Blair had adjusted to being filled by his cock. He pushed a little deeper and Blair's hips bucked involuntarily letting him know he was ready. Jim took the hint and started fucking the other man for all he was worth, unable to hold back any longer, driving deep into him, pounding him into the bed with every thrust. Blair rose up to meet him, matching his need and his thrusts with equal force, his cries of pleasure echoing in the bedroom walls.

Finally, their pace was too much. Blair's body arched back and with a hoarse shout, he spent himself in a long, trembling orgasm, his seed covering both their stomachs and chests. His muscles clamped tight around Jim and after two hard thrusts the older man groaned and climaxed inside his lover.

When he had his breath back, Jim made as if to pull out but Blair stopped him, reaching out to catch his hand. "Don't... not yet..."

Jim nodded in understanding. It'd been too long since he'd felt so loved and he wanted to keep the connection between them for as long as possible as well.

*****@*****

EPILOGUE

Six months later

Blair left the Cascade Tours office feeling tired but happy. It had been a good day; lots of tourists, new people to meet, and he even ended up trading recipes with a Norwegian cook. He smiled as he saw the Explorer parked in front of the building, Jim leaning against it.

"Hey..." he whispered softly, as he grew nearer to the older man.

His lover smiled back. "Hey, Chief. Had a good day?"

"Yeah," he replied, as Jim began to drive them home. "Come on, don't keep me in suspense here! Did you tell Simon or not?"

Jim chuckled. "Oh, yeah! I told him... The whole thing. About Sentinels, Guides, everything. I thought he was going to swallow his cigar!"

"God, I wish I'd seen it! So, what did he say?"

"He agreed. There was nothing else he could do. As of tomorrow, you'll be my partner and a Cascade PD police observer. You'll have to come to the station in the morning to fill out all the paperwork to make it official."

"Alright!" Blair exclaimed happily, then he turned serious. "You think we can trust Simon to keep quiet about your senses?"

"Yes. He seems to be a good man and besides, I owed him. I'd still be waiting for a transfer from the San Francisco PD if not for him. The best thing that happened to me was him asking me to join the Major Crime team."

"Well, he owed you, too. If not for us, he would never have caught Veronica Sarris. God, and to think I worked with her for so long and never knew she was The Switchman! Good thing you decided to go with me that day and heard the bomb she planted on the bus," he sighed wearily. "So, anyway, no second thoughts about this... about us?"

Jim smiled at his young lover. "No. It would be a mistake not to use the Sentinel abilities to help people. You said it yourself, I'm a walking crime lab with organic surveillance equipment," Jim remarked. "I feel like I can really make a difference here, do something useful, and as long as I have you by my side, it will always feel right."

"Then it will always feel right because I'll always be by your side," Blair replied softly.

His hand caressed his lover's knee and he rested his head on Jim's shoulder. It had been hard for Jim to surrender to his feelings, but Blair was glad the older man had found the strength within himself to do it. They were together and their love for each other seemed to be getting stronger everyday. And together they would stay, because their love would defeat any danger that might come their way. As Sentinel and Guide, or just as lovers, their destiny was the same.

The end

Author's notes: The lyrics "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Foreigner, and "Can't Fight This Feeling" by REO Speedwagon, are used without permission.

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Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter ♦ Lyn

"Blair?"

Blair Sandburg jumped at the voice, causing his grease-covered hand to slip on the wrench and felt the edge of the pipe he'd just cut bite into his finger. He bit down on the epithet that found its way to his tongue and scooted out from his position under the sink, looking up into a pretty, smiling face.

"Hey, Molly," he said. He sat up and wiped the sweat from his brow, leaving a swathe of dirt in its path.

"Mom thought you'd like some lunch," Molly said. She held out a plate piled high with sandwiches.

"Thank you," Blair answered, smiling back at her. He pushed himself to his feet and looked around. "Let me just clean up first. The leak is fixed anyway."

"That's great, Blair. Here," Molly passed him a towel and watched as he washed his hands and packed up his tools. Then she led the way out to the dining room table and placed the sandwiches in the center.

"I hope you're going to help me eat these," Blair said, indicating the platter. "There is no way I can get through all of those on my own."

"Okay," Molly agreed, settling into the chair opposite him.

Hannah Brown appeared from the kitchen at that moment and hurried forward with two steaming mugs of coffee. "Oh, good. You've fixed the leak then, Blair?"

Blair nodded, his mouth full of ham and salad. Swallowing quickly, he answered. "All done, Mrs. Brown. Thanks for lunch. I didn't get time for breakfast. Mr. Jackson said he heard rodents under his bed again."

Hannah rolled her eyes. "That man. I think he's just lonely, you know? Since his wife died."

"I know," Blair agreed. "I don't mind. I feel sorry for him. It must be awful to be alone like that."

"You'd know," Hannah answered. "When are you going to find a nice girl and settle down, Blair?"

Molly rolled her eyes behind her mother's back and Blair tried not to burst out laughing.

"You're such a nice boy, so hard-working, not to mention good-looking. Any girl would be lucky to have you," Hannah continued, oblivious to her daughter's antics.

Blair shrugged. "I guess I just haven't found the right person yet," he replied.

Molly schooled her features as Hannah turned to her. "Neither has Molly, have you, dear? Why don't you two go see a movie or something one night?"

"Mom," Molly groaned.

Hannah tut-tutted as she headed back to the kitchen. "It's just a movie, Molly," she said. "It's not as though I'm asking Blair to marry you." She smiled at Blair and raised her eyebrows.

"I'm sure Blair's got better things to do with his time than go to the movies with me," Molly said.

Blair finished his sandwich and wiped his mouth. "No, not at all," he said, smiling shyly. "I'll call you."

"Thanks," Molly answered. "I'd like that. Just as friends?"

"Just friends," Blair agreed. "I'd better go. I'm meeting someone and I have to get cleaned up first."

Hannah smiled again and disappeared into the kitchen.

Molly followed Blair to the front door. "Thanks for getting me out of that."

"No problem," Blair answered. "It's just a movie, right?"

Molly shook her head. "Mom's so desperate for grandchildren. I swear she'd marry me off to old Mr. Jackson, if she thought there was a chance."

Blair whooped with laughter at the thought, then sobered. "It's not that I don't like you, Molly. Any guy would be lucky to have you," he said. "It's just that I, well, I am interested in someone."

Molly laid a hand on his arm. "You don't need to explain, Blair," she answered. "We're good friends. Friends go to movies all the time. I've got to say, I'm kind of relieved that you don't see me in a romantic way."

Blair's eyes lit up. "So there's someone waiting in the wings?"

Molly shook her head. "Not exactly. I'll see you later, all right?"

"Sure. I'll be in touch."

Molly nodded then placed a quick kiss on Blair's cheek, smiling as he blushed. She watched the young man walk up to the elevator and punch the button. As the doors opened, he looked back and waved.

"Hold the elevator!" Blair looked up at the call and pressed the door open button, swallowing nervously. Detective Jim Ellison hurried in and stood at the back of the car. "Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome," Blair answered, wincing as his voice cracked. He froze as the detective leaned close, reaching over his shoulder to punch the ground floor button. The two men rode in silence, and Blair stood facing forward, affording himself a distorted view of the other man in the polished metal of the control panel.

Ellison brushed past him as he got out on the ground floor and Blair prayed he couldn't feel the erection that tented his pants. "You're bleeding, Chief," the detective said. "You should put a bandage on that cut."

Blair nodded dumbly and watched as Jim walked out of the apartment building. Sighing, the young janitor adjusted his shirts to cover his burgeoning hard-on and pressed the button for the basement.



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Megan Conner looked across the table at her silent companion and sighed. "Blair? Earth to Sandburg."

"Hmm, what?" Blair started at the touch of Megan's hand on his and dragged his gaze from the scene outside the restaurant window.

"Have you heard a word I've said?" Megan asked, a smile softening her words.

Blair sighed. "God, Megan. I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"You're thinking about that bloody copper again, aren't you?"

Blair reddened and reached for his wineglass. "No, I've just got a lot on my mind and I'm a little tired, that's all."

"Don't try and pull the wool over my eyes, Sandy. I can see right through you. Come on now, tell Aunty Megan all about it."

Blair leaned back in his chair and grinned at the pretty brunette opposite him. He had met Megan Conner, a forthright, ebullient Australian nurse at a gay bar that he often frequented. Blair was bi-sexual but it was something he kept to himself. Though he was extremely popular at the apartment block where he was the live-in janitor, he wasn't sure of his acceptance should his secret get out.

Blair had been raised by a free-spirited single mother who believed that there was good in all people and that everyone should be accepted for whom, not what they were. It was an admirable premise and one that Blair himself had espoused until the night he'd left his favorite hangout and been beaten and very nearly raped by a group of thugs out for an evening's entertainment. Megan had come across him as he tried to drag himself out of the alley and back to his car. He'd argued against going to the hospital but she'd insisted that he needed medical treatment and had taken him back to her apartment where she cleaned and bandaged his wounds and nursed him back to health.

Though he'd felt an attraction toward his savior initially, Megan had told him that she was very definitely gay and not interested in a relationship with him. The friendship had become close over the past two years and Blair looked upon Megan now as the big sister he'd never had.

"Blair? Talk to me."

Megan's voice brought him back to the present and he took a deep breath before answering. "I don't know what it is, Megan. The minute I laid eyes on this guy I knew he's the one I've been looking for all my life. I mean, he's tall, handsome, he's got the body of Adonis, but it's his face. He looks so sad most of the time, and he's got the most incredible eyes. Kind eyes that look like they can see into your very soul."

"Very poetic," Megan said. "You really fancy this bloke, don't you?"

Blair sighed and nodded.

"So ask him out."

Blair choked on his wine and reached hastily for a napkin to mop up the spill. "Are you kidding?" he asked incredulously. "Detective Straight?"

"Well, what are you going to do? You can't keep moping around the way you are, looking all love-struck and forlorn. I'll have to start calling you Camille."

"Very funny," Blair grinned, amused despite himself. "No, I've decided Detective Jim Ellison is a lost cause and there are definitely other fish in the sea."

Megan's face brightened. "There are?"

"Yep," Blair nodded. He leaned forward and rested his chin on his clasped hands. "Her name is Molly Brown and she's single and she lives at 852."

"Not the unsinkable Molly Brown?" Megan asked mischievously.

"Get real, Megan. She's not that old. She's funny and smart and beautiful."

"So ask her out already."

"I might just do that," Blair answered, taking a final sip of his wine. "So, how's your love-life going?"

"Ah," Megan began, raising one finger for emphasis. "Now that may just be the world's greatest romantic tragedy."

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Blair quickly finger combed his hair and straightened his jacket before knocking at the Browns' front door. He heard footsteps from within and then Hannah Brown opened the door.

"Blair! How nice to see you again. Come in. Come in."

"Hello, Mrs. Brown," Blair followed the small woman into the living room. "Any more problems with the bathroom pipe?"

Hannah shook her head. "Not a one, but I'm sure you're not here about pipes." Turning away from him, she called out loudly, causing Blair to wince slightly. "Molly! Blair's here."

Blair fixed a smile back on his face by the time Hannah turned back to him.

"Hey, Blair." Molly walked in to the living room and greeted the young man with a wave and a smile. She was dressed casually in faded jeans and a blue sweater that accentuated her azure eyes. Her blonde waist length hair was tied back from her face in a loose ponytail.

"Hi, Molly," Blair replied. "About that movie? Um, if you're free, I thought we could go tonight."

"Tonight? Oh." Molly sighed.

Blair swallowed hard. "I can take a rain check, if you don't feel up to it?"

"Of course she wants to go," Hannah interrupted. "She's done nothing but mope around the apartment for the last couple of days. I'll get your purse. Why don't you let me treat you?" Hannah hurried off, still talking.

Molly and Blair looked at each other.

"Look, if you'd rather not..." Blair began.

Molly shook her head. "No, no. It's okay. Mom's right. It will be nice to get out of the apartment for awhile."

"Are you sure?"

Molly nodded emphatically. "I'm sure. What do you want to go see."

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Blair and Molly strolled along the beach slowly, both enjoying the cool breeze drifting over them. Molly stole a glance at Blair as he walked next to her, his head down and his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He'd seemed preoccupied all evening and she worried he was already regretting his decision to ask her out. Then again, that would at least make telling him what she had to so much easier.

"Penny for them," she said.

Blair looked up quickly, then smiled at her apologetically. "I'm sorry. I haven't exactly shown you a great time, have I?"

Molly shook her head. "It's all right. I had fun. The movie was good; the company is even better. Something's bothering you though. Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's nothing," Blair assured her.

"Is it about Detective Ellison?" Molly asked.

Blair stopped dead in his tracks and turned to her in surprise. "How did you.... No, it's not..." He sighed and threw his hands in the air. "Am I that obvious?" he said. "Megan says I am."

Molly raised an eyebrow. "Megan?"

"She's an old friend," Blair offered.

He leaned over and linked his arm in Molly's, steering her up a small path to a grassed area overlooking the beach. Sinking down onto a bench, Molly smiled up at him and motioned for him to join her.

"You're in love with Jim Ellison," she said. She held up a hand as Blair began to protest. "Hey, no problem there. What's not to love? I mean the man is a hunk. It's just that I didn't realize that you were gay. I've seen the way you look at him but you always have beautiful women around you. I thought it was my imagination until I saw your face when he got into the elevator the other day."

Blair took a deep breath. "I'm bi-sexual," he explained. "I knew it was crazy having an attraction toward a man who's so obviously straight but it's like my heart didn't want to hear what my head was saying. I know I don't have a chance with him, he doesn't even know I exist."

They were both silent for a moment, gazing out over the little park, watching the breeze pick up leaves and old picnic wrappings, sending them scurrying along the ground.

"Is that why you decided to ask me out?" Molly asked finally.

"God, no," Blair answered. Then he shook his head and turned to face her. "I guess, in a way, yes. Not the way you think, though, Molly, honestly. I like you a lot. I really do. I've always thought that maybe you and me...." He reached over and took her hand. "Then I got swept up in this little daydream of mine. Talk about building castles in the air. I really do like you, Molly."

Blair leaned forward slowly; watching Molly watching him as their faces drew closer together. His arm snaked around to the back of her head, pulling her in close for a kiss. He was startled when she pushed away from him roughly and stood up.

"Molly? Oh, God, what an absolute screw-up I've made of things," Blair groaned. He lowered his head to his hands and scrubbed at his face. "I didn't mean for you to think you were second best. Megan always said I could obfuscate my way out of anything, that I had a way with

words. Well, all the right words have deserted me now. I didn't mean to offend you, honestly."

He looked up as Molly knelt before him and placed a finger to his lips. "Blair, it's not that. I haven't told anyone except my closest friends about this. I'm gay, Blair, and I'm sorry to say you're just not my type."

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Jim Ellison opened the door to his apartment and threw his keys into the little basket he kept on the counter. The keys hit the edge of the basket and he watched with a thrill of annoyance as they dropped to the ground. He sighed and bent to pick them up then walked into the bathroom stripping off his jacket as he went and tossing it over the back of the couch.

He turned on the water for the shower and stretched mightily before stripping off and stepping under the warm spray. He was bone weary, after being on a stakeout that had stretched over two days. It had been followed by a long chase on foot through the streets of Cascade trying to catch the suspects in a series of robberies. That they had evaded him finally made him mad as hell. Especially since he had unconsciously used his gift for the first time ever on the job and it had let him down. He had opened his hearing up to hear which alley the thieves had taken in their flight, extending his sight to attempt to catch a glimpse of them and remembered nothing more. He'd come back to himself, standing on the pavement, his captain shaking his shoulders and tapping his face.

The detective had been aware of his particular gift since he was a child. He had been born with heightened senses, being able to see, smell, touch, hear and taste far beyond the range of a normal human being. His father, when finally convinced that his young son was not making up fairy tales, had made the discussion of Jim's gift, or curse, as he saw it, taboo. The depression of his senses had made them almost non-existent and inactive until a helicopter crash in Peru had reawakened them.

Jim had been an Army Ranger, a member of a highly skilled team, sent into Peru. The helicopter carrying him and his men had crashed, leaving Jim the sole survivor. Badly injured in the crash, Jim had lain alone in the jungle for several days and his latent hyper-senses had kicked back in, he assumed, as a protection mechanism. Having been rescued by a Peruvian tribe, known as the Chopec, Jim's gift was recognized and honed to exceptional levels by Incacha, the shaman of the tribe. When he had finally been rescued by the armed forces, his senses had returned to normal, or so he thought.

On his return, to the United States, he had settled back in his hometown of Cascade and joined the police force. A stakeout for several days in a forest area not unlike the jungles of Peru had caused his senses to once more return to their previous clarity, with one minor problem. They were wildly out of control, spiraling from nothing to overload within seconds and leaving him to believe he was truly going insane. He knew that the answer to his problem lay in the fact that he had no shaman here, as he had in Peru. There was no one like Incacha to guide him, and teach him how to control his senses. Jim did what he knew he must, in order to preserve his sanity, he depressed his senses once more, just as he had when a child for his disapproving father.

He had become a solitary creature, seen as forbidding and morose to those he worked with. His co-workers in Major Crimes tended to leave him alone, for the most part. The taciturn detective usually met an invitation to any social event with a rebuff and they had long ago given up trying to coax him out of his shell.

Alone in his apartment, however, Jim allowed his senses full rein, allowing him to become a participant in the life he desperately wanted to have. He was aware that he'd become something of a voyeur but argued that he was simply doing his job, standing guard over the inhabitants who shared his apartment block, just as he had protected the tribe in Peru. The most puzzling aspect of this was that he'd discovered that if he tuned in first to one particular heartbeat and then allowed that to ground him as he continued his mental tour, his senses did not spike. After discovering this, he'd experimented with other people in the apartment building, thinking that perhaps, he'd finally found a way to gain control over his senses so that he could put them to use in his work. It only worked with one heartbeat, however and Jim then discovered that he had become dependent on the sound and to his discomfort, sexually attracted to the young man who lived in the basement of the apartment building. Blair Sandburg was the janitor, the keeper of Jim's heart and the savior of his soul.

Except that tonight, he wasn't home. Jim had already cast his sensory net out the moment he had arrived home, searching, but not finding, the heartbeat he knew would relax and calm him. He shook himself from his reverie and turned up the hot water in the shower before stepping under the spray, allowing the water to pound away at his sore muscles and aching head. He knew he would never have a chance with Blair, the kid was terrified of him, freezing up, his heart pounding and his breath catching whenever Jim got near him. Tonight his imagination would have to suffice.



Jim reached for the shower gel, the same herbal blend that he had smelled on Blair and soaped up his muscular body. He allowed his hands to glide over the wide expanse of his chest, stroking then tweaking his firm, sensitive nipples. He leaned back against the cold tiles and closed his eyes, seeing Blair in front of him, lapping at his chest, his long curls cascading over his shoulders. Groaning, he sent his hands lower, gliding across his tight belly to scratch softly through the hair at the base of his throbbing cock. Finally, he fisted the hard shaft of his penis and used his other hand to roll his heavy balls in their soft sac. Slowly, he began to stroke, his hand at first just ghosting over his aching flesh, then firming and speeding up as he pictured Blair in front of him leaning forward, braced against the tiles. Jim could see his own broad hands gripping Blair's narrow hips tightly as he sunk his slick cock deep into the younger man's ass. He watched Blair arch up and back toward him, his head falling back onto Jim's chest as he stiffened and cried out his release. Jim's own cry of passion brought him back to reality with a gasp and he slid down the wall of the shower and sat panting under the cooling spray.

Drying himself off, Jim slowly climbed the stairs to his bedroom and pulled on a pair of boxers. He slid under the bedcovers, delighting in the coolness against his heated skin. He lay there for an hour, his overactive mind unwilling to switch off and allow him the rest he needed. In desperation, he extended his hearing out through the apartment building once more, identifying and discarding sounds as he went, then relaxing as his ears picked up the beat he needed to hear. Jim lay in the bed, his mind drifting aimlessly as Blair's heartbeat filled his ears and his soul. Suddenly, Blair's heart began to race and Jim sat up, his whole body tense as he concentrated on moving his hearing past the much-loved heartbeat to the voice beyond it.

"What the... What the hell are you doing in here?"

There was the sound of something hard and unyielding hitting flesh and a grunt of pain, then the sound of a body hitting the floor. Then silence.

Jim was out of bed and flying down the stairs toward the basement, gun in hand before he was aware of it. Reaching the emergency exit of the basement stairs, he slowed down and fought to control his wildly pounding heart. He pushed the door open slowly and peeked out into the corridor. Seeing no one, he crept out and made his way toward Blair's apartment, keeping his back to the wall. As he turned the corner, he felt the color drain from his face. Blair's body lay in the open doorway of his small apartment. He was sprawled on his back, his arms thrown out to the sides, blood streaming from a deep gash on his forehead.

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By the time Blair walked Molly back to the apartment building, he'd recovered a little from the shock of her news. He was somehow more surprised at himself for not guessing her secret before now. He'd always prided himself on having exceptionally good gaydar, a necessity, really, in his job where you couldn't risk coming on to the wrong guy. His gaydar was set, of course, to men. Perhaps the signs were different for a gay woman; maybe it was simply that he'd seen only what he wanted to see; a beautiful desirable young woman.

He said goodnight to Molly and she asked him to call her in a few days, just as friends, of course. Sweetly, she kissed his cheek and he walked down the stairs to his apartment, feeling both jilted and oddly relieved. The relief, though, brought him back full circle to one Detective James Ellison. Definitely off-limits.

"You're a sad case, Sandburg," Blair sighed as he fitted his key into the front door lock, and froze as the door swung open, creaking a little.

He took one step nervously into the apartment and reached a hand out to where he knew the light switch was. He squinted and pulled his hand up to shield his eyes as a large man dressed in black, his face concealed by a hood, swung a flashlight up and directed it at him. Blair took an involuntary step back and looked in shock at a second man who held Blair's precious laptop to his chest.

"What the.... What the hell are you doing in here?" Blair asked.

His gaze fixed on the man with his computer; Blair did not notice the first man sidle up beside him until it was too late. He turned his head as a dark object flashed at the edge of his vision, and then something hard crashed brutally into his head. The myth about seeing stars when you get hit on the head is just that, a myth. Blair was unconscious before he hit the ground.

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Jim leaned forward as Blair shifted slightly on the ambulance gurney and moaned softly. Two blue eyes set in a white face fluttered open, squinted at him and closed again. Blair licked his lips and raised a hand toward the large bandage taped to his forehead.

"What happened?" he whispered.

Jim intercepted Blair's hand and laid it back at his side, squeezing it gently.

"Just take it easy," he said softly. "You're on your way to hospital. You're going to be fine, Chief."

He watched as Blair struggled to open his eyes once more.

"Tective? That you?"

"Yeah, it's me. Rest now." Jim smiled as Blair finally won the battle and looked up at him.

"Hey," Blair whispered.

"Hey, yourself," Jim answered.

Blair squeezed his hand gently and went back to sleep.

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Jim looked up from his cramped position in the hard plastic waiting room chair as the doctor called his name. Striding over to the middle-aged dark-haired woman, he nodded and shook the hand she extended.

"I'm Doctor Anderson, Mr. Ellison. Your partner is a lucky man."

Jim shook his head. "He's not my partner," he said. "I live in the same apartment block. I found him after the attack, and it's Detective Ellison."

"Oh." The doctor's brows knit together in confusion. "Are you Jim?"

"Yes, I am."

The doctor smiled then, whatever was troubling her obviously gone. "Mr. Sandburg has been asking for you, so I just assumed, seeing that you rode in with him..."

Jim colored slightly, then swallowed past the lump in his throat. "How is he?"

The doctor smiled again and motioned for him to sit before lowering herself into the seat beside him with a sigh.

"He's going to be fine, Detective. He has a concussion and a deep gash in his forehead. We've sutured the cut and he needs to be observed closely for the next twenty-four hours. If you're waiting to take a statement from him, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until morning. He's still a little vague on details. There is, however, one small problem. He's insisting on signing himself out AMA. Do you know if Mr. Sandburg lives with somebody else?"

Jim shook his head. "No, he lives alone."

"Then I would strongly advise against his being discharged. It would not be wise for him to be alone right now. If he had someone to keep an eye on him, I might consider it. I wonder if you might talk to him. See if you can convince him to stay. At least for twenty-four hours."

Jim nodded and stood up. "I'll see what I can do, although I can't imagine why he'd listen to me."

"He has been asking for you, detective," Doctor Anderson reminded him. "I'll show you to his room."

If Jim hadn't been so worried about Blair, the sight before him may have been amusing. As it was his lips twitched upward and he had to resist laughing outright. Blair sat on the gurney, his legs hanging over the side and his long curls obscuring his face as he tried, unsuccessfully, to thread the sleeves of his hospital gown over the still attached IV tubing. He'd managed to strip the gown down to his waist, so that his surprisingly well-muscled chest was bare but he continued to wrestle against insurmountable odds to remove it completely.

Jim couldn't hold back a snort of laughter and Blair looked up suddenly and blinked at him owlishly.

"Hey, no making fun of the brain damaged, man," he said.

Doctor Anderson hustled past Jim and into the room. "You're far from brain damaged, young man, and if you're not careful, you're going to pull out that IV."

"That's the plan," Blair said peevishly. He looked back at Jim. "Where are my clothes?"

Jim shrugged. "You've got me, Chief. Why don't you let the doctor keep an eye on you overnight. You can go home tomorrow when you're feeling better."

Blair shook his head then grimaced. "No way, man. I cannot afford to lose this job. I need the money and the apartment."

The doctor pushed Blair back onto his pillows. "I'm not prepared to discharge you unless you have someone to take care of you for twenty-four hours," she said firmly.

Blair looked at Jim again, his blue eyes begging. "Come on, detective. Can't you do something?" He struggled upwards. "If I have to, I'll walk out of here in my boxers."

Jim sighed and spoke up even as his mind was screaming for him to be quiet. "I can look after him. He can stay at my place until tomorrow."

Blair's eyes widened in shock and he seemed about to speak when the doctor interrupted.

"If you're happy to do that, Detective Ellison, I'd be satisfied to discharge Mr. Sandburg into your care. I assume, as a police officer, you have some rudimentary medical knowledge?"

Jim nodded. "I was a medic in the army."

"Good, good." The doctor smiled, looking inordinately pleased with herself. "Are you happy with this arrangement, Mr. Sandburg?"

Blair opened and closed his mouth several times, looking not unlike a grounded fish, Jim thought. Then he nodded his head and looked at Jim. "Thanks."

"No problem, Chief. Why don't I go find your clothes and a wheelchair and we'll get out of here."

The doctor smiled at both men. "Your clothes are in the basket under the gurney. I'll get a nurse to remove the IV and bring your discharge papers. Don't get that bandage wet," she admonished. "You can take it off in the morning to have a shower. The stitches can be removed in five days. You can come back here to the E.R to have that done."

"I can do it," Jim broke in.

"Fine," the doctor agreed. "Then it's all settled. Goodnight, gentlemen."

She swept out of the room, leaving the two men staring at each other. Jim pulled Blair's clothes from the rack and handed them to him then motioned over his shoulder. "I'll get a wheelchair and pick up my car keys from the desk. I asked one of the other officers to bring my truck in."

"Just one thing," Blair said.

Jim raised an eyebrow and licked his lips nervously.

"Can we leave my statement until tomorrow? I have a seriously pounding headache happening."

Jim laughed. "I'm not surprised. Nothing but rest until tomorrow."

Blair nodded and reached for his jeans.

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Blair shifted slightly in the passenger seat and tried not to moan out loud as the truck rounded a sharp corner and his head banged against the window. He had a headache the size of Texas and he felt faintly nauseous. He felt drained and exhausted but his curiosity would allow his mind no rest; so he sat, hunched sideways in the seat watching his companion from beneath veiled lashes.

The detective had not said a word to Blair since they'd climbed into the truck, besides admonishing him to buckle his seatbelt. Blair had closed his eyes against the rush of sensation he'd felt as Jim placed a broad hand on his back to help steady him when he stood. Now the detective sat ramrod straight in his seat, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the view through the front windshield, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. Eventually, the gentle motion of the truck lulled Blair into a light doze. He woke, startled as a hand shook him awake.

"What?"

He sat up straight and looked around him in confusion, wincing as the movement sparked pain in his head. His raised hand was once again gently intercepted before it could reach the bandage covering the gash and Blair finally remembered where he was.

"Oh, sorry. Must have drifted off for a minute," he said woozily.

No problem, Chief," Jim answered.

Blair climbed gingerly from the truck and feeling a hand supporting him, shook it off quickly.

"I'm okay," he insisted.

He took two steps forward then stopped as the ground suddenly rose up to meet him and the nausea he been holding at bay overwhelmed him. He was caught up in strong arms and supported against a broad expanse of chest before he could hit the ground.

"Thanks," he muttered and then ungraciously threw up over his savior before passing out.

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Jim Ellison poured himself a cup of coffee then pulled up a chair and sat watching his charge sleep. He reached forward with one hand to push away a lock of hair that was hanging over Blair's face and obscuring his view then froze, his hand still in mid-air as the young man sighed and shifted slightly on the couch.

It had been morning by the time the two men had arrived back at the loft after waiting an interminable length of time for discharge papers and a prescription for a mild analgesic for Blair's headache. Blair had not woken again since he'd vomited and then passed out, so Jim had carried him to the couch and deposited him there before striding quickly upstairs to change into a clean shirt and pants. He'd filled a bowl with warm water and stripped off the unconscious man's soiled shirt, cleaning him gently and admonishing his raging erection to behave at the same time.

Now he sat and drank his fill of the enticing view before him. Blair had an exotic beauty, Jim thought, with long russet curls that brushed his shoulders and framed an open face. Jim allowed his fingers to ghost along the laugh lines that edged Blair's eyes, then stroked down to softly cup the young man's lightly stubbled cheek. The obvious masculinity did not detract from Blair's natural beauty and Jim felt distantly surprised that he felt no disgust in his sexual desire for another man.

He sat back again as Blair shifted once more and contented himself with studying the sleeping face. So caught up was he in his intense scrutiny, that it was several seconds before he became aware of the deep blue eyes that stared back at him sleepily.

"Boy, you were really gone," Blair said softly, smiling as he accepted Jim's offer of assistance to sit forward while the detective pushed another pillow behind his back.

"Sorry," Jim replied. "Just thinking."

"S'okay." Blair eyed Jim's cup with undisguised interest. "Is that coffee?"

Jim nodded then watched with amusement as Blair reached over and unselfconsciously took the mug from his hand before drinking deeply. He leaned back and closed his eyes, sighing.

"Nectar of the Gods, man."

He was silent a moment and Jim thought that he'd dozed off once more, then he spoke again. "This isn't my apartment."

"Ah, no." Jim rescued the coffee cup as it drooped in Blair's grasp and set it on the table. "The thieves left your apartment in a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. Papers and books thrown everywhere, dirty dishes and clothes covering the benches..."

"That was me," Blair interrupted. He shrugged. "I've been busy lately."

"Well, it's also covered in fingerprint powder, so I thought you'd be more comfortable here until tomorrow."

"Okay. What time is it?"

"Almost three p.m.," Jim answered, checking his watch.

Blair opened one eye and stared at him. "Really? Wow, I must have really been tired." He yawned then straightened up suddenly. "My laptop! Did you find it?"

Jim shook his head. "I was more concerned with getting you to the hospital and looking for the thieves. You can make a list tomorrow of what's missing. Are you insured?"

Blair shook his head mournfully. "Not on what I make. I've been putting money aside for a special project." He slapped his forehead and yelped at the pain it caused. "My money." He opened his eyes and looked at Jim. "Could you go check if my money is still there?"

Jim looked at him dubiously. "I shouldn't leave you alone."

"I'm not going anywhere," Blair answered, lying back against the cushions. "The money is very important to me. I've been saving it for a

long time. I know I should have put it in a bank but I just don't trust them. Something my mother instilled in me. Please?"

Jim couldn't resist the plea in the dark blue eyes. He nodded and held out his hand. For Blair's keys. "Where did you keep it?"

"In the freezer," Blair said. At Jim's incredulous look, he shrugged. "I saw it in a movie once. Can you look for my laptop too?"

"Sure," Jim agreed. "You stay where you are. No getting up on your own. When I get back, I'll heat you some soup."

Blair smiled at him drowsily. "Thanks, man, for everything."

He flung an arm out, his action encompassing the apartment, then closed his eyes.

"You're welcome," Jim whispered.

A check of Blair's freezer yielded the money wrapped securely in several plastic bags but a quick look through the untidy apartment did not turn up Blair's laptop. Jim shook his head at the devastation in front of him. He wondered how anyone could live in such disarray.

The attack appeared to have taken more out of Blair than he cared to admit. By the time, Jim got back upstairs; Blair was sleeping soundly once more. Checking his watch as he opened his front door, Jim realized it was almost time to wake him for a neurological check. He walked over to the slumbering man and pulled the blanket more closely around his shoulders, then after watching him for a moment longer, went off to the kitchen to heat some soup.

Blair's thundering heartbeat pulled Jim from a near zone out and he turned off the bubbling soup and hurried to the younger man's side. Blair lay, twisted in the bedclothes, both hands raised up to protect his head and his eyes moving rapidly beneath tightly closed lids.

"No," he whispered. Then he shouted the word and shot up on the couch, his eyes suddenly wide with fear.

"Easy, easy. It's all right." Jim spoke softly, unsure of whether Blair was fully awake yet from his nightmare. He reached out a hand and squeezed the other man's shoulder, then brushed the sleep-mussed hair from his face.

Blair turned a pale face toward him then relaxed, slumping back down against the pillows. "Oh boy, it was just a dream."

"Yeah," Jim agreed, "Just a dream. I could hear your heart really pounding though. It must have been quite a nightmare."

Blair blushed a little and looked down at the blanket. "Guess you think I'm a real coward for flipping out over a burglary."

"Hell, no," Jim said. He sat on the edge of the couch and tipped Blair's chin up so the younger man had to look at him. "I'd be more worried if you weren't freaking out."

Blair smiled then and leaned into the hand Jim hadn't realized was stroking the younger man's cheek. "That feels nice," he whispered.

Jim sobered and moved to pull his hand away. "Blair..." he began.

Blair reached up and caught Jim's fingers before they escaped completely, bringing them to his mouth before turning the hand palm up and nuzzling it.

Jim fought to hold back his groan of desire and shifted slightly to accommodate his quickly growing erection. "Blair..." he tried again.

"Shh," Blair whispered, cupping a hand around the back of Jim's head and pulling him closer until their faces were inches apart. "You'll ruin it."

"Ruin what?" Jim said softly, his voice unconsciously dropping to match that of Blair's.

"The seduction." Blair pulled Jim's face down and angled his up, opening his mouth as Jim's lips touched his.

The kiss was gentle and sweet, almost chaste except for the hunger it stirred in Jim's groin. Blair pulled back after a moment and leaned his head back, the tip of his tongue sweeping over his lips.

"Mmm, nice," he said.

He opened his eyes and stared at Jim for a brief moment, then pulled Jim forward to cover him. "More," he growled.

This time, the kiss was passionate, primal. Jim's mouth pressed Blair's open and he pushed his tongue into the hot cavern, stroking and mapping teeth, tongue and gums. Blair tasted of mint and coffee, an unusual but addictive combination and Jim wrapped strong arms around the other man then pulled back so that Blair sat straddling his lap. He moved his own hand now so that it fisted in the luxuriant curls, while the other snaked up beneath the flannel shirt and tee to stroke the firmly muscled back. His mouth unerringly found Blair's again and he gave himself up to the joy of it, opening his hearing to find the heartbeat he knew so well, then extending his other senses to fully experience the body above him.

Blair began to grind his hips against Jim; his erection finding and stroking the length of Jim's raging hard-on and he faintly heard Blair moan

as his movements picked up speed.

Suddenly Blair's heart roared in Jim's ears and he felt his consciousness begin to fade. Alarmed, he pulled back, ignoring Blair's soft protests.

Blair finally sat back and placed both hands on Jim's shoulders. He was panting slightly, sweat beading his brow. "Jim? What's wrong?"

Jim shook his head then scrubbed a shaky hand over his face. "Too fast. This is going too fast," he whispered.

Blair slid off his lap quickly and stood up, his balance shaky, but when Jim extended a hand of support, he shook his head, leaning instead against the arm of the couch. "I'm all right," he assured the other man. "Just got up a little fast."

Both men were silent for a moment, then Blair spoke again.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Jim lifted his face from his hands and looked at him. "I shouldn't have pushed you."

"Are you kidding?" Blair asked. "I've been wanting to do that since the first time I saw you, when I came and fixed the kitchen faucet."

"So have I."

Blair collapsed back onto the couch with a sigh and reached for Jim's hand. "So, what's the problem then."

"It's just moving a little too fast, that's all," Jim answered. "You've been injured. I'm supposed to be looking after you."

"And you're doing a great job of it," Blair said, leaning sideways to lick Jim's earlobe.

Jim pulled back then turned to face Blair, grasping both his hands. "I think I'm in love with you, Blair. I've felt this way for a long time now and I don't want to screw it up, like I have before. I have a habit of jumping into relationships dick-first and two months later; I'm alone again. I want you to be with me forever."

Blair stared at Jim for a long moment, then reached one hand up to gently stroke his cheek. "I'm right where I want to be. We'll take it as slow as you want, Jim, but I'm telling you now. I want you."

Jim leaned forward so that his forehead touched Blair's. "There's something I need to tell you about me first. After that, if you decide to go, I won't stop you."

Blair grinned nervously. "It can't be that bad, surely." His smile slipped just a bit. "Can it?"

Jim kissed him softly on his full lips. A loud rumble of discontent from Blair's neglected stomach disrupted the brevity of the moment and both men laughed, grateful for the respite. Jim pressed a quick kiss to Blair's forehead and stood.

"Let me get you something to eat and I'll tell you the story of my life."

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Blair placed the painkillers that Jim handed him into his mouth and swallowed them with a sip of water as he contemplated what Jim had just told him. Jim sat down in the chair opposite him and watched him carefully, a worried expression on his face.

"So," Blair said slowly. "You think because it's my heartbeat that stops you from zoning out," he sketched quotation marks in the air, "that means I'm your guide. Do you think it's predestined, like a genetic thing, or coincidence, happenstance?"

"Just like that, you believe me?" Jim asked, looking astonished.

Blair took another sip of his water before he spoke.

"When I finished high school, I planned on going to university. I wanted to study anthropology. I'd been reading about lost cultures and primitive tribes and how they lived since I was a little kid. I knew I'd have to apply for scholarships and stuff. My mom was a single mother and she had to work hard to bring me up, she worked two jobs when I was younger to get me through school and buy me the books I wanted to read. When I was fifteen, my mom died. I went off the rails for a while. She was all I had."

Blair's voice quavered a little. He took a deep breath and continued. "For a long time, I didn't care about anything. I dropped out of school. Just wandered around really. Three years ago, I walked into the library to shelter from the rain and I started reading some of the books I loved, books about tribes in Peru and Africa and Borneo. I read a little by a guy called Sir Richard Burton."

Blair raised a hand as Jim opened his mouth to speak.

"The explorer," he said with a grin.

"So, he wrote books and went exploring as well as acting. He was a talented guy," Jim broke in.

"No, this guy wasn't the same..." He stopped when he noticed the grin on Jim's face. "Are you making fun of me?" Blair asked, stretching one leg out under the table to stroke along Jim's thigh. He rubbed at the lump he felt at the juncture of leg and groin.

Jim sucked in a deep breath and smiled. "I couldn't resist," he said, massaging Blair's toes with one hand. "I love watching you when you talk. You get so fired up and passionate. Anyway, I've never heard of this guy Burton. He knew of other people like me?"

Blair nodded. "There are thousands of people who have one or two heightened senses, tasters, people who work for perfume companies and so on, but Burton knew of these tribes who had sentinels, with all five senses heightened. They were the protectors of their tribes. A few years ago, an archaeologist by the name of Feliz Santiago discovered some ruins in the Yucatan. He believed them to be the remains of the temple of the Sentinels."

Blair pulled the plastic covered wad of bank notes toward him and held it up. "That's what this money is for. I was saving to take a trip down there, to see it for myself. Did you find my lap top?"

Jim shook his head. "I'm sorry, looks like they got it."

"One of them was holding it when I walked in," Blair said. "I knew I'd never get to university but everything I read about, every trip I took to historical sites or people I visited, I recorded, like a journal. I don't know, I had some kind of idea that maybe one day I could write a book about my experiences. Stupid, huh?"

Jim reached across the table and took Blair's hand, squeezing it gently. "Not stupid, no. You have everything backed up, don't you?"

Blair nodded, then stifled a yawn. "Of course, I do, but they're no good without a computer, man and there's no way, I can afford a new one. I guess I'll have to choose between a new laptop or the trip."

"Don't worry about it now," Jim said, standing up. "You need to rest. Let's get you upstairs."

"I'll be fine on the couch," Blair answered.

"But you'll be more comfortable in a proper bed," Jim insisted. "I'll take the couch."

"We could share the bed," Blair said softly.

Jim moved around to stand in front of Blair and placed a soft kiss on the top of his head. "Tonight you sleep and recover. Tomorrow, we'll talk about the rest."

Blair nodded against his chest. "That sounds like a plan."

"Goodnight, Blair."

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A frantic hammering at the front door startled Jim from his sleep and he sat and attempted to stretch the kinks from his cramped muscles. The knocking came again and he reached for his robe then remembered it was still upstairs. He glanced at his watch and noted it was a little past 6a.m.

"All right already. Hold your horses," he called.

He made his way slowly to the door, scrubbing a hand through his close-cropped hair and yawned widely. He pulled open the door and stepped back quickly as a tall, thin woman pushed past him.

"I'm looking for Sandy," she said without introduction. "I heard he was here."

Jim shut the door then turned to look at his intruder, crossing his arms across his chest. "And you would be?"

"Oh, sorry. Megan Conner."

She extended a hand and gripped Jim's with surprising strength. "I'm a friend of Sandy's. I work at the hospital and someone told me Sandy was brought in last night, injured. I tried phoning his apartment but I got no answer. Anyway, one of my friends who works in the E.R told me that he was staying with you." She paused to take a breath and Jim wondered briefly if she and Blair had, perhaps, been separated at birth.

"Megan."

Blair's drowsy voice came from above them and both turned to look as Blair came slowly down the stairs from Jim's bedroom. It was only when he viewed Blair's attire that Jim became aware of his own state of undress. He'd gone to bed as he always did in just a pair of boxers, his heightened sense of touch making it unnecessary for him to rug up against the night chill. Blair was dressed in boxers as well, but he had found an oversized Cascade PD sweatshirt of Jim's to wear, the sleeves falling down over his hands and one shoulder sliding off to reveal a darkly furred chest.

"I'll leave you two to talk," Jim said, sidling past the young woman who appeared to be sizing him up, much as a lion would its prey. Jim thought back to her Australian accent and immediately amended the image in his head to that of a dingo.

"No, stay, please," Blair said as he hurried over to them.

Megan enveloped him in a hug and he steered her toward the couch, nodding at her questions and surrendering with a sigh and a long-suffering look at Jim when she pushed him onto the seat and began to poke and prod at the cut on his head.

Jim grinned back then pointed upstairs. "I'm going to change."

"Oh, right," Blair said, finally noticing Jim's clothes or lack thereof.

By the time, Jim came back downstairs, Blair had made coffee and the face Megan turned toward him was decidedly more friendly.

"Thank you for taking care of Sandy, detective," Megan said as he accepted a proffered cup from Blair.

"No thanks necessary, Ms. Conner," Jim answered.

"Megan, please."

Jim nodded and smiled. "I'm Jim."

Megan stood and picked up her purse. "I've got to go and get ready for work." She turned to Blair and kissed his cheek. "You call me if you need anything, all right?"

Blair nodded and walked her to the door.

"I mean it, Blair. Anything." Megan glanced meaningfully over at Jim, who caught the warning look she gave him and smiled nervously.

"Yes, mom," Blair joked. "Are we still on for dinner Friday night?"

"Of course," Megan answered. "Feel free to bring a friend, if you'd like."

"Okay. Oh, wait. That reminds me," Blair said. "Do you mind if we make it dinner for four? There's someone else I want you to meet."

Megan's eyes narrowed. "What are you up to, Sandy?"

Blair feigned a look of wide-eyed innocence. "Nothing! Honest! I just want you to meet another friend of mine. I think you might get along, that's all."

"Okay." Megan glanced at her watch. "Shit! I'm going to be late. That old bag Murray is just waiting for me to screw up so she can send me packing back to Oz. I've got to go."

She placed another kiss on Blair's cheek then raised her hand in farewell to Jim. "Thanks again, Jim. I'll see you on Friday night."

She grinned cheekily and left.

Blair walked over to Jim and wrapped in tightly in a bear hug. "I think she likes you," he said happily, nuzzling his face into Jim's warm chest.

Jim gave a mock shudder. "Yeah, right." He pulled back a little from the embrace. "I'm going to take a shower."

Blair nodded. "Okay. I should get my stuff organized. I need to go down and make a statement."

Jim headed into the bathroom, silently berating his cowardice at not asking Blair to join him. He turned on the taps and stepped under the warm spray before beginning to soap his body up. He had his face tilted up to the spray to rinse the suds from his face when the shower curtain was pulled back.

"Is there room in here for two?" Blair asked.

Jim smiled and snaked a hand out. "Get in here already," he growled.

He pulled Blair under the water and turned him so that he faced away from him. Reaching for the shower gel, he squeezed a small amount into the palm of his hand and began to stroke across the lightly furred chest. Blair sighed and rested his head against Jim allowing the detective to take control.

Jim deliberately avoided Blair's lower body for now, moving instead to soap up his back, enjoying the feel of soft skin over firm muscles. He massaged lower, his hands gliding over Blair's tight buttocks before stroking down each leg and foot in turn.

Blair turned within his embrace and began to lap at Jim's right nipple, using one hand to stroke the left to a peak until Jim began to arch up against him at the exquisite sensation. Jim growled low in his throat and bent to nuzzle at the juncture of Blair's neck, nipping lightly and

causing Blair to yelp in surprise before nudging Jim's mouth for more. He moved his mouth lower, dipping his tongue into Jim's navel and allowing one hand to ghost gently up and down Jim's straining erection before cupping the balls beneath and rolling them gently in their sac. Jim opened his senses fully, allowing himself to revel in the pleasures being lavished upon him whilst grounding himself in the touch, taste and smell of his lover.

Then Blair reached between them and finally grasped Jim's hard cock, stroking firmly and raising his head to capture Jim's lips in a deep kiss. Jim pushed Blair's mouth open and plunged his tongue into the hot cavern, stroking the gums and tongue at the same time as his hands moved down to massage Blair's ass and pull him in closer. He gently pulled Blair's ass cheeks apart and circled the pucker hidden within with one finger. Blair moaned and pushed back against the digit, all the while continuing to lavish his attention on Jim's drooling cock.

"More," Blair pleaded and Jim obliged him, pressing two fingers into Blair's ass and stroking slowly in and out in counterpoint to Blair's movements on him.

"Not enough," Blair groaned.

He turned back to face the wall and leaned slightly forward, bracing himself against the tiles with both hands.

Jim's mouth went dry at the sight of his lover's offering. "Blair," he whispered hoarsely

Blair turned his head to look at him and nodded. "I love you, Jim. I want you."

Jim nodded slowly and took the gel that Blair offered him. He moved in closer and laid gentle kisses at the nape of Blair's neck, at the same time, pressing two fingers into Blair's passage and scissoring them, slowly stretching the muscle. Feeling it begin to relax, he inserted three fingers and circled the hole, speeding up his actions as Blair moaned and began to move back and forth on his hand. Jim reached around with his other hand and found Blair's cock, hard and straining up against his stomach. Jim fisted the erection firmly and stroked slowly feeling Blair thrust forward into his hand and then back onto his fingers.

Finally, feeling as though his cock would burst, he lubed himself up quickly and pressed slowly into Blair. The other man lowered his head and body more and Jim took hold of Blair's hips in order to control his advance. Slowly, Blair began to rock back and forth on Jim's shaft, each small movement taking him deeper.

"Now, Jim, please," Blair grunted and he lunged back hard until Jim's balls slapped against his ass.

Jim took up the offer and began to pound hard into his lover, delighting in Blair's cry as the tip of his cock nudged Blair's prostate, sending a surge of pleasure spiraling through the young man. Reaching around, Jim took Blair's cock in his fist once more and stroked in counterpoint to his thrusts behind. Blair cried out again and lunged back hard then his muscles clenched hard around Jim's cock and the older man gasped as his own orgasm was wrenched from him.

Jim rested his head on Blair's back, continuing to move slowly within him, not wanting to lose this intimate contact with his lover. Blair moved first, slowly straightening up as Jim's softening cock slipped from his body.

"Sorry, babe," he said, turning to Jim and kissing his forehead gently. "I'll have a major kink in my back if I don't move."

"I'll massage it out for you," Jim answered, wrapping Blair in a hug before turning off the cooling water and stepping out of the tub. He dried off quickly and wrapped a towel about his waist then sat on the seat of the toilet watching as Blair toweled off his body and hair, not wanting to take his eyes off this beautiful man for a moment.

"Blair?"

Blair finished drying off and turned to Jim.

"Where do we go from here?" Jim asked.

Blair shrugged and smiled. "I don't know, babe. My mom once said, life's an incredible journey; you don't want to miss one second of it. Why don't we just see where it takes us?"

Jim nodded, content with that much. He wrapped an arm around Blair as they exited the bathroom. "There is one trip I want to make with you."

Blair tipped his face up to look at him and Jim couldn't resist placing a kiss on the tip of his nose.

"What trip would that be?" Blair asked.

"That trip to Mexico. To the temple of the sentinels. I've got some time off due me. We could learn more together. Maybe I could finally put these senses to some good instead of cursing them, if I understand them."

Blair grinned, his eyes lighting up in delight. "We could do some research into why I seem to be the only one who can ground you when you use your senses. I could learn more about how to be your guide." He nodded slowly, looking thoughtful. "We'll need to do some tests."

"Tests, Chief?" Jim suddenly looked doubtful.

"Come on, Jim, it'll be interesting."

Blair continued to chatter as Jim pushed him upstairs to the bedroom.

"I'm not into tests," Jim muttered as he watched Blair's delectable ass ascend the steps.

Blair waited at the top of the stairs and drew Jim to him, wrapping his arms tightly about him.

"I'll reward you when you do good," Blair said, grinding his returning erection against Jim's awakening cock. "Deal?"

Jim groaned and crushed Blair's mouth against his. Coming up for air, he smiled and stroked a thumb gently down his lover's cheek before loosening Blair's towel and sending it sailing over the rail to the floor below. "Deal."



The end.

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 The Sentinel's Guide to Flexibility



The Sentinel's Guide to Flexibility - Akablonded

"Ellison! In my office. Now!"

"Yes, captain?"

"This report ..."

"Report, sir?"

"From the police department psychologist ..."

"Psychologist, sir?"

"You know, that's a really annoying habit of turning everything I say into a question."

"Question, sir?"

Simon Banks, Captain of Cascade's Major Crime division, elected to ignore what surely couldn't have been subtle sarcasm from his best detective. Jim Ellison was a great many things. Subtle wasn't one of them. He turned back to the matter at hand.

"I'm reading it. And I'm not liking it."

Ellison sat stoically, mutely, inscrutably.

"Don't give me that damned Kung-fu look, Jim. Dr. Tracy -"

"Is a shrink with way too much time on her hands."

"Incidentally, she doesn't like being called a shrink."

"Well, I don't like to be called a lot of things, like, 'an individual whose ability to balance job-related stress on a day-to-day basis is beginning to become more difficult, and, consequently, is revealing itself in more frequent, inappropriate emotional displays.'"

Simon Banks wondered if the tall man sitting across from him was a mind-reader, since the detective clearly couldn't read the 8 pt. report type from where he was sitting.

"Irregardless. You're going to have to make an effort."

"Should I go out and hug a tree?"

"This is not funny. If Dr. Tracy doesn't see some improvement -"

"Captain, you can't be serious ..."

"- it's going to go into a formal report on your fitness as a member of Major Crime. You do not want that, believe me. You'll be riding a desk until you - and it - retire. I kid you not."

"Captain ... Simon ..."

"You have three choices. Go to weekly group meetings for stress management ..."

"Jesus Christ, Simon, all I did was yell a little ..."

"At the Commissioner's aide -- the mayor's brother-law. And you certainly know how to pick your battlegrounds -- a dinner for the mayor, no less. If it had just stopped there, we wouldn't be having this conversation, now would we? But no. You had to go that extra step. Do the words, 'bad move' mean anything to you?"

Ellison wanted to respond with, "And do the words 'goofy bastard' mean anything to you?" but wisely resisted adding fuel to the fire. Instead, in a tired, resigned voice, he asked, "So, what are the other two options?"

"Work in the Cascade PD outreach program."

"Isn't that the grade school thing?" Swell. Six-year-olds with sticky fingers and little high-pitched, squeaky voices yammering at him. He'd be bleeding from the ears in about 20 minutes.

"Yes."

Not in this lifetime, Ellison grimaced. "And what's behind Door Number 3?"

"Yoga."

"The little guy from Star Wars?"

"Don't be funny. Yoga. Not 'Yoda.'"

"As in 'sit on the floor, stretch, and chant?' Sure, Simon. Put my name high on that list."

"Your choice. Either that, or start gearing up for the Tiny Tot Patrol."

"God, life just gets better and better. Alright, you win. You all win. Put me down for damned yoga. That should make Dr. Tracy ecstatic. Then, we can conveniently forget about it - and all get back to business as usual."

"Not so fast, my friend. The yoga class is going to be given here twice a week for the next six weeks. In all likelihood, the good doctor will be monitoring the first few classes. So, just resign yourself to having a front row seat. Correction. 'Mat.'" Banks laughed at his own joke in his unique style. Jim had always hated that 'hey-hey-hey' laugh his superior used in situations like this. Today was no exception.

"You can't be serious, Simon."

"Ellison, does this look like my version of a 'smiley face'?" The discussion is over. At 5:00 PM tomorrow, I want to see your butt in Gym B for Yoga 101. Wear exercise clothes. And get rid of that attitude, mister. Report to the instructor. Bill, Bob ...what the hell's his name?" Banks looked down at the folder. "Blair ... Blair Sandburg."

WEEK ONE, TUESDAY

Tuesday, 4:50 PM, saw seven police officers - three uniforms, three gold-shield detectives, and one undercover officer from vice - milling around outside the Metro building's second-floor gymnasium, usually reserved for judo, aikido, and other martial arts classes. All wore regulation PD sweats and varying degrees of pissed-off looks.

"Jesus, isn't this a pile of crap?" Joe Grabowski grumbled to no one in particular. His qualifying sin had been the bullying of a perpetrator a tad too enthusiastically. When faced with the three choices, the somewhat hefty detective had also opted for six weeks of bending to and fro like some demented willow, rather than facing unimagined terrors at the insistent little hands of first-graders. Ellison recognized Pat Bascilio, the vice cop on sight, knew Ted Warren and Zack Dunlap, both from burglary. He'd worked with the two uniformed officers, Tim Broderick and Jenny Lombardi, who had since been assigned to the Canine division. Ellison tried to imagine what the hell she could possibly have done to get relegated to 'cop detention'? Before he could ask, the taller of the two burglary detectives began ragging on the petite blonde officer, looking unquestionably fetching in exercise paraphernalia.

"Hey, Lombardi! Where's the dog? Why isn't your partner's bony ass up here with the rest of us?"

"Because, Dunlap, Arnie knows how to keep his nose clean. Besides which, he's smarter than all of us combined."

"Yeah, well, those God-damned German shepherds are whiz kids, all right."

"Or maybe just whizzers." Grabowski laughed himself red in the face over his own joke.

"Grabowski, you're pathetic, you know that?" Jenny Lombardi retorted, shaking her head. She wandered over to where Jim stood. "Hey, Jim, how you doing?"

"Pretty good, Jen. Aside from the obvious. So, how'd you get roped into this?"

She lowered her voice, explaining almost apologetically, "You heard that Arnie nearly got wasted last month?" Ellison nodded. Lombardi's four-footed partner had been shot in the shoulder protecting Jenny from a perpetrator high on PCP. The drugged-out armed robber had somehow doubled-back around the officer and would have taken serious pleasure in making her two kids orphans had it not been for the heroic actions of the big dog. Officers Lombardi and Arnie - named after the Golfer, not the Terminator - had subsequently received commendations for their bravery.

"I got shook up, you know? I mean, some of these guys around here don't think of dogs as real partners. But they are. And losing Arnie or what might have happened to me ... well, I couldn't work through it. I just made the mistake of telling our friendly, neighbor shrink about my feelings. You know what I mean? That's why I'm here. How about you? Who'd you tick off?"

"Nobody. Everybody." Both were true.

Over the past four months, the strangest things had begun happening to the Major Crime detective. A stakeout in a forested area outside Cascade for the mad bomber dubbed the Switchman, caused all five senses to go haywire. The isolation had fomented a weird array of aberrations -- lights too bright, sounds too loud, smells that made his stomach turn, tastes that made him gag, and touch that made even the most common fabric rub his skin raw. It was just like five years ago, when the ex-Army Ranger endured 18 months of isolation in the jungles of Peru as the sole survivor of his lost unit. Except, now, without the help of the natives, and most particularly, Incacha, the Chopec shaman, all of Ellison's five senses conspired to torture him.

Sometimes, it happened one by one; other times, all together. To escape the torment of those episodes, Jim would retreat into a spiraling world of gray nothingness, blessed oblivion. At first a rarity, it was an occurrence that was becoming more and more frequent. Soon, somebody in the PD would begin to notice something, and Ellison might be put out to pasture because of it - or six feet under, if the **something** happened while he was on duty and the results were deadly.

What actually had brought Jim Ellison here to Lotusland in Cascade, however, was a skirmish with Dave Aldrich, Aide to Police Commissioner Yeager. It started with an unfortunate remark "normal" ears would never have heard, and escalated quickly. Having drawn bodyguard duty for the mayor, a reluctant Ellison was making himself unobtrusive when he'd heard the s.o.b Aldrich whisper a tactless

remark. Above the general din of typical political functions, the tuxedoed-detective zeroed in on Aldrich's slur immediately, and took exception to the sniping at Metro Division in general, and Simon Banks in particular. Ellison might have let it pass, but for the scurrilous racial epithet thrown in for good measure. Over hors d'oeuvres, the two men exchanged heated words while Detectives Brian Ryf and Henry Brown looked on.

When circumstances brought a drunk -- and driving -- Dave Aldrich into Jim Ellison's neighborhood, the detective took great pride - and an indecent amount of pleasure -- in arresting, booking, and throwing the inebriated civil servant into the foulest-smelling holding cell he could find for an overnight stay.

"And the rest, as they say, is history." Jim finished relating his tale of woe with a lopsided grin. "So, I wonder if this Sandburg character is here."

Jim and Jen looked through the window in the padded gym door and caught sight of a smallish male figure, casually sitting on the floor near the mirrored front wall. He appeared to be barefooted, well-muscled, and sporting the attire of the day -- a comfortable-looking tee shirt and sweatpants. Long, curly brunette hair hung loosely around the young man's neck and shoulders, and prisms the light from one recessed, overhead fixture. Soft, soothing music from a hidden cassette player wafted toward them.

Then, the two police officers got their first look at the face of the yoga instructor, and both quietly gasped. Neither would have been loud enough to be heard by the other, except in Ellison's case, his hearing was as good as his eyesight, which, in turn, was as good as all of his other senses. By anybody's criteria, Blair Sandburg was handsome. Some might have used the phrase "pretty as a woman," but one look at an amply-stubbled jaw line confirmed that substantial quantities of testosterone flowed through the quiet young man's body.

Sandburg was indeed beautiful, in an exotic, hard-to-categorize way, at least to Jim's way of thinking. He immediately regretted the thought, and shook himself away from everything it implied. It would only cause the sort of trouble Ellison had tried to put behind him after his time in vice. Yes sir, trouble - and this kid could be trouble with a capital "T" -- was one thing the detective didn't need right now.

Suddenly, blue eyes opened and peered through dark lashes, settling squarely on Ellison. Jim felt burnt, as though he'd looked into the sun without protection, and strangely vulnerable. It was unfamiliar, scary, yet intriguing.

Jerking his head back, Ellison was saved from explaining the odd look on his face to Jenny Lombardi by a pleasant baritone voice calling the class to order. "Come on in, folks, and let's get started." As they trickled in, the calm-looking young man stood up, hands pressed in a prayer position against his sternum, and greeted the group trudging through the doors with "Namaste,* friends. My name is Blair Sandburg. And I'm going to be your yoga instructor for the next six weeks." He smiled good-naturedly at the seven resistant souls in front of him. "I can see by your faces, you're thrilled." Silence. "OK, well, the art and discipline we know as yoga has been practiced for literally thousands of years. Very simply, it's a system of physical, mental and spiritual training. This class will be based on Hatha yoga - one of several traditional schools. It's the type of yoga taught in most occidental classes."

"That's what this class is - an occident." Grabowski stage-whispered to Bascilio standing next to him.

"Ah, that's what I like to hear. People with a sense of humor. Anyway, this is a form of exercise that virtually anyone can do. I've had children as young as five old and seniors into there '80s take my courses. Never lost a student yet. Anyway, there won't be any chanting." The almost-perceptible sigh of relief was short-lived. "For now." Fourteen eyes stared at him, with not a smile in sight.

"Man, this is a tough room. Anyway, ladies -- lady -- and gentlemen, I only have one or two things to say before we begin. First of all, I know that some of you - make that probably all of you - don't want to be here. But give it a chance. You may actually end up liking yoga. At the very least, you'll learn something about an ancient discipline. You may also learn something about yourself during our time together." The hard-edged looks thrown his way did not deter Blair Sandburg from continuing his introductory speech.

"OK, so much for the philosophy portion of the program. Let's get to the nitty-gritty of it. Yoga is a lot of things. One thing it isn't is a competition. I repeat, 'yoga isn't a competition.' Please try to keep that in mind. Don't worry if you can't stretch as far as, or be able to accomplish the asanas - postures -- as easily as the person next to you. I promise, it will all come in time. All right. Everybody down on the mat, please. Tonight, we're going to start with some basic positions. As I observe your overall flexibility, I'll be able to adjust just how quickly we progress over the next few weeks. I may even encourage some of you to try the more difficult or alternate versions of certain postures. Now let's start off with a basic asana - it's called The Tailor. Fold your right leg at the knee and nestle it under the left one like this. It's really quite comfortable, once you get the hang of it. You should be able to sit this way for hours at a time." He looked at the doubtful glances. "Honest. I wouldn't obfuscate." More blank looks assaulted him. "Lie. I wouldn't lie to you. At least this early in the relationship. Just a another little joke, folks. If you're interested, an alternate to this is the Half or Full Lotus." He clarified, "You know, the 'pretzel' that most people think of when you mention yoga. Like this." Sandburg quickly maneuvered his muscular legs, weaving them over and under one another, ending with his right foot resting easily on the left knee, and the left foot on his right knee. It seemed a perfectly natural way for the flexible instructor to sit - and utterly impossible to Jim Ellison and the others.

"That's gotta hurt like hell." Grabowski muttered.

"We only have an hour, people. Please sit. Now."

With a grumbling undertone, all seven threw themselves to the floor.

"Everybody OK? Good. We're going to start by doing some breathing exercises. Close your eyes if it feels more relaxing. Lift your right hand. Bend your three middle fingers down. Extend your little finger. Close off your right nostril with your thumb. Now breathe in slowly,

steadily through the left nostril for a count of four." Sandburg heard the usual assortment of freight-train breathing techniques used by yoga virgins. "Close off both nostrils for two counts. That's it. Now expel the air in your lungs, slowly, steadily through your right nostril for a count of four. Good. Good. Now let's try it again."

For the next five minutes, the instructor eased his pupils through the rudiments of proper breathing techniques, then segued them into rolling their heads from right to left to loosen tight neck and shoulder muscles. "Inhale to a count of four, the way we just practiced. Then, start moving your head forward, exhaling to a count of four. Slowly, people, slowly! This isn't a race. Now, try to touch your breastbone with your chin. OK, inhale, then roll your head toward your right shoulder, back, around, and towards your left shoulder. Exhale as you move from one side of your body to the other. It's as though your head and neck have ball bearing in them. You're probably hearing lots of 'clicking' sounds. All normal. Good. Very good. Now, stretch your legs out in front of you, and lift your arms over your head as you inhale. On the exhale, slowly lower your arms - keep the elbows straight, but not locked in place -- and try to touch your toes. Flat backs, people, flat backs as you do this. Remember to 'breathe' into the stretch. When you've reached as far as you can, calm yourself, and try to move forward just a little more. Good. Good. "

Sandburg watched each of his new pupils with varying degrees of interest. He kept coming back to the tall officer at the periphery of the room. He'd heard someone address the tall man as 'Jim.' Scanning the attendee roster in his mind, by the process of elimination, Blair identified him as Ellison, James J., a detective in the Major Crimes unit. Sandburg considered that the short-cropped hair fitted the chiseled face. Through the tee shirt, Blair could see musculature that was an unarguable tribute both to good genetics and countless hours of exercise. The big man's bearing gave Blair the impression of someone in the military. But then, in the few minutes since the class had begun, Blair Sandburg was impressed by just about everything, where Jim Ellison was concerned. He liked beautiful people. Beautiful women - and beautiful men. Considering what Sandburg did for a living, it was pretty shallow.

The one thing Blair had learned in his relatively short, but active life: it didn't necessarily follow that beauty on the outside reflected beauty on the inside. So, in the end, Sandburg always seemed to wind up getting hurt. It was a cycle he'd been trying to break for quite a while. The whole situation with Mark Lambert was a point in fact. Blair let his own mind wander through the days and nights of their affair. The archeologist had 'detached with love' (as Naomi, Sandburg's flower-child mother used to say) more than two years ago. Even though Blair's matching degree in anthropology might have dovetailed somehow into Mark's so that the two could see the world together, the older scientist apparently felt no compunction or need to explore the possibility. So, with a minimum of fanfare and notice, Lambert had traipsed off to see what was around the next corner and over the next mountain. Now and then, there were collect phone calls, one-page letters and hastily-scribbled postcards -- little lifelines that kept hope afloat.

Then, even those ceased to come.

So Blair found himself adrift. Teaching helped with the feelings of futility. And yoga was his salvation. Again. His body relished the comfort of habit. At the same time, his student's mind found excitement in investigating new subjects and new ideas. Like the intriguing work by Sir Richard Burton, the 19th century Victorian explores, about a cultural phenomenon: sentinels. Sentinels were individuals blessed - or cursed, depending on how you looked at the gift - with a genetic advantage to help protect the "tribe," no matter how large or small the tribe actually was.

Yet, even now, in the middle of teaching and taking classes. Blair Sandburg felt impotent, that anything and everything he did was inferior. Mark Lambert had that effect on him. Mark had called earlier in the day, announced he was going to be in Cascade the following week and wanted to drop by "for old times' sake. At any given moment, Blair Sandburg had felt: elated, dejected, exuberant, depressed, excited, uncomfortable, but most of all rattled. Definitely rattled. Like the first moment you realized you were **really** in love as a teenager. And wondered if it were one-sided.

If Blair Sandburg were being honest in his heart of hearts -- where the dashing Dr. Lambert was concerned, it felt just the same way.

Meanwhile, the yoga teacher looked outwardly calm and seemingly oblivious to some harsh words being said at him and about him. One or two were innocuous, if stupid. The others were derogatory or just plain mean.

Ellison heard each and every wisecrack being made under the class's collective breath, and, for some reason, was becoming increasingly edgy and angry at what amounted to the PD version of schoolyard bullying.

"What the hell are we doing here?"

"Jesus, what a friggin' waste of time."

"Little faggot. Somebody should stick a ..." The last comment made Jim snap his head around and look at Ted Warren, who was startled to feel the weight of Ellison's punishing, pale blue eyes. Wisely, the uniform shut his mouth. The ugly words had carried a definite homophobic feel to them. One that Jim Ellison could pick up a mile away, and in a dozen different languages. He'd had enough practice in his Army days to know what was what. And who was who.

"Well, ladies - lady - and gentlemen, our first class is almost over. Let's get to the 'fun' portion of tonight's entertainment. We're going to relax into The Corpse position, that is, lying on the floor, eyes closed, hands by your side, inhaling through your nose, exhaling through your mouth. Everybody comfy? OK, now let any tension you may be carrying just drift away. So, close your eyes, and listen to my voice. Think of a special place, where you can enjoy being who **you** are. Don't worry about being a police officer, or husband or wife, or father or

mother, or son or daughter, or any of the hundred of roles we all fill. For the time you're here -" he paused quietly, encouragingly," you can exist in the 'now' - no past to regret, no future to obsess over. You're in the moment of this time and place." As if by magic, four faces took on a smiling, contented look. Grabowski's and Warren's wore cloaked disdain.



Ellison looked the most altered, almost serene with the hard edges and lines around his startling eyes and firm mouth all but disappeared. It happened that way in yoga, sometimes. A person understood and connected on a subconscious level to the universe -- and the teacher who helped bring the two together. In many respects, it was like love.

As Blair watched the breathing of each of the class members even out, he continued to move them through guided imagery, he couldn't help be drawn back time and again to the magnificent body near the wall. What would it be like, Sandburg wondered, to be lying next to that prone figure, in a setting that didn't involve a municipal building, surveillance cameras or six other people watching? The teacher in Blair mentally took himself to task. *Back to business. You have five weeks left to get these hard-nosed people - and your raging hormones -- under control.*

Unfortunately, as he tracked Jim Ellison's magnificent chest rising and falling with the cadence of his voice, Blair Sandburg had a hopelessly, sinking feeling that the former would be infinitely easier to do than the latter.

Jim Ellison hung back until the others filtered out the gym, to a man (and woman), bitching and moaning about the aches and pains and muscles they hadn't used in years. Skin shining with perspiration, muscles pumped with the workout, he casually approached Blair Sandburg, as the smaller man mopped his graceful neck and upper chest with a PD towel.

"So, what did you think, Detective ... Ellison, right?"

"It was ... uh ... interesting. Thanks for the workout."

"Oh, no problem, man. You're in terrific shape, by the way."

"I guess you noticed I'm not too flexible."

"Don't worry. It'll come in time. Like I said, just try not to think of yoga as a competition sport."

"That's a tough one. We're a pretty competitive bunch."

"Mostly what I noticed is that nobody really wanted to take the course."

"You have to cut us some slack."

"Oh. And why should I?"

"Well, for one thing, because we were 'ordered' to be here."

"No, you weren't. As I understood it, you all had other options. Maybe they should have taken them.. I'm not deaf, you know. It's pretty evident that you don't think much of me."

"Hold on there, chief. We're not interchangeable parts. I liked the class."

"Well, thanks. All the same, I can't be responsible if your fellow classmates are ass-- ... uh, sorry."

"We're not all assholes."

"It doesn't matter, Detective. Good, bad, or indifferent, we're in it together for the next six weeks."

"It's Jim." The big man extended his right hand, which the shorter man shook firmly, as he looked the tall, handsome police officer square in the face. Surprised at the strength of the grasp, Ellison was even more taken back at the energy that seemed to flow from the yoga instructor. They stood connected for a moment, then Blair released his hand, bent down, and picked up his duffle bag, along with a Jags jacket.

"You a Jags fan?" Even Ellison knew how lame that sounded, but he couldn't seem to help himself. "

"Since forever." Glancing at the clock on the back wall, Blair threw on the jacket, then quickly zipped it closed.

"Wasn't the game last night - "

"Don't even go there! What the hell were they thinking. I mean ... oh, damn, I'd love to finish this conversation, but, if I don't step on it, I'm going to be late for my class."

"Class? You're teaching another class tonight?"

"No. I take classes at Rainier College."

"Oh, yeah? In what?"

"In the Anthropology doctoral program. Jeez, you can certainly tell you're a detective."

"Sorry, Sandburg, I didn't mean to hold you up."

"Don't be sorry. It's kind of ... it makes me feel at least I have one friend in the PD. So ..."

"...So ... I guess I'll see you next time."

"Thursday at 5."

"Thursday at 5."

With that, Blair Sandburg walked out of the room, leaving Jim Ellison standing, vaguely disconcerted, in his wake.

WEEK ONE, THURSDAY

The stroke of five saw Jim Ellison staking out the same position he'd occupied in Tuesday's class. From the back of the room, he nodded toward the young instructor, who was clearly delighted to see his prize pupil primed and ready for a good workout.

For his part, with eyes half-closed, Ellison instinctively breathed in and was rewarded with the intoxicating scent of Blair Sandburg that at once calmed and aroused him. He would have reveled in the sensation more, but the other class members began to straggle in and move to the same positions they'd claimed during the first class. *Just like everybody else*, Blair smiled indulgently. In virtually every class he ever instructed, once members found 'their' spot (next to a window, by the door for a fast getaway, or up close to be able to see Blair demonstrate the positions) they stick to it throughout the entire course. The lay of the land in Cop Yoga, as Blair was beginning to think of this gig, consisted of the sole female officer in front, at his immediate right. Next to her, Tim Broderick. To his left, Grabowski and Warren.

Behind them, Bascilio and Dunlap. Finally, Jim Ellison stood alone, near the door at the back, rather like an avenging angel Blair thought fancifully. No, he reconsidered, more like a protector, a watchman for this little tribe. The thought niggled something in the young man's mind that he'd read years ago, in an arcane anthropological volume ...

The tyrannical clock on the wall brought Blair Sandburg's focus back to the here and now, as he began class one, week two.

"Hello, people. I hope everybody's ready to work tonight, because I'm feeling great. What say we start off with the Salutation to the Sun?" The groans confirmed that Sandburg was doing his job - nobody who'd ever done the ambitious combination of positions **wrong** had ever made sounds like that. He began counting off the movements, in a crisp, enthusiastic cadence. "The Salutation to the Sun should be done every morning, four times facing east." The seven police officers blinked at the little factoid. "Hey, people, I don't make the rules." Blair shrugged his shoulders, and lifted his hands in a mini-mart "I only work here, I don't know why we don't have Cap'n Crunch" pose. Jenny Lombardi laughed at the self-deprecating gesture the yoga instructor was making. She liked him. She like the look of the self-assured young man, the sound of him, and the way he tried so hard to breach the chasm with their police world of black and white - hard people, hard crimes, hard choices. She relished Blair Sandburg's genuine enthusiasm for life, the way he was 'centered' - to borrow the yoga teacher's word -- enough to let the crudeness and the plain shittiness of the Grabowskis and Warrens of the world roll off him. Jen also admired that he was good at what he did - and was a natural in sizing up and handling people. *If he ever wants to give up his day job, this guy could be a terrific police observer.*

Lombardi noticed one other thing. She noticed Cop of the Year Jim Ellison **noticing** yoga instructor Blair Sandburg, and vice versa. Jen had always thought that Jim Ellison may or may not have explored other avenues in his life. Most of the men here didn't see what she did. They assumed that since the now-divorced Ellison had been married, he was on their team. But the look of appreciation, admiration -- and downright hunger -- she caught when the Major Crimes detective followed the instructor around the small gym with those lethal blue eyes of his meant that Jim Ellison might be traded real soon.

Jenny Lombardi knew how tough it was for a cop to find love, and hang onto it. She wished Jim Ellison the best of luck. Although luck wouldn't enter into it. If there was one thing she could bet the Lombardi homestead on, it was that there was enough chemistry between the two to start a small nuclear reaction.

As the class progressed, Blair walked around, talking the officers through the class, helping them attain the positions, with varying degrees of success. Like most members of paramilitary and military groups, they took the instructions and verbal corrections without any discernible comment. The line in the sand seemed to be drawn, however, at any actual physical contact. When Blair placed his hand on the back of Zack Warren, the young officer visibly startled, and moved away from the unwanted touch. Blair chose to honor the very apparent discomfort of the uniform, and talked Warren through the correct positioning of his arms for The Bow. As Jim performed the same asana, laying on his stomach, stretching his arms backward, attempting to grab his ankles and roll back and forth, he heard Warren's churlish tone in the "Take your hands off me." Ellison was just about to swing his eyes up to see what was happening, when he heard a mild, non-threatening, "Sorry, Officer," followed immediately by the feel of two warm hands, helpfully pulling on his own biceps. The same soft, persuasive voice instructed, "No, detective, keep your arms straight, let your legs do the work, and roll on your pelvis. Gently. Gently. That's it. Very good."

Where their skin touched, Blair suddenly pulled his hand back, as if burnt by the contact. Jim experienced something not unlike a bolt of electricity coursing through him.

This is going to be a long, LONG six weeks, they both thought, simultaneously.

WEEK 3, TUESDAY

"Hey, Jim, man, are you taking vitamins or something?" Jim swung his eyes up to glance at Henry Brown, the young black detective, whose desk butted up to Ellison's, perched on the edge of the desk.

"Why's that, H.?"

"Because you're looking **good**, man. And if it was something you were popping, I'd ask for the name."

"Brown, don't you have something more constructive to do?" Jim snorted, trying to deflect the other man's keen - and accurate - observation.

"Yes, Detective, or did they suddenly declare Tuesdays a holiday, and not inform me?" Simon Banks' voice boomed across the bullpen, effectively ceasing all extraneous chatter. "Ladies and gentleman, might I suggest we all get back to work unless you'd like to explore other forms of employment in any time soon." As he walked back to his office, the Captain took a close, hard look at Ellison and remarked, "He's right. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you just came back from vacation." As the door swung closed, Jim heard the other metaphorical shoe drop. "Either that, or you're in love."

WEEK 4, TUESDAY

Jim Ellison found himself arriving for class earlier so that he could warm up, and run through some of the positions. The Cobra was a pain in the ass; The Fish, a pain in the neck. Literally. But the detective had practiced diligently over the weekend - hell, he'd been practicing since the very first class. Why? Not that Jim would admit it to anybody, but he wanted to be the best in the class. For ...Blair. *Jesus Christ, Ellison. A little long in the tooth to want to be Teacher's Pet.*

"Wow, Jimmy, I'm really impressed." Burglary detective Karen Yarrow asked as she witnessed his perfectly executed shoulder stand, a roll back to the floor, before Ellison took a relaxing breath and folded his legs into The Lotus position.

"Karen ... I didn't see you standing there."

For some reason, Ellison needed to be on his feet, and got up quickly.

"So, you're taking yoga."

"Yeah," Jim answered, mopping his brow off with a PD-issue towel. "I was ordered to," the tall detective muttered, by way of an explanation. "Uh, so, how are you?"

"Well, I'm OK. Could be better. If a certain someone would ask me over to cook dinner for him again."

The tall red-head hinted overtly, as she watched Jim get to his feet. Self-consciously, Jim began making chit-chat, which he really detested.

For a moment, they stared at one another awkwardly.

"Sorry, Karen, I've been meaning to call you, but I've been swamped. **We've** been swamped at Major Crimes."

"The Bellers case, right?"

"Yeah. It's been a 24-carat bitch. What is it with the Feds and paperwork? But then, anything involving them -"

"-ain't good. Don't I know it!"

After a few moments, even the inanity of the small talk sputtered to a halt.

"I guess you've been spending all your spare time practicing." Before Ellison could sputter an edgy reply to the barbed comment, Karen went in for the kill. "Looks like you're shooting for teacher's pet, Jimmy."

Shit. She saw right through him. This was probably why Jim Ellison had called it quits with Karen Yarrow, long red hair, and legs up to there, notwithstanding. She was highly-perceptive, probably a lot smarter than him, with mean streak a mile wide. And she enjoyed using it. Of course, the fact that sex with her had been a certifiable disaster might have also made Jim gun-shy. The last time the two slept together, Ellison had narrowly missed graying out with the lusty younger woman. Jim had avoided having to explain looking epileptic or, worse, unconscious by leaping out of bed, and hastily retrieving his scattered clothing. Tossing a half-assed excuse about some unforgotten emergency over his retreating shoulder, Jim Ellison ended up just looking lame. Something, no doubt, that Karen had shared with any and every Tom, Dick, and Harriet who'd listen. After that fiasco, Jim Ellison made the tactical decision to begin dating outside the police department environment, which was to say, he'd stopped dating altogether.

"So, what brings you down here, Karen? Slumming?"

"Actually, I came over to see what the class was like - thought maybe I'd pick it up the next go around. So, do you like it? I mean, if it weren't for the fact that you were forced to be here."

"It's not all that terrific." Jim wondered if the lie leaving his lips sounded as false to the woman standing next to him as it did in his own ears. It didn't matter. Ellison needed to discourage her from hanging around and meeting Blair Sandburg.

"I heard from Jenny Lombardi that the instructor was, well, worth a 'look see.'"

"He's pretty good, if you like the type."

"Oh, I heard that he was just pretty." At the stroke of five, the topic of conversation walked into the middle of the tableau.

"Sorry, I'm late, people. Hiya, Jim!"

"Hi, Bl--, uh, Sandburg."

"How's it going, man?" Blair Sandburg's cornflower blue eyes and animated face swung away from Ellison and over to Karen. "Hey there. I'm Blair Sandburg. And you are ...?" Stepping into her space, the yoga instructor extended his right hand, which Karen Yarrow wasted no time in grasping. She took exactly five seconds to size up Blair Sandburg, and 10 to decide she wanted 'in.' From the scent of arousal Yarrow was casting - a phenomenon Jim had recently begun picking up on his sensory 'radar' -- it was obvious to Ellison that she liked what she saw.

"I'm Karen Yarrow. Nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"Don't believe everything you hear." Nearly a head taller than Sandburg, Yarrow, nonetheless, adopted a coquettish, flirty attitude, which succeeded in infuriating Jim Ellison in its sheer blatancy. More than that. Jim Ellison was ... jealous?

Jealous. Jim "The Loner" Ellison was struck with the raging green-eyed-monster variety, as Karen insinuated herself between the two men. Unaccountably, Jim fought the uncontrollable urge to pull her away from **his** instructor, and encourage her out the door, as the other class members were drifting in.

"Jim and I are ... old friends. Right, Jimmy?"

Blair wisely chose not to **go** there, where his Jim (**his** Jim?) and the daunting redhead were concerned.

"Well, I guess it's time we got started." Catching the look on Jim Ellison's face, Blair cut the conversation short. "So, Karen, would you like to take the class tonight?" Was Ellison imagining that Blair watched him from the corner of his eye? Gauging his reaction? Or perhaps just glancing at the clock behind him?

"No, no. But maybe if the course is offered again, I'll give you a whirl."

"As Bill Clinton would say, 'we live in Hope.'"

"We sure can. Bye, Blair. Bye, Jimmy." Giving the detective a decidedly platonic kiss on his angular cheek, she left, taking appreciative looks from the male members of the class with her.

The bulk of the Thursday night class was taken up learning The Crow, The Peacock (a position which looked as though it defied gravity),

and The Tree -- a standing-on-one-foot, hands-over-the-head balancing act. Bascilio and Brockerick tried to outshine Jim Ellison, and failed miserably, crashing into one another when their 'trees' were felled. Watching the goings-on, Blair considered putting in for hazardous duty pay, since he found himself knee-deep in Cascade's version of the Keystone Cops.

The sniping at Blair Sandburg had all but ceased by the middle of the course. His surprising strength, quiet competence, and unflagging enthusiasm for his subject won over each of the Hatha Squad, as they'd been dubbed.

As with every class, this one drew to a close with relaxation and meditation. And, although wild horses couldn't drag the admission out of most of them, all seven knew the last five minutes of the class were worth the price of admission.

"Night, Sandburg."

"Good job tonight."

"Later, Blair."

"Lou, you're looking better every week."

"See you next week."

"Hey, Pat, excellent work."

"So, Sandburg ..."

"Blair, please."

"Sorry, uh, Blair ... I finished the book you gave me."

"Interesting stuff, huh?"

"Yeah. And I thought maybe you ... that is, we might grab a cup of coffee afterwards and talk about it."

"Anything specific?"

"No. Just ... but, hey, listen, I'm sorry. I forgot you have that class." The bald-faced lie hung on Ellison's lips. Not only did he remember the anthropology class the young man took, but any and all Sandburgian minutiae that Jim had managed to pick up during the previous conversations they'd shared.

"The class was cancelled for this week. So, grade-a caffeine sounds great. We are talking outside of the PD, right? 'Cause, I have to tell you, man, the stuff that passes for coffee around here is deadly."

"It's not that bad."

"It should be registered as a lethal weapon."

Jim grinned broadly. "There's a decent place right around the corner."

"Lead the way, Detective."

A few minutes later, student and teacher sat across from one another, making small talk, over Kenyan Roast.

"You're in great shape, Detective."

"Jim. My name's Jim."

"Yes. I know. Anyway, 'Jim,' you really take care of yourself."

"Old habits die hard. I mean, being a soldier."

"Well, I didn't think you meant being a Bruce Willis film junkie."

Caught off guard, Ellison almost spewed out an entire mouthful of coffee, then hastily glanced around to make sure nobody noticed how sophomoric - and nervous - the last move had made him look. A bored waitress came over, mopped up the table, then moved back to her previous station near the register.

"You know, Sandburg, you're kind of a smartass."

"You've got java on your face." Blair non-sequitured. As Sandburg was about to hand Jim a few un-absorbent napkins, he instead dabbed them at the drops from the strong chin while continuing the non-stop conversation. "And yeah, I've been told that."

"I'd never have pegged you for a ..."

"... New age, neo-hippie, sprout-sucking punk? I think that's what Grabowski once called me. Well, he's-"

"Wrong?"

"No. He's still an asshole."

"Yeah, we established that in week one."

Blair chuckled as he blew softly, insistently across the oversized coffee cup. "But the guy's probably a lot closer to the truth than not." Jim watched, fascinated, as the first shimmering ripple intersected with the second foamy one, then the third, then

"Detective! Detective Ellison! Jim! What's wrong, man?"

Jim Ellison snapped back to the present, as he felt his face being slapped rhythmically by an obviously upset Sandburg.

"You don't have to yell. I can hear you, chief. Please sit down. I'm OK."

"Jesus Christ, what happened? You sure you're alright?"

"Well, except for the eardrum you're perforating, yeah. Sit down, Sandburg. You're drawing a crowd."

Since they were the only two in the coffee shop at the moment, and even Rita, the waitress, was out catching a smoke, Blair continued to stand, soothingly rubbing Jim between his shoulder blades.

"You're sure you're alright."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Worried blue eyes, the size of saucers, continued to observe him.

"Honest, chief. I wouldn't lie to you. Please. Have a seat." Sandburg released the lungful of air he was holding in, using the cleansing yoga breathing he'd been preaching about for the last month.

"Jim ..."

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Why?"

"You're going to have to bear with me on this one."

"OK. It's your dime. So talk."

"I've noticed that you sometimes get ... I guess the word is 'lost'." When Ellison remained silent, the anthropologist in Blair took over as he continued. "You know what I'm talking about ... you get kind of disoriented - in lights and sounds and smells that don't bother the rest of us. Am I right?"

"Keep talking ..."

"So, what about the others?"

"What 'others'? You're losing me here, chief."

"Your sense of touch and smell."

"..."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I'm right, aren't I? Earlier today, when Officer Yarrow was ..."

"Getting in your face?"

"Actually, Jim, I think she was getting in my 'space.' And you smelled it, didn't you?"

"And if I did, what does it mean?"

"It means, detective, that I have a lot of reading and research to do before I see you next Tuesday."

WEEK 5, TUESDAY

Cascade Hospital's ER Dr. Se Jin Mei put the butterfly bandage on Jim Ellison's right temple, where a bullet had grazed him earlier in the afternoon. As Jim slowly put on the set of scrubs to replace the shirt and chinos that had been splattered with blood, the impossibly-young-looking trauma physician reeled off Standard Cautionary Spiel 101: " Well, Detective, I don't have to tell you how very lucky you were. A quarter inch one way or the other, and you'd be on an operating table - or worse. I see by your records that you're somewhat of a fixture around here, so the drill should be familiar. Keep the wound clean and dry. I don't foresee any problems, but if you notice any redness, swelling, discharge, or start running a fever, please get back here immediately. If not, have the Police Department doctor check it in a day or two. I'm going to write you a prescription for both antibiotics and analgesics, should you experience any pain."

"Thanks. I appreciate your help."

"No trouble, Detective Ellison. I hope **not** to see you any time soon."

"I 'hear' that, Doc."

As Doctor Mei exited Treatment Room 4, he was suddenly confronted by an excited Blair Sandburg, demanding, "Is Detective Ellison in there?" Before the physician could ask who he was and why he was looking for the officer in question, Jim called out into the hallway.

"Come in, chief." Ellison heard a staccato heart beat in the yoga instructor so fast he'd largely thought it impossible. Rapid breathing, respiration, sweat on the skin -- all signs of agitation which Jim could clearly identify -- seemed to reverse themselves as Blair got a good look at the bandaged detective and realized, with a deep, satisfied sigh, that he really was alright.

"Jesus. Give a guy a heart attack, why don't you? Man, when Captain Banks came in, told me ... uh ... 'us' ... that you'd been shot, I came over here as fast as I could."

Even with the mother of all headaches, Ellison looked at the wall clock across the room which read 5:35, did the math and figured there was no way Sandburg could be here at Cascade General at this hour, unless he'd canceled the yoga class.

"Yes, Jim. I cancelled out. It's not like I was the only one worried. The others - "

"Are cops, Teach. They'd know I was OK. If I hadn't been, Simon wouldn't have been shouting my whereabouts from the rooftops."

"Yeah, well ..." Blair blushed, making his skin glow like a sunset on an exotic island. To avoid Jim's scrutiny, Sandburg bobbed his head down to study the buttons on his blue flannel shirt. The tousled shock of hair had made good its escape from whatever tie Blair had used, and moved as though it had a life - and mind - of its own toward the big man sitting on the examination table.

"So, since I'm here, do you need a ride home?"

"Listen, don't worry, I can - "

"What? It's only a 10-minute drive to your place. Or do honestly relish waiting for a cab to come get you? Well?"

"Wait a minute. How do you know it's a 10-minute drive to my place?"

"Isn't Prospect Avenue ..."

"How do you know I live on Prospect?"

"Didn't you mention ..."

"No."

"Christ, I asked, OK?"

"Why?"

"Jesus, what is this? Twenty questions? Do you want a ride or not?"

"Sure."

"So, unless you have somebody in the wings who will play Florence Nightingale ..."

"I'll come with you, Sandburg ..."

"... accept the damned offer, alright? Gracious would be good. But in a pinch, I'll take civil. And a 'thank you' would be nice." Suddenly, Blair stopped, replaying the last few lines of dialogue between them. "Oh, OK. Well, I'll get your things here. Did the doctor prescribe any meds?"

"Yeah."

"Don't move. I'll go get them. And I'll find a nurse and a wheelchair to get us out of here." With that, the young man swung purposefully out the door, leaving Jim Ellison to ponder the oddly comforting notion that **they** were in need of help.

Having been summarily settled onto his living room sofa, Jim Ellison had his shoes removed, an afghan thrown over his lap, medication, water, and a hot cup of decaffeinated tea set conveniently on the coffee table. He also found himself with a feisty terrier of a nursemaid who turned on the detective's answering machine and took his cell phone away.

"But I should ..."



"You need to rest. Don't worry about anything. I called Captain Banks while you were in the bathroom and told him you're home and that you're not alone. I'm with you."

Jim snorted. "And what did he say to that?"

Blair suddenly smiled. "That he'll stop by after his shift to check up on you. He also thought it was great - that I'd be a good 'calming' influence."

Taking a sip of whatever-the-hell concoction Blair had brewed, for reasons he couldn't quite fathom, Jim Ellison felt contented.

Happy was just too far a reach.

"Hey, Jim, how're you doing?" Blair Sandburg sat down on the edge of the sofa, checking to make sure the emergency-room bandage was still in place.

"I'm OK."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Don't think so."

"Then, mind if I talk to you for a minute? It's important."

"Sure, buddy."

Sandburg's train of thought was temporarily derailed when Ellison placed his hand on Blair's solid thigh. It took several seconds for the younger man to get himself under control -- and his suddenly alert cock to behave - before he could continue the conversation.

"Chief? You in there?"

"Uh, sorry, man. I was ... anyway, over the past four days, I've done a lot of reading."

"Yeah? About what?"

"Well, first off, about your time spent in Peru."

"How did you know about that?"

"I remember when you first got back to Cascade. It was in all the papers. That whole 'Beyond the Call' thing knocked me out. And I can imagine how hard it was for you. Then you kind of fell off the face of the earth." Real sympathy was evident on Blair's face.

"Yeah, well, that's ancient history. So, what else did you read about, Darwin?"

"Sir Richard Burton."

"The actor?"

"No, the 19th century Victorian explorer, the one and only expert on sentinels."

"What?"

"Sentinels. Jesus, Jim, this is so damned exciting!"

"Slow down, chief. I don't know what you're talking about. And would you bring the volume down a notch? My head is starting to throb a little."

"Sorry, man."

"Can you give me the condensed version, please?"

"In 25 words or less? You just may be the living embodiment of a Burton had discovered." At Ellison's questioning look, Sandburg continued. "Sentinels, man. People born with a genetic advantage. And special abilities. Like you."

"What do you mean?"

"The 'heightened senses' thing, Jim. In primitive cultures, people with them weren't considered ..."

"Freaks?" Ellison countered quietly.

"There's nothing 'freakish' about it. Just the opposite. In primitive cultures, they were - are -- considered special members of the tribe. Under the eye of the shaman, a sentinel would develop his - or her -- hyperactive senses for the common good of the village and its inhabitants. They used their skills to track animals, changes in the weather, enemy action, anything to protect and serve."

"Sort of like a scout?"

"No, 'watchman' would be a better translation."

"What's this got to do with me, chief?" Ellison's vivid blue eyes were beginning to droop from the combination of drugs and exhaustion.

"I've been reviewing documented cases of persons with one or two hyperactive senses, but no one with all five senses - "

"I could be the real thing," Jim said softly.

"Yeah, man, you could." Blair agreed as he fluffed the pillows behind Ellison. "And if you are, you need someone who understands your condition. Every sentinel had someone to watch his back and take care of him."

"You mean like a partner?"

"More than that, I think, but Burton's a little vague on details. Cut it out, Jim."

"Cut what out, Sandburg?"

"Looking at me like that."

"How'm I looking at you, Blairrrr...?" Ellison's voice slurred slightly, as he slowly dropped off to sleep.

"Like a 6'1," 200 lb. kid outside a candy shop. And I'm a damned Gummy Blair." Sandburg looked down affectionately -- and longingly -- at the resting figure. Blair bent down and brushed his lips tenderly against the snoring giant's forehead. "Bang! Holy Grail time..."

WEEK 6, THURSDAY

"Well, people, this is our last session together. See, I told you, I haven't lost a student yet." A smattering of laughter reached Blair Sandburg's ears. "Congratulations. You stuck it out - and I'm proud of all of you. I hope that this class has been a learning experience for you, 'cause it's sure been one for me. Please think about continuing to practice yoga. And if any of you are interested, I'm going to be giving this class again starting next month. You're all welcomed to come back and show the 'rookies' how it's done. So, thanks for coming, and be safe. Namaste."

After the formal salutation of peace, pro forma goodbyes and "Later, man" ♦s were exchanged. There was also a surprising interchange with former class-bad-boy, Lou Grabowski. Blair had never been quite sure what had turned the relationship around - whether it was the magic of yoga, or a word of warning placed in the stocky detective's ear by someone else. A taller, more muscular **someone** who took the role of protector very seriously.

"Hey, Sandburg ..."

"Yes, Detective?"

"I wanted to say ..."

"Yes?"

"... uh ..."

"You're welcome, Lou. Take care of yourself."

Grateful for not having to actually say the dreaded "thank you" words, a relieved Grabowski headed out find a beer with his name on it.

Jenny Lombardi came up and gave Sandburg a quick hug. Throwing a "See you Monday night, Blair" over her shoulder, she headed on out to have dinner with Billy, Bree and Arnie. It was Wonderburgers all around for the kids and her canine partner. Hand on the door, Jen stopped and turned toward Ellison, flashing him a big smile. "Have a good one, Jim. If you're over in my neck of the woods, stop by and say hello." With that Jen departed, leaving the teacher and his prize pupil alone in the big room.

"So ..."

"So ..."

"First of all, thanks for taking care of me last week."

"Have you thought any more about the talk we had at your place?"

"You mean the Burton thing? I want to get rid of them."

"Why would you want to give up something so special?"

"Because I have no control over them."

"I can help you with control, if you let me."

"And what if you can't? What happens to me then?"

"But I can. I **know** I can."

"You seeing Lombardi?"

"What? Where the hell did that come from?"

"Look, it's none of my business. I just heard 'Monday night' and ..."

"Heard? As in eavesdropping? From 30 feet away? Since you're interested, Jen's going to take another yoga class with me, starting next week."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why did you want to know if we were seeing each other?"

"No reason."

"There had to be a reason for you, Jim Ellison, to ask me, Blair Sandburg, if he's dating somebody. Sorry, if I misunderstood." Blair Sandburg stood, wearing a smile that could melt a polar icecap -- and the heart of a hopelessly smitten Major Crime detective. A tongue-tied Jim Ellison could only nod. He'd suddenly realized that someone else - Jenny Lombardi - had seen the truth even before Ellison himself had acknowledged it: Jim Ellison fucking loved Blair Sandburg. It had snuck up on him like the best perpetrator he'd ever come up against.

Needing to change the subject - and get back control of the conversation -- Jim countered, "And, another thing, coming from you, 'trust me' just may be the two scariest words in the English language. So ..."

"So ..."

"So, you want to, maybe, have dinner?" Jim blurted out, impulsively.

"Like a graduation party? Yeah, OK. I could eat."

"So can I. I think they need to use the room for Aikido. Let's finish the conversation downstairs in the parking lot."

A few minutes - and a thousand conflicting feelings - later, Jim Ellison stood by the dusty, rust-mottled car. Blair Sandburg was right about one thing: it was on its last legs.

"You want to meet me at the restaurant?"

"Oh, you mean, this like a 'real' dinner?"

"Well, yeah, it's not going to involve talking into a clown's head. I, uh, found a place you might like -- sort of New Age. Somebody recommended it." Jim offered by way of explanation. "My treat." He added hastily.

The younger man looked at him intently. The only word Blair could think of was 'touched' that this tall, hulking, gorgeous carnivore had gone out of his way to do something special. There was another word.

Aroused.

"It's called Sultana's."

"You're kidding, right? That's like ... well, expensive."

"I said it's on me, Sandburg."

"But, Jim ..."

"Don't you ... I mean, if you have other plans ..."

"No! It's just that ..."

"Great. Then I'll meet you there at 8. OK?"

" ..."

"OK? Then we can talk more about ... you know, the **other** thing."

"The Sent - uh, OK."

The satisfied smile that Jim Ellison flashed at the young man found its way down into what writer Nathaniel Hawthorne once called "the empty chamber waiting for a guest." Blair Sandburg had the sneaking suspicion that just the right **guest** had just taken up residence in his heart, even as the same detective took garage-level elevator no. 3 back to Major Crime.

A calm, casual air masked the nervousness Jim Ellison felt. Looking as though it had been tailored on Saville Row, his suit fit like \$1,000,000 after taxes. Since Ellison wasn't all that familiar with some of the dishes offered on the menu, the big detective had arrived a half-hour early to scope out the place. Just like any other military operation he'd ever participated in, it was important for ex-Army Covert Ops Captain James Ellison to get the lay of the land, and learn as much about it as possible, in order to insure success of the mission. He spoke softly to the owner of the restaurant and the waiters, with assuredness and determination. By 7:45, everything was in place. Jim Ellison was ready.

At 7:59 PM, Blair Sandburg walked through the front door, sporting black dress slacks and a midnight blue shirt that made Ellison think a 19th century lord of the manor had materialized here in an upscale section of Cascade. For Blair's part, as soon as he caught sight of Jim standing by a candle-lit table in a discreet corner of the beautifully-understated room, he knew that no one had ever looked at him **that** way before. Oh, people had wanted him, and lusted after him, and longed for him. But nobody had ever loved him. Fuck. The books were right. Love did **show**.

"Hi."

"Hi." As Jim slipped the chair under his dinner companion, he inhaled the air next to Sandburg and was treated to a heady concoction of aloe, cinnamon, honeysuckle -- and want. Ellison's appetite was whetted. Whetted, hell. It was kicked into an overdrive that could take him into the stratosphere. But the feeling deep in the pit of Jim's stomach wasn't for food. Ellison reveled in the unsurpassed satisfaction of being a meat-eater, with the man across from him the last porterhouse steak in the free world.

His porterhouse.



"So ..."

"So ..."

"Uh ... have trouble finding the place?" As soon as the absurd words spilled over his lips, Jim Ellison winced. *Jesus. Try to sound even stupider, why don't you?* He hastily tried to amend the profoundly idiotic catch phrase. "I mean ... uh ... do you like to eat like this all the time?"

"Well, yeah, being a vegetarian, it does kind of narrow the choices down a little. You know, the whole 'nothing with a face' thing ..."

They both laughed - the young man pleasantly, the older, somewhat self-consciously.

The silence that passed between them was something Jim Ellison had never experienced. It felt warm and comfortable, as though it were a continuation of the conversation. What the hell was it with this kid? Maybe he wasn't so much a guru as a wizard, a sorcerer who was weaving a spell around the detective. And Jim was bewitched.

"What bunch of crap!" Ellison scoffed at the thought, then realized he'd said it aloud. "Hell! I didn't mean ..."

"No problem. I just don't think that one's on the menu." Blair joked good-naturedly, as he slowly sipped his water.

"I'm just a little ... so, what do you recommend?"

"You mean besides the shrubbery, Det -"

"Jim. It's Jim."

"I'm sorry, **Jim**, but it's just so damned easy to press your buttons."

"You enjoy doing that, don't you? Weird, considering you're supposed to calm me down."

"My 'class' was supposed to do that. Me ..." Sandburg staked Ellison with a smoldering look that could fry tofu on a cold day in Hell, as well as the man of steel sitting across from him, " ... I think I'd like to try a different approach to get you relaxed."

Before Jim was able to come up with a viable answer to the outrageous - and intriguing - comment, Blair turned his attention to the matter at hand. "Let's order, 'Joe Friday.' You may need your strength later on."

"Does that -- "Jim Ellison gestured with fork in hand to someplace outside the confines of the cozy restaurant, " - teaching I mean -- pay you anything?"

"Very little, actually."

"So, how do you swing it? Are you independently wealthy?" The detective joked.

Blair looked at him surprised. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am."

"You're joking. Really?"

"Well, yes. But it only happened recently."

"What, did you win the lottery? Or did you just arm-wrestle Alex Trebek for it?"

"Actually, I was almost 25 when I found out that I was rich. As in honest-to-God, blue-chip, capital-gains, solid muni-portfolio, caviar-for-breakfast, bathe-in-Perrier rich."

"No kidding."

"It was **way** bizarre. My mom, Naomi, and I were sharing a glass of saltilassi at a vegan cafe in New Mexico, when she decided to drop the bomb on me. I found out that I was the heir to a respectable fortune."

"You had no clue before that?"

"No. She and I never had much money, but we traveled like nobody's business. Neither of mom or I seemed to miss it. I never thought of myself as 'poor,' but I guess we were."

"Why didn't your mother use any of the money while you were growing up?"

"She and her parents were on the 'outs.' I guess Naomi didn't want her only son to be corrupted by all that filthy lucre. So, she'd conveniently neglected to mention that Grand pop Marvin and Bubby** Adele had made serious dinero in polyester, of all things. Apparently, if they'd had their way, my middle name might have been 'Monsanto.'"

"Instead of 'Jacob.'"

"How'd you know that?"

"Oh, I have my sources."

"Yeah, I bet. Yours is 'Joseph', right?"

"How'd **you** know that?"

"I have **my** sources. Or would you prefer to believe I channeled the information? After all, we yoga people are all new-age, neo-hippies, right?"

"You know what scares me, chief ..."

"What scares Jim Ellison?" Sandburg moved a step closer.

"... that I think I'd believe pretty much anything coming out of your mouth ..."

"Really?"

"Yeah. For some weird, ungodly reason, I trust you."

"Me?"

"More than anyone else I've ever known."

"Jeez, you really know how to seduce a guy."

"What?"

"You know ... seduce. Me. You. Bumping up against one another." Blair's smile faded as he studied the startled, candlelit face across from him.

"Oh, God, man. I'm sorry! I didn't ... I mean ... I thought ..."

"Well, you thought ... you thought ..."

"Wrong?"

Silence. Then, finally, Jim said the words. "No. Right. You thought right."

The dinner was more than just dinner. It was a hands-down, unqualified, one-for-the-books success. It was the kind of dining experience people hope for when they're wooing one another: service just efficient enough, food just good enough, chat just deep enough, proximity just close enough, and understanding just mutual enough to all spell success. But success at what? And at what price?

Philosophical questions aside, with the check paid, and goodnights said to the courteous - and openly admiring - staff, Jim and Blair stepped out into the crisp night air.

"Thanks -"

"Thanks -"

"For asking me -"

"For joining me -"

Both stopped speaking, then, nervously waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Come to my warehouse, Jim?"

"Your warehouse? You own a warehouse - or live in one?"

"You'll see. Wow. Is this your Ford?"

"Yeah. It's a '69. That was a great year for me."

"That's the year I was born." Blair saved Ellison the embarrassment of trying to think of a witty comeback, as he opened the door, and climbed onto the passenger-side seat. As Jim got in on the other side, buckled up, and started the engine, Sandburg launched into a convoluted set of directions to his home. "Take Monroe cross-town to Althorpe. Once we hit 8th Avenue, we'll make a left, then another on Cosgrave, followed by a third onto Runnymede. My place is at the end of the street."

"Runny - you mean that broken-down road near the waterfront? You're not serious! Jesus Christ, Sandburg, could you have picked a more dangerous place in Cascade?"

"But it's near the water."

"Near'? One good shake, and it's 'in' the water."

"God, Ellison, when was the last time there was an earthquake hereabouts? Are you always so, so ... -"

"Sensible?"

"No ..."

"Pragmatic?"

"No ..."

"What, then?"

"I was going to say ... 'cautious'."

"No you weren't."

"You're right. Actually, I was going to say 'anal.'" Blair smiled softly, as moonlight kissed his face. "But to tell the truth, I'd like to reserve that word for later." Enigmatically, he climbed out of Jim's truck, leaving the off-balance detective moving quickly to follow his host.

A few minutes later, as they walked through the sliding elevator doors, Blair greeted him, more or less formally. "Welcome to Casa Sandburg. Ten thousand square feet of what I like to call 'home sweet home. So, what do you think?'"

"Well, it's ..."

"Roomy?"

"OK, chief. Let's go with that."

"I see that wide, open spaces don't impress you."

"The Grand Canyon impresses me."

"Yeah. But the Grand Canyon doesn't cost \$850 a month to rent."

"\$850?"

"Great, huh? Jim?"

"Please tell me that you **are** renting, and that you didn't actually buy this building."

"Why's that?"

"Because if you did, you need to have your head examined. I can hook you with Dr. Tracy, the PD shrink."

"I don't think Phyllis much likes being called a 'shrink.'"

"You know her? Hell, Sandburg, is there anybody or anything you don't know?"

"One or two things." Blair said, almost wistfully, as Jim walked over to admire the view of Cascade Harbor from Sandburg's oversized window. "Nice view, isn't it?"

"Yeah," the tall man admitted, "but it doesn't make up for living in a place that looks like Berlin after the war."

"Your problem, Detective Ellison, is that you only see emptiness." The younger man stood near Jim's elbow, so close, it seemed, that they were occupying the same space.

Ellison turned slightly, and searched Blair's upturned face, as if he could find the answer to all of his questions there. "Well, then, what should I see?"

"The damned possibilities, Jim. That's what I've been trying to teach all of you emotionally-stunted sons-of-bitches at the PD!" Angry for a brief moment, Blair Sandburg -- once dubbed Mr. "Can't We All Get Along?" by a bunch of high-school thugs who roughed him up on a more-or-less consistent basis -- quieted as he looked back at the tall man who loomed over him -- the special man Blair knew, as surely as The Embryo followed The Bow, he loved.

"Without seeing possibilities, Jim, you're missing life." Blair moved slowly away from Ellison. "I'm going to change into something a little more comfortable. Jesus, I sound like a bad romance novel. I'll be back in a minute. In the meantime, take a look around, particularly at the things on the wall."

Jim followed the suggestion and walked over to the far wall, where there hung a modest-sized grouping of artistically lit paintings, hand-woven rugs, and multi-ethnic masks. He also found, of all things, a crewel sampler with a bit of homespun wisdom on it:

Soul is our appetite, driving us to eat from the banquet of life. People filled with the hunger of soul take food from every dish before them, whether it be sweet or bitter. Handbook for the Soul

"So, what's the verdict, Jim?" Blair asked, standing a heartbeat away.

"That maybe I need to know more."

"About yoga?"

"That, too." With those words spoken, Ellison picked the smaller man up, and molded him to his strong, needy body. Sandburg's flexible limbs wrapped around Jim like the promise of love to come. Slowly Ellison turned the two of them in a counterclockwise circle, as they melted into a stunning kiss. Blair's lips were so full, so sweet, so tempting, that Ellison began to lose himself in the experience. Only the Sandburg's enthusiastic response - hands stroking, tongue probing, hair flying around the bigger man - kept Jim in the present.

"Blair ... chief ... I swear to God ... I've never felt ... ! want you ... want you now" Ellison confessed between gasps of passion as they tumbled onto the futon in the center of the enormous room.

"Wait, Jim. No. I said 'NO!'" The authority in Sandburg's voice stopped the nearly out-of-control detective dead in his tracks. "It shouldn't be like this! There's no rush. We have time. All the time in the world."

But they didn't. The moment of hesitation made the enormous fear lying just below Jim Ellison's tightly controlled surface erupt.

"I ... can't do this - I can't take this trip with you."

"What are you talking about ... what do you mean, Jim?"

"It's too much. The 'sentinel' thing ... you and mean ... what I feel for you ... I ...I'm sorry." Pushing Blair aside more roughly than he meant to, Jim Ellison backed away from the dazed-looking young man splayed across the rumpled bed. As if the Devil himself were in hot pursuit, Ellison escaped through the front door, out into the coward's blanket of night. Staggering down the deserted street, the detective cursed himself for being just that -- a coward. Someone who couldn't cut the mustard, someone too afraid to accept who he was. And **whom** he wanted. Could it be that longhaired, yoga instructor/perpetual student back there at the warehouse? The one who just did a handstand on his heart? And who might conceivably be able to help Jim get his five heightened "sentinel" senses under control?

Ah, shit. Jim Ellison knew the damned answer before it left his lips.

As he headed back to the rundown warehouse, Jim Ellison wondered if the non-drinking Blair Sandburg kept any liquor around for emergencies. Ellison hoped whatever it was went well with crow.

He was going to have to eat a big serving of it before the night was over.

A bewildered Blair Sandburg sat on the floor, surrounded by blazing candles, trying to stay calm and centered. After what had happened -

or, more accurately what **hadn't** happened -- he was failing miserably. What went wrong? One minute, Jim Ellison lay against him, and around him, and almost **in** him, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Happiness and joy seemed to be locked in Sandburg's arms. The next, they were achingly empty - and so was Blair. Again. The brass ring had slipped through his fingers, and he had no idea why.

But that wasn't really true. Sandburg knew. It was his fault. Like always. He'd pushed too hard, wanted too much, needed it too soon. If only ... a hesitant knock brought Blair out of the reverie, onto his bare feet and running toward the front door.

Standing there was Cop of the Year Jim Ellison, jacket slung over his shoulder, tie loosened around his elegant neck, and the look of hope - and contrition - on his flushed face. "Chief ..." he began, " ... we need to talk. Can I come back in?"

"Did you forget something?" Wetness hanging on Blair's thick eyelashes threatened to spill down the pale cheeks.

"Yeah. This." Ellison Jim dropped his coat onto a small table near the door, and swept the shorter man up into his arms possessively. By way of an apology, he began kissing the smaller man with all the fervor he deserved. Milking Blair's ripe mouth until the lips took on a cherry-red glow, Jim finally released his willing captive and let Sandburg sink back onto his feet on the chilly floor. Still crushing Blair to his chest, the detective whispered, "I'm sorry ... you were right. I was wrong ..."

Sandburg mumbled into the solid mass, "It's ... it's OK ..."

"I made a mistake ..."

"A huge one ... " a megawatt smile fought its way to Blair's relieved face.

"I'm sorry that I acted like a ...a ..."

The shorter man pulled back, and peered up at the handsome face above his, and helpfully offered to finish the detective's thought. "A dick?"

"Well ..."

"A dick."

"OK. A dick. Chief ..."

"Yes, Detective Dick?"

"Let me try to explain ..."

"Whatever, man ..."

"You have to understand ..."

"But I do, Dick, uh, Jim ..."

"You do?"

"Seriously? Pretty much. Yeah. Just like what Burton wrote. Fear-based reactions. They're part and parcel of being a sentinel."

"So, that's what happened?"

"Partly."

"And the rest ..."

"Well, it's that whole 'being a dick' thing."

"So, you think I'm a dick, huh?"

"A pretty big one, yeah. And you know, Jim, it's a lot like being paranoid. If you have to ask ..."

"So ..."

"So ..."

"We OK?"

"Yeah. Yeah, big guy. We're OK."

"Maybe we can get back to trying a little of that private instruction you talked about?"

"Are you sure? Really sure?"

"Sure? No. Yes. Maybe. Hell, work with me here, Sandburg. You're going to be the brains of this team. But, it's what I want, what I need. **You're** what I want, what I need. God, it's like my body's on fire, and I could do with ... " Jim eyed the lithe body hungrily, " ... a little more exercise."

"Well, then -" Blair ran his confident hands over Ellison's cock which was threatening to break free and reek havoc on Runnymede Street, "-- let's get started. "

"How, chief?" Jim whispered.

"Yoga," Blair whispered back.

"Again with the fucking yoga."

"Tantric yoga? The yoga of attaining the divine through sex?" Blair teased mercilessly. "Sorry, that's for advanced students, Jim. Maybe later. You and I still need to concentrate on increasing your flexibility. You're like **so** rigid. And we're going try some special positions. Understood?"

At the thought of it, an excited Ellison began inhaling and exhaling like a freight train. "Flexibility. Positions. OK."

"Breathing, Jim. Breathing. Use the technique we learned." Obeying immediately, Ellison began to breathe deeply, calming his body, if not his emotions.

"Good. Good. It's a wise student who follows his true teacher."

"What are you, a fortune cookie?"

"No, sentinel. I'm your guide."

Body on fire, mind reeling at the implication, Jim whispered, "You're going to be my guide?"

"If you want me to be. Do you?"

"You know I do, Blair."

"Say it. I have to hear it."

"Sandburg ..."

"Say it."

"Chief ... I want you to be my guide. And I want to be your sentinel." He added almost perfunctorily.

"Please."

"Deal." As they sealed the covenant with another kiss, Blair basked in the joy of the moment, knowing that this honorable, good man would fill the empty chamber in his heart forever. "Now, stand still. First of all, you'll do a lot better if you take this off." Blair ran his finger down the front of Jim's white dress shirt, then began to unbutton it, slowly, and with great deliberation. As it hung open, Blair lightly flicked his agile tongue over the taller man's right nipple, and ran it over the highly defined abs, until he reached Ellison's surprisingly small waist. Sandburg grabbed the edges of the tailored Van Heusen, then pulled them slowly up and over the muscular shoulders and arms. Ellison stood dead still as the young man deftly removed the garment. And when Blair planted a solitary kiss over Jim's heart, Ellison's eyes glowed like ball lightning at the intimacy of the gesture.

"Jesus Christ, Sandburg ..." Jim moaned with the pleasure of the moment.

"I have a set of sweats you can wear. Over there." Blair nodded toward a small rattan chair near the TV.

"Yours?"

"Get real. They are like **so** long. No, they're ... they belonged to ... a friend." As the last word left his lips, Sandburg saw Ellison's face morph from excited soon-to-be-lover to an uncertain stranger. "Jim. You OK? Talk to me, man."

"Sure, I'm OK, chief. Why wouldn't I be?" Even as he responded, Jim extended his senses outward toward the sweats to sniff, doglike, and try to match the scent of the interloper, whomever he - or she -- might be. Finding nothing but a clean garment, Ellison dove deeper into the fibers as Blair continued speaking.

"Oh, I don't know. It just seems like the temperature in the room dropped about 20 degrees. Was it what I said? Jim? Jim? Don't you dare zone out on me here. Answer me, damn it!"

"Stop yelling, Sandburg. I hear you."

"Listen, because I'm only going to say this once. They don't matter. **He** doesn't matter anymore. Only **you** matter. Only **we** matter. Understand?"

"Yeah. Uh ...I ... I just ...do I need them?"

At the unexpected question, Blair's heart raced dizzily, happily, his breath quickened, and his obvious arousal kicked into overdrive.

"No. No, you don't."

"And maybe you don't need these." Jim's fingertips ran along the waistband of Blair's soft, cotton yoga pants, then slid over the edge and touched the warm, glowing skin under it. Sandburg almost yelped at the sensation, as he looked into that classic, patrician face and blue eyes ablaze with a look of longing he'd only imagined in half-forgotten dreams. "What do you think, teach?"

"I think, detective," Sandburg said slowly, as he began to undo the drawstring of his pants, "you may be right." Ellison couldn't resist touching the ripe-for-loving young man standing so tantalizingly close.

Feline-like, he began to lick Blair, from the highly-defined collarbone, over the dusky-rose nipples and ribs resting under his golden skin, and stopped at the waistband. Ellison resisted running his nose back and forth over it to revel in the strong, male scent. Instead, Jim looped his thumbs under it, and was about to slide the garment down, when Blair's hands stopped the process.

"Not yet. I want you to listen to me. Listen. To. Me."

Jim obeyed. He could do nothing else at the sound of **the** voice, a voice that, Ellison was certain, would guide him the rest of his life.

"You're going to come, and sit on my mat with me. You're going to be very still."

"Well, I can 'come' and 'sit'."

"Good. Now you can finish what you started." The student followed his master's order and finished removing the pants, revealing Blair's soft cotton boxers. "Down here. Facing east." With both instructions followed, Blair maneuvered the sitting Ellison's long legs out in front of him to form a "v." He slowly walked around back of Jim's squared shoulders to make sure his spine and hips were aligned properly.

"What are you going to do, Sandburg?"

"Well, **we** are going to try a special, 'advanced' position."

"Have you tried it with anyone before?"

"No." Blair stopped for a moment. "No one before you. No one after you," then added in a low, sensuous voice, "but only if you still want." With that simple question, Sandburg placed the heel of his right hand on Ellison's arm, and began to stroke and massage it.

"Wild gurus couldn't drag me outta here, Chief." By way of an added acknowledgement, Jim reached back, pulled Blair's hand impulsively to his lips, licked it first, then kissed it tenderly. Like the "om" sound the detective had learned in class, the circle of energy created between the two lovers somehow bonded them at their core. They were no longer solitary creatures alone and adrift. They were a combined force - a force to be reckoned with.

The absurd amount of happiness Sandburg felt made him plant a kiss on top of Ellison's close-cropped hair. Then, with the elegance of a body totally in control, Blair sat himself on the floor, in front of, but facing away from his pupil. As seamlessly, and as gracefully, as anything Jim Ellison had ever seen, Sandburg executed The Plow, lifting his legs over his head, rolling backward. With superior abdominal muscles being called into play, Sandburg flipped over effortlessly, and ended up sitting a hair's breadth away from Jim's rock-solid chest. As he settled between the amazed detective's legs, and leaned back, Blair chuckled. "Liked that, did you? Then you're going to love my doing a shoulder stand, totally nude, and having you thrust your..." Sandburg's monolog was interrupted by the battering ram of Jim Ellison's cock trying to drill a hole in his backbone. Blair could feel the wetness of the leaking organ up and down his spine. "No, on second thought, big guy, maybe we're better not **go** there right now. So, I guess you could tell some of the other class members yoga can be pretty damned athletic, huh?"

Sweat, musk, and arousal swirled cocoon-like around them, as Jim growled into the left ear and sucked the lobe into his mouth. "No one else, chief. Ever again. No one sees you in this position. Only me. Got it?"

"I hear that. But, you know, Jim," Blair purred, obviously pleased with how Life with a capital "L" seemed to be heading, "one of the implied tenets of the yoga philosophy is that we share good things with others, and not be possessive of anything -" The often-spoken aphorism was interrupted as Jim turned the smaller man's face toward him and covered the full, inviting lips with his own, transforming the color to that of summer-picked strawberries. Ellison grew still, as he lost himself in the sensations of touch and feel and taste. Sensing the imperceptible shift, Blair instinctively pulled away, and realized what had just happened. To bring Jim back, the scientist in Sandburg applied an immediate tactile stimulus to his subject - he ran the tip of his tongue first over Jim's bottom lip, then the top. The movement brought the detective's focus back to revel in the sights, sounds, and tastes of his lover.

And Jim had been right. If happiness made Blair Jacob Sandburg radiant, deeper feelings made him incandescent.

"It's love."

"What is, chief?"

"What I feel for you."

"And you know you've fallen in love with a non-vegetarian, ex-Army hard-ass cop and sentinel to his Cascade tribe because...?"

"...aw, hell, Jim. You know the answer to that. I'm extremely flexible."

Looking at the man who he was going to wake up with tomorrow, and every tomorrow after that, Jim Ellison quipped, "Here's hoping, Sandburg. Here's hoping."



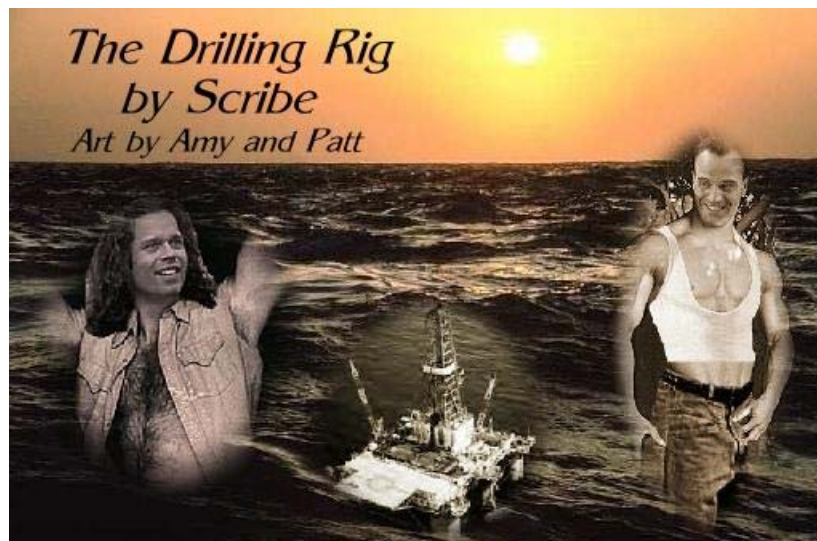
THE END

*Peace.

**Grandmother

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 The Drilling Rig



The Drilling Rig - Scribe

Part One, Situation Set-up

Blair Sandburg smiled brightly at the man sitting across the desk from him, and lied through his teeth. "Yes sir, I've had experience. I worked the kitchens at Rainier several semesters on a work/study program. Last year I pretty much ran them while the manager was on vacation."

It wasn't **entirely** a lie. He **had** worked in the cafeteria--as a bus boy. *But this is justifiable. I gotta get a good paying job. I can't scratch up the cash I'll need flipping burgers or punching a cash register, and construction just about killed me last year. Cook on an oil drilling*

platform ought to be right up my alley. I mean, I can cook. I'll just have to cook for more at one time, right?

Blair Sandburg was a very logical young man (despite what struck some people as a rather fey personality), and could rationalize almost anything if it would help him get back into college to finish his master's. There'd been a lot of financial set backs since he'd graduated with his first degree, and the next academic step seemed to be getting farther out of reach all the time. He felt like he had to get back into the academic swim **soon**, or lose his edge.

He'd been something of a wunderkind, starting college when he was fifteen, and advancing quickly. Well, he was twenty-one now, had been out of school for two years, and was unable to find any sort of job related to his field of expertise. He **knew** that the academic world had, by this time, relegated him to the Twilight Zone of 'Oh, yes, he **used** to be so promising. Whatever happened to him?'

Carl Broderick, in charge of overseas personnel for the oil platforms in the Sunline Drilling Corporation, tapped his pencil thoughtfully on his desk, staring at the curly headed young man sitting opposite him. That expression was so open, honest, and sincere that it **had** to be a put on. Still, the kid had passed the drug test, which was better than **most** of the applicants so far. And, though he was on the smallish side, he looked sturdy. An offshore rig was no place for the fragile, even if they **were** in one of the less physically strenuous positions.

Finally he dropped the pencil, bridged his hands together, and rested his chin on them. "Sandburg, if I were to **call** Rainier, and ask after you, would they know who I was talking about?"

Again the forthright stare. "Yes, sir."

"Mhm. Would they know you as a **cook**, though?"

Blair winced, and said reluctantly, "No. I guess not. But I **did** work in the kitchen."

Carl nodded. Fair enough. No experience, but he was honest enough to admit the truth, even when it might cost him the position. The **last** relief he'd hired for one of their rigs had experience, and had robbed them blind and had tried to extort extra cash from the crew by threatening them with lousy food. He'd ended up pitched headfirst into the North Sea. Oh, they'd hauled him out in time: he'd only lost a couple of toes to the hypothermia.

Finally Carl said, "I'm going to be straight with you, Sandburg. I'm in a fix, here, damn near desperate. The company plane is leaving tomorrow for Scotland with replacement crewmen for one of our rigs in the Northern Sea. The supply boat leaves for the platform the day after, early, and I still need a cook. There isn't anyone else even **remotely** acceptable so far. There'll be a senior cook, plus a baker and a couple of helpers. The rig operates 24/7, so the kitchen does, too. But if you get the job, all you'll have to do is spell the head cook: twelve hours on, twelve hours off. It won't all be on your shoulders. Can you actually boil water?"

Blair nodded vigorously. "And work a can opener, and a microwave, and a food processor, and a blender. I have friends who are on macrobiotic, or vegan diets, so I can take care of those with no problem, if any of the crew need it."

Carl barked with laughter. "Kid, our guys think that the four major food groups are salt, sugar, grease, and caffeine. Load them with those, and you'll keep them happy."

Blair nodded again, so energetically that his auburn curls bounced. "I can do that."

Broderick sighed. "Okay. If no one else shows up by five p.m., you're it. Be ready to show up at the airport by five am." He scribbled an address on a scrap of paper. "Here's the berth at the dock in Scotland. Bring everything you'll need for at least a two week stay. The deal with us is two weeks on, one week off, and we contract you for a year and a half."

Blair blinked. That was a little more commitment than he had been looking for. "That's... um... kinda longer than I was interested in."

"If you can't sign on for at least that long, we aren't interested. It costs us a lot to ship you out there, feed and house you, and ship you around for your time off. It's a big investment. On the plus side for you, since you'll be non-resident during this earning period, Uncle Sam won't tax any of your wages."

"No shit?" Blair was both delighted and astonished.

Broderick smiled slightly. "No shit."

"Damn, Naomi will *love* that. Screwing the government out of what they shouldn't be helping themselves to in the first place." *I might as well, to make her happy. After all, I didn't apply for grants or loans because she's so distrustful of the government.*

Broderick was continuing. "Company supplies linens and laundry supplies, basic bath soap and shampoo. Any other toiletries, you have to bring with you: razors, deodorant, toothpaste, mouthwash, etcetera."

"What type of shampoo?" Blair was absently fingering a long, curly strand of auburn hair."

"Lord, son, I don't know. I think they buy it by the five gallon jug."

"Pass."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me. I'd advise you to stock up on... um, reading material, too. There's always a lot floating around the rig, left there by previous crew members, but there's no telling if they have the same taste in stroke books that you do."

Blair blushed as he took the paper with the dock number on it. He probably **would** bring some erotica along. Heck, he was a healthy young man, after all. He had a better than average libido, not that it had been getting much of a workout lately. The thing was, how discrete would he have to be? Would he get tossed off the rig into the waves if it was found that **his** stroke material featured hard bodied guys instead of voluptuous women?

Blair waited anxiously by the phone in the lobby of the rat trap he was currently calling home. Every time one of the hookers or drug dealers got on it, he fidgeted. They all ignored him. The working girls and the players had all learned that the cute young guy with the long hair wasn't interested in buying **anything**, probably couldn't afford to if he **was**. Some of the girls contemplated offering him a freebie. They had privately conferred and declared him a pint sized sexy teddy bear. But common sense and watchful pimps quashed those ideas.

Five o'clock came and went, and Blair didn't know whether to be relieved, or even more anxious. At five-thirty the phone finally jangled, and he snatched up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"This Blair Sandburg?"

"Yes, sir."

"Broderick here. You got the job, kid. Be at the airport around five or a quarter after. The plane will be at gate nine. If you're late, they'll **leave** your butt, and you'll never get another job with a crew boat or platform, understand? Same goes for meeting the boat in Scotland. You'll be on your own from landing to launching, they won't nursemaid you."

"I understand. You won't be sorry."

"I hope not. And I just hope **you** aren't sorry. I'm not sure you know what you're getting yourself into, but I ain't your daddy. Good luck. Oh, and be sure to bring a pair of steel toed boots with you. Gotta have 'em for insurance purposes."

Blair hung up and did a little dance in front of the phone, pumping his fist in the air. *YESYESYESYESYES!*

He stopped abruptly. "**Steel toed** boots?" For insurance? Damn, what was he getting himself **into**? After a moment he shrugged. "Oh well."

Part Two, At First Glance

Blair was in plenty of time for the flight to Scotland. Luckily, he'd kept his passport up to date after a couple of brief study trips abroad in his college days, so that wasn't a problem. There were only a dozen or so other men on the plane: the others had flown out a few days before.

He met Luke, who was to be one of the assistants. He was a thin, easy going young man. Even though he was couple of years younger than Blair, he was still a veteran platform worker. He'd been helping in the kitchen on rigs since he got out of high school and met the legal age requirements for hazardous labor. Blair liked him immediately.

Not **liked** him, liked him. Luke nice enough, but he wasn't Blair's type. Blair had always had a craving for a more forceful, mature lover. Luke was a nice boy, but that was just it. He was a **boy**. Blair was interested in **men**.

When the plane landed in Scotland, it was already evening. The crewmen quickly scattered to find rooms for the night, pubs, and possibly a bit of sex before they isolated themselves on the platform. Blair wasn't interested in the pubs. He also had to buy his toiletries and boots before the stores closed.

As dusk fell, he found himself loaded down with several bulging plastic bags. The boots had been kind of expensive. It was a good thing he wasn't going to have any real expenses while he was out on the rig. The box was frighteningly large, too. Blair was used to sneakers or loafers. When he tried on the boots, he felt like... Well, it was hard to say. To tell the truth, he'd felt macho and virile as hell. Disgustingly politically incorrect.

He was on his way back to the room he'd rented at a slightly seedy bed-and-breakfast, but he paused outside one of the local adult bookstores. Bring reading material, Broderick had said. Blair had a modest stock at home, but he'd read, ogled, and in many cases placed stains, on them, so he hadn't bothered to bring any of them along. It was time for a fresh supply to keep him occupied out on the platform, because it was hardly likely that any of the oil rig workers would feel like lending an (**ahem**) helping hand to a poor, horny assistant cook. Blair was already on intimate terms with his palm. It looked like they were going to be going steady for the next month.

Blair went into the store, and the woman behind the counter barked, "**Freeze!**"

Blair held his hands up as best as he could, loaded down as he was. "I didn't do it!"

"Not yet, ye didn't." Perhaps not unsurprisingly, she had a thick Scottish burr. "Packages stay up at t' counter, sport. No tellin' what might wan'er in there when you wan't lookin'."

"I wouldn't do that, but I know where you're coming from."

"Yeh, yeh. Just park 'em up here and I'll set 'em behin' t' counter. Ye can get 'em when ye leave."

Blair wasn't entirely happy with that arrangement, but he had to comply if he wanted his smut, and he wanted his smut. He handed over the bags, and moved out into the store.

Oo. Quite a variety they got here. Blair walked past the vanilla men's magazines, through the Dominatrix section, and into the Man to Man section. He stood for a moment, hands on hips, contemplating the racks of magazines, tabloids, and paperbacks. *A man could happily wank himself to death here* he thought complacently.

He started browsing, trying to decide if he should concentrate on prose, photo layouts, or a combination of both. *Why am I doing this to myself? I know damn good and well that I'd better be hitting the used section.*

Blair sadly fingered a magazine that showed a buff older man with short cropped hair. "Sorry, Daddy," he murmured. "Sonnyboy is short of cash right now. Maybe when I get back."

He moved over to the table of cardboard boxes that held second hand material and started to sift through them. Damn. No one ever seemed to trade in anything that featured anyone over twenty something.

Blair felt a slight prickling of the hairs at the back of his neck. He shrugged uneasily, but the sensation didn't go away. *Somebody's watching me.* He thought. Well, eye contact in a place like this generally meant you were looking for one of two things: companionship, or trouble. Blair was lonely enough for one to risk the other. He looked around, and started to get hard almost immediately.

The man standing by the magazine rack was a wet dream come true. He was exactly Blair's type: a little mature but not by any means old. In his prime. He was well over six feet tall, and his body, clad in tight T-shirt and even tighter jeans, was a symphony of hard, well defined muscle. He wasn't pretty, but he was handsome, with a stubborn jaw and the most intense ice blue eyes Blair had ever seen. His dark hair was chopped short, emphasizing the slightly receding hairline. Blair wanted to climb him like a mountain.

Eye contact. Blair's smoky blue eyes locked with the stranger's lighter ones, and Blair's cock gave a decidedly interested twitch. *Oh, geez. I hopeI hopeI hope. Please, God, I'll have two weeks and maybe more to be celibate. Gimme this one?*

Handsome Stranger smiled slowly, and Blair swallowed saliva. He quickly turned his eyes, if not his attention, back to the box of magazines before him, flipping them unseeingly.

He heard the rap of boot heels approaching. A low voice behind him said, "Hi."

The glance he tossed back was supposed to be casual, but it fell short by several megawatts. "Hi."

The Stranger moved up to the table beside him, their shoulders brushing. Well, Blair's shoulder brushed **his** arm. Blair would have had to stand on a box for their shoulders to be level. "Anything good?"

He was American, by his accent. Or rather, lack of accent. "Mm, dunno yet. Haven't really had a chance to look."

The Stranger reached across Blair's arm, finger touching the model on the front cover of the magazine he was holding, resting right beside Blair's hand. The model had wavy, flowing red-brown hair, not too different from Blair's own. "Looks pretty good to me."

Now his mouth was going dry. "Not really my type."

"No?" The single word was husky. The bigger man turned toward him, leaning a hip casually against the table, crossing his arms. "What **is** your type?"

You, man. You are exactly my type. Fuck, I'm blushing. I can feel it. I didn't think I had enough blood left to rush to my cheeks, I thought it was all busy inflating my cock. He didn't know what to say. Give Blair a party, or a quiet dinner, and he could flirt up a storm. But he'd never been really good at the casually pick-ups most people thought made up the homosexual lifestyle.

When he didn't speak, The Stranger didn't give up, thank heavens. "Ought to introduce myself before I start asking personal questions, I suppose." He offered his hand. "James."

Blair took it, shaking hands. "Blair." He knew that the names exchanged in such encounters were not always necessarily the once inscribed on licenses and birth certificates, but he saw no reason to use an alias.

"So Blair," The use of his name was like a caress. James indicated the new magazine he'd been coveting. "You don't want that?"

"Shit, yeah, I want it. But money's kinda tight right now. I was figuring on going for quantity versus quality for the time being."

"Oh, you shouldn't do that. Pick just one you really, really like. That's what I do." He reached over and lifted one curl from where it rested on Blair's shoulder, and rubbed it sensuously through his fingers. "Look, I'm not usually so abrupt, but I don't have a lot of time. There's somewhere I have to be in a few hours. Would you be interested in spending some time with me?"

Blair looked at him carefully. "You mean like go out to a pub for a beer, or something?"

"No." He wound the curl around his finger. "I mean like go back to my room and 'or something'." His eyes met Blair's unflinchingly. "I top."

Shit. I bet you do. Fuck this magazine shit. I've got the real thing right here. Blair almost managed to keep his voice steady. "Yeah, I'd like to go with you. Just let me get my stuff from the dragon up front."

As they walked up to the counter, James said, "Take it with you? Where are you going? Vacation?"

"Exact opposite, man. Finally got a job." The clerk didn't look too pleased that he wasn't making a purchase, but she grudgingly put his bags up on the counter. "I'm kinda shipping out in the morning, so I don't have a lot of time myself. Small world, isn't it?"

"Yes." Those bright eyes were studying the content of his bags, and, when they turned back to Blair, they were guarded. "Sailor?"

"No, I got a gig slinging hash on an oil rig. Gonna be out for a solid month. I've never done it before, and I figured I couldn't count on finding any... um, mutually inclined friends, so I'd better stock up on sleep aids."

James looked at his watch. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. I'm going to have to take a rain check."

Blair didn't say anything immediately, but he was thinking, *What?! Geez, what cooled your jets all of a sudden?* "Oh. That's too bad. You sure?"

James hesitated, and for a moment Blair hoped... But he shook his head. "No. Wouldn't be fair to either of us if we had to rush it, would it?"

"Shit, man, I got no objection to knee tremblers."

"No." The tone of his voice took some of the sting out of the rejection. He slid his hand down Blair's back, letting it rest for just a moment on his ass. Blair had to restrain himself from leaning back into the touch. "You deserve better than that, kid. Don't just settle, get what you want." He was backing toward the door. "Some other time."

Blair raised a hand numbly. "Yeah. See ya." The bell tinkled, and he was gone.

Blair sighed gustily. The clerk had been watching the exchange with interest. "Wassamatter? Ye and yer boyfrien' have a spat?"

Blair looked at her coolly, gathering up his bags. "Do you own this place?"

"Neh, jus' work here."

"Then you're lucky you don't have to work on commission, because your customer skill sucks." He left, deciding to try the used bookstore down the street. He'd lost his chance for something nice tonight, but he still had at least two weeks of enforced celibacy ahead of him to provide for.

Part Two, At Second Glance



My theory is that weather on any sort of dock in any part of the world is this: it is never actually pleasant. It is always, too damn hot, too damn cold, too damn wet, or too damn something. Blair thought this as he tried to keep his jacket over his head without losing his hold on his two overstuffed duffle bags. It was raining, as he'd once heard an old mountain man say, like a cow pissing on a flat rock, and the wind was whipping so that it was slanting **just** enough to blow into the gap he was trying to peer through.

I guess if I listened to the news now and then I'd have known this was blowing up, but nooo. Had to catch that last episode of Saturday Night Live. Well, it was worth it. They had Antonio Banderas on, and he got down to his boxers in that bedroom sketch.

Sadly, the memory of the Latino hunk wasn't quite enough to keep the chill at bay. By the time Blair reached the boat, he was soaked and

quivering with cold. The man who admitted him at the top of the gangplank eyed him sourly. "Sandburg, right? You mean t' tell me you're not bringin' any foul weather gear?"

"I wasn't told I'd need any," he said patiently.

"Yeah, well, I s'pose they just fig'erred anyone with half a brain would KNOW that they'd need a slicker out in t' North Sea this time o' year. G'wan in. I s'pect they'll scare you up somethin' on t' platform. There's usu'lly somethin' left behin' by some crewman. Though," Blair thought that the snicker was a little nastier than strictly necessary. "It'll pro'lly swaller you up."

Before he could reach the shelter of the cabin, the wind decided to get a bit friskier. Blair managed to save his jacket from sailing off into the water, but only just. He was immediately drenched *Fucking marvelous. Now I'll start my new job with a sniffle, and that is so attractive in a food handler.* He slammed the door open and stepped inside, being greeted with an immediate chorus of variations on the theme of 'Shut the fuckin' door!'. Blair managed to fight it closed, and just stood there for a moment, dripping.

"Aw, shit," someone said. "They done sent us another drowned puppy." Blair's hair had more or less plastered itself across his face during the last-minute deluge, so he supposed it was a fair comparison, if not a flattering one.

"Looks like wanna dem Afghanistan houn's wit' dat hair," someone else added, and there were appreciative guffaws. Blair immediately began to wonder what the hell he'd gotten himself into.

Someone tossed a towel over his head, and a gruff voice said, "Dry yourself off, kid, before you get pneumonia."

Blair dumped his bags in a place he hoped would be out of the way, and started tousling his hair. "Thanks, man. How long do you think we'll be delayed?"

"Delayed?" The voice was puzzled. "We're pulling out in ten. The whole crew made it on board, so there's no reason to wait around till the last minute."

"But the weather..." Blair hung the towel around his shoulders and pulled a handful of damp hair out of his eyes...

...and found himself looking at James. The older man was dressed much as he had been the night before, except that he had on an open, heavy pea coat, and wore a knitted watch cap pulled low on his forehead. "You..." Jim's mouth tightened, and he gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Blair glanced around quickly. The room, looking roughly like a lounge, held somewhere around fifty men. Most of them were watching the new arrival curiously.

Blair continued. "You mean to tell me that we're going to launch in this weather?"

One man, with grey just starting to show in what was left of his hair chuckled. "Hell, son, this little bitty spit? It takes a damn sight more than this to keep a crew boat from shoving off on schedule."

"Oh." The boat was pitching in what was, to Blair, an alarming manner, and it was still docked. He made his way over to the wall and took a seat next to Luke, who was also dripping wet. "Guess you must be my wet litter mate, huh?"

"Don't take it personal, Blair. Some of the older guys feel obligated to rag on the younger ones."

"Ageism at it's worst."

◆ It won't be so bad once we're on the platform I worked with Simon before, an' he don't let no one mess with his staff."

The ship started to move. Actually, it had **been** moving. It started to move more. **Lots** more. Blair grabbed hold of the bench he was sitting on. *Oh, man. Sniffles farther down the line, nausea right now, a guy who shot me down in flames last night, and a bunch of teasing macho red necks to deal with at close quarters. This job is just peachy so far.*

As the floor seemed to pitch and heave, Blair's stomach *thank God I just had tea and toast instead of that kippers-and-kidney thing they tried to push on me* started to rebel, big time. "How much longer is this ride going to last?"

Luke wrinkled his brow in thought. "Well, it'll be a little slower, what with the rough seas, but it shouldn't be more than, say, six or seven hours."

"Oh, man." Blair hung on a little longer. He knew that he must be slowly turning a lovely shade of pale green. Finally he said, very carefully, "I gotta assume that there's a toilet somewhere on this ship?"

One of the roughnecks said tartly, "It's a boat, not a ship, ya idjet. An' no, we jus' hang it over the side when we need to go." He was met by appreciative snickers.

James *Jim* frowned at the joker, and jerked his thumb toward an unmarked door. "Head is through there."

"Thanks." Now all he had to do was **make it** there, hopefully without spewing his breakfast on someone who would be inclined to beat the snot out of him. He kept remembering those job-required steel toed boots...

Blair got up, hanging onto the bench for support as long as he could, and took a cautious step out onto the floor. The ship chose that moment to pitch, and he landed on Luke's lap. There was general laughter as he struggled back up, and a catcall from someone about 'get a room!'. Blair was beginning to think that it might be best to kind of 'hide in the closet' while he was out on the platform, at least until he could gauge the general opinion toward gays. Right now, he wasn't too hopeful.

He started across the room again. This time he almost made it to his goal before another particularly high swell hit, and he was thrown off balance again. He landed this time against someone big and solid. Strong arms grabbed him, keeping him from falling, and settling him back on his feet. "Thanks, man. I..." It was Jim. Somehow that didn't surprise him. He seemed to be destined to keep running into this man. "I appreciate it."

Jim just nodded, pushing open the door for him. Good thing he did. The nausea reached a peak right about then. If Blair had been forced to take that extra second, he wouldn't have made it to a stall, and would have decorated the lounge floor in a most embarrassing manner.

Instead, he made it to a stall just in time for the porcelain basin to catch the (surprisingly, to Blair) meager contents of his stomach. The way he'd felt, he had been sure there was going to be an eruption worthy of Vesuvius. He hung over the mercifully clean bowl, panting, his hair curtaining his face. Then, just when he thought he was safe, he started bringing up bile.

When the dry heaves finally stopped, he was exhausted, his sides ached, and he was slightly disoriented. He sat back on the floor with a thump, back braced against the cool metal of the stall divider and tried to catch his breath. *I obviously was never a sailor in any of my previous incarnations.*

He was too weak to really react when someone pulled the hair out of his eyes. He found that Jim was squatting in the door to the stall. The older man silently offered a paper cup of water and a tiny pill. Blair eyed it without enthusiasm. The idea of putting **anything** back into his outraged stomach wasn't very appealing. "Valium?"

"Dramamine. I know it won't be easy, but if you can keep it down, it'll help a lot." Blair tried to pick the pill up out of Jim's palm, but his own hand was trembling. The other man sighed, and said, "Just open up." Blair opened his mouth, and the man tucked the pill inside, then held the cup to his lips for him to sip. His belly protested immediately. The other man could tell, because he put a hand on his shoulder, saying sharply, "Fight it down. You need to get that into your system for it to help."

Somehow Blair managed not to spew again. In a moment, he was even able to accept another couple of sips of water. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall, and praying for relief. Blessedly, he got it. The storm in his innards slowly lessened to a faint grumbling that he wasn't pleased with, but he could handle.

He opened his eyes to find Jim still squatted next to him, watching him with those laser sharp blue eyes. "Better?" he inquired. Blair nodded. "Good. You'll need another one in a couple of hours, just to be on the safe side." He offered Blair a wad of damp paper towels, and the young man gratefully wiped his face.

Blair sighed. "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

The wide, firm mouth crooked slightly at the corners, a ghost of a smile. "Then you must've been kicked in the nuts a lot in your short lifetime."

"Pretty much, yeah."

Jim glanced back over his shoulder toward the closed door to the lounge, then looked back at Blair. His voice low, he said, "Look, about what happened out there..."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, man. You don't owe me any explanations."

He rubbed his face. "It's just that... Well, out on the platforms, I... uh... I'm not quite as open."

"You're still in the closet. I can dig it. I guess it isn't exactly the most liberal environment on earth. Don't worry, I won't say or do anything to embarrass you. I'm not exactly gonna be wearing my 'Pink Pride' button while I'm out there, either."

"You're not mad at me?"

"Why should I be? Hell, it isn't the first time I've been shot down in flames."

Jim frowned. "It isn't that. It's just..." He stood up abruptly, going to the sink and beginning to wash his hands, leaving Blair bewildered. A moment later the door to the lounge opened, and Luke peeked in.

"Blair, you okay?"

Blair struggled to his feet, tossing Jim a curious look. "The patient will live. He may not be totally happy about it, but he'll live." As he started out, Jim nudged him, and silently offered a second pill. This time Blair could have easily picked it up, but he gripped Jim's wrist, as if to steady it. As he retrieved the tablet, he let his fingers press into the warm, broad palm for a moment, and stared into his eyes, saying softly, "Thanks, man. Just what I need."

He had the satisfaction of seeing red creeping up the older man's cheeks as he left the head.

Part Four, Settling In

If the weather had been any better, Blair would have been on deck to catch a first glimpse of the platform as they neared it. Not even the most seasoned crew member felt like leaving the warm snugness of the lounge for the cold, driving rain outside, though. Besides, it wasn't anything new to **them**. Blair supposed it was kind of like the African natives who grew up near a game preserve. Their attitude toward a tourist's excitement over seeing an elephant, would be amused and slightly condescending. After all, it was just a part of **their** daily routine.

As it was, Blair didn't leave the room till it was time for him to make his way across to the platform. He didn't like having to step out onto the landing and go up the outside stairs, no matter **how** secure the safety railing was.

Up on the platform, a handsome, burly black man in foul weather gear, called out, "All right. Where's my new help?"

Luke went to him, smiling. "Hey, Mr. Banks!"

They shook hands. "Luke, glad to see you back. I know now I'll have at least one person I won't have to worry about."

Luke pulled Blair over. "This is Blair Sandburg."

Simon Banks studied the young man shrewdly. "So, you're going to be my second. That means you're in charge of half the meals on this floating madhouse, Sandburg. Can you handle it?"

"I'll have to, won't I?" When Banks frowned, Blair said, "Yes, sir. I'll handle it, or break my neck trying."

"You won't have to do **that**, son. If you **don't** handle it, **I'll** break your neck **for** you." The boat's crew were piling bags, boxes, and crates on the platform. Simon started ticking off items on a clipboard he held. "You two can start by humping those supplies into the galley. I want them out of this weather, pronto. Luke, show Blair the ropes."

"Will do." Luke picked up a fifty pound bag of flour and heaved it up on his shoulder. "C'mon, grab anything that won't do good in the wet first thing."

Blair snagged two twenty-five pound bags of sugar by the blue plastic handles that were sewn onto the stiff paper bags and started after him. *I got a feeling I'm gonna be chipping chunks off this stuff and grinding it in the food processor later. He worked steadily for almost two hours, passing in and out of the rain, carrying heavy loads. And I thought this was going to be an easy job. Pfft.*

Once they had everything inside, Simon examined the heaped piles, nodding in satisfaction. "Okay. Now you just need to get everything squared away, then you can go to your bunks. I want the perishables put away first, and you make **damn** sure you rotate everything. I don't want to get to the back box of something and find out it went out of date a month ago."

Once again Blair, beginning to feel distinctly weary, hauled heavy loads back and forth. The freezer was a revelation. It was **huge**, bigger than any apartment he'd ever lived in, and almost as cold as some of them seemed to have been in winter. *First, I get drenched, now, I get chilled. Lovely. I hope they have Nyquil on board.* His hands got so numb that he was grateful when it was time to move the cases that held six gallon-sized containers of fruits, vegetables, pudding, sauces, or condiments.

Finally, when Blair was beginning to wonder if he could hurry and catch the boat back to land, Banks was satisfied. He clapped Blair on the shoulder. "Usually you'll take the midnight meal and breakfast, but I'm gonna have mercy on you your first day. I'll throw something together for the late crew, and you'll just have to take care of breakfast. I'll set up some of my famous breakfast pizza, too. That way, all you'll have to worry about, really is frying up some ham steaks and bacon, baking some home fries: a few little odds and ends like that. Rafe will have the bread, coffee cake and muffins ready for you." Rafe was the platform baker, an almost ridiculously good looking, dark haired man. Nice enough but, like Luke, not his type.

"Thanks. So, when do I need to report for KP?"

Banks frowned. "Son, what you're gonna be doing is a hell of a lot more difficult and responsible than simple kitchen patrol. We have the assistants for the scut work and prep. Don't tell me you don't take this seriously."

"No, sir."

"You damn well better not. The men on this rig work hard. They don't have a hell of a lot in their lives here outside their work, and let me tell you, they **cherish** the little comforts. They are damn **particular** about their food. You don't fuck around with it, **ever**, or... Well, like they say, it's a long swim back home."

Blair winced. "Got it."

"I hope so. I need a second I can trust, Sandburg, and I'm not much more patient than the roughnecks and roustabouts, because I'm not going to have **anyone** making me look bad to the company. I have a kid back home to support, and you don't endanger a man's support for his family. Now, from what I've seen so far, you're not afraid of hard work, and you can follow instructions. Keep it up, show a little common sense, and you should do okay. Now, the shifts change at eight, a.m. and p.m.. Meals are at one p.m., six-thirty a.m. and p.m., and midnight.

Like I said, you're on for midnight and breakfast. You'll be feeding somewhere between fifty and sixty men a meal, unless they get wind that there's gonna be something they really like. Then almost the entire crew finds **some** way to make it in."

"I'd suggest you get in here at least at four since it's your first day, and you're not used to the galley. Try not to fix the food too far ahead so it gets cold, or leave it in the warming oven so long it turns to rubber. I'll leave the pizza in the refrigerator, with written instructions on the message board. Now, go try to get a little rest."

Blair gathered his duffle bags from the galley entrance, where he'd stowed them, and went in search of his quarters. Thanks to a couple of comedians, he ended up in some sort of tool shed, once again drenched and shivering. Reluctant to leave the meager shelter, he just stood there for a few moment, swearing very quietly to himself.



The door opened, and Jim stepped inside. "What are you doing out here," he asked curiously. "No one ever comes out to this structure this time of day."

"I have a lousy sense of direction. I was **looking** for wherever the hell it is I'm supposed to sleep."

"And someone sent you here?" Blair scowled. "Shit, some of the guys take teasing too far. Come on, I know where the assistant cook usually bunks." He led the softly growling Blair back out into the rain.

Blair's room proved to be handy to the galley, just a few turns down a corridor. It wasn't bad. In fact, it was a lot better than some of the dorm rooms he'd stayed in. The bed, though bolted to the wall, was wider than a standard single, and looked comfortable. There was a desk and chair, a small closet, dresser drawers and storage cupboards built into the wall, and his own toilet, complete with head.

"Some of the crew with more responsibility get their own rooms," Jim explained. "The cooks need to be able to rest whenever they can. Besides them, there's the company man, the floor bosses, the tool pushers... I'm head tool pusher on the night shift, so I have my own room, too. You'll have to use the communal showers, but they have private stalls."

"Head tool pusher, huh?" Blair dumped his bags on his bunk, giving Jim a lazy grin. "My, now **there's** an evocative job description. Calls up all **kinds** of interesting mental images." Again Jim blushed. It was really delicious, seeing such a big man get red in the face for some reason other than anger. "I guess we ought to exchange full names if we're going to be living on this ocean bound tabletop." He offered his hand. "Sandburg."

"Ellison." They shook.

Blair cocked his head. "Sooo, 'Jim'?"

"Says James on the birth certificate, but I mostly go by Jim."

"You don't lie about your name with your dates. You just... don't tell everything."

Jim cleared his throat. "About that. Look, out here I don't actually, er, **fraternize**."

Blair crossed his arms, giving him a level stare. "You weren't asked."

"Oh. Okay. Fine."

"Yes. Good. Now, if you don't mind, I need to take a nap. Four o' clock is going to come awful early." He pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it on a chair, then idly scratched the still slightly damp pelt on his chest, combing his fingers through the more than respectable growth. Even with all the hair on his head, the amount of his body hair **still** surprised most of his first time lovers.

Ellison... Well, he stared. There wasn't a polite term for it. He just sort of fixated on Blair's chest. Specifically, he seemed to be drawn to the nipple ring. It flashed mellowly in the bright light of the cabin, gleaming among the dark curls on his chest. Blair was used to it drawing a little attention when he took off his shirt, but this... The guy's expression was going blank.

"Ellison, are you all right?" Jim blinked rapidly, and the blank look left his eyes.

"Uh... Yeah."

"You were off in the Twilight Zone there for a minute."

He grimaced, obviously irritated with himself, muttering, "Shit." Seeing Blair's concerned and curious look, he said firmly, "Just got a little distracted, that's all. I ought to go catch some zees, too. You have a good night."

"Same to you, man." Blair shut the door after him, then turned around and leaned against it. *You weren't asked. Not yet, anyway.* Not at all displeased with Ellison's reactions, he stripped and crawled into bed, setting the little travel alarm he'd splurged on for three-thirty.

It hardly seemed like he'd closed his eyes before the damn thing was chirping at him to get up. Blair winced as his body berated him for not having the good sense to treat it to a hot soak, or at least a long, hot shower after working as a pack beast the night before. *Quitcher bitchin'.* he scolded his sore muscles. *At least you're not hauling bricks and two-by-fours like *last* year.*

Blair hadn't been instructed, but he knew enough about food service work to put his hair in a tail, then pin it up and cover it with a hairnet before he went into the galley to start breakfast at four that morning. He found a clean overall apron hanging on a hook near the door, and put it on. It was so large that he had to wrap the ties back around his narrow waist and tie them in front, and the bow ended up being floppy.

He was just trying to figure out a way to look a little less like the Pillsbury Doughboy when Luke stumbled in, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "Hiyah, boss."

"Boss?"

He nodded. There was a pot of coffee (Blair discovered that the coffee maker was never really shut off. Platforms ran through them steadily enough to buy in bulk.), and Luke helped himself to a cup. "You're head man on this shift, Simon's head on the other. I am your peon. Anything special you want me to start with?"

"Just give me some idea of what the hell to do, man. Where do I start?"

Luke smiled good-naturedly, seeming a little puzzled by Blair's indecision. "Well, there ain't too much this morning. Just make sure the oven's set to the right temp an' slide the pizzas in to cook, make sure they don't burn. Slap the ham and bacon on the griddle an' tend it. I'll start scrubbin' and slicin' spuds, and do the onions for the fries. Pour a good glop of bacon grease in the big pans when you go to bake 'em. Keeps 'em from stickin' too bad, and gives 'em a nice flavor."

"And ups the fat content about six or seven hundred per cent."

Luke gave him a polite look that said he had no idea what Blair was yammering about. "Then one of us can set out the pastries an' bread, and put up the toasters."

"Toasters?"

Luke nodded. "Sure. Can't make the toast in advance, can we? Gets cold an' tough. Fellas toast it as they need it. I make sure the plates an' stuff are out, an' put out the butter an' jellies, an' the boxes of cereal. When you're ready to dish up the food, I set out the milk an' help serve." He shrugged. "Not much to it. Breakfast is pretty simple 'less you take a mind to do fancy eggs or pancakes."

Blair sighed. "I think I need some of that caffeine."

Luke poured him a cup. "Most folks on the rigs are addicted to it, in one form or 'nother. Welcome to the club."

Blair found brief, but thorough, instructions pinned to a cork board. He turned up the temperature on the ovens, and slid in the massive pans of dough covered with eggs, cheese, chipped onions, and cooked sausage. He'd never tried such a concoction before, but the mouth-watering smell that soon was wafting from the oven made him curious.

The griddle was as big as a dining room table, and he quickly loaded it with slabs of ham steak and pounds of bacon. He was soon nursing a couple of blisters, having quickly learned that you put the bacon in the **back** to avoid splatters. Once everything got going, he was kept busy constantly flipping and moving pork products, so that they cooked evenly.

Meanwhile Luke was using a vegetable brush on what looked like a peck of potatoes. Then he sat down with them and started carving the eyes out, and slicing them into thin rounds. He handled the wicked sharp paring knife with admirable speed and skill. Blair was sure that he, himself, would have added some protein to the dish by chopping off a finger if he tried to move that fast. "Good idea, leaving the skins on. Saves most of the vitamins and minerals."

Luke shrugged, blade flashing and creamy rounds dropping into the bowl in front of him. "Don't know about that. Just saves a hell of a lot of time. We **got** frozen, cut spuds, but Simon likes to use up the fresh ones first, 'fore they can start to spoil."

They worked well together, the chores going smoothly. Luke was a bit doubtful when Blair got some red and green sweet peppers from the vegetable bin, minced them, and sprinkled them over the potatoes before sliding them into the oven. "I guess it'll make 'em **look** kinda pretty," he said doubtfully.

"Luke, ever had roasted peppers?"

"Yeah, they're pretty good."

"Trust me."

Luke grinned. "My daddy always told me that when anyone said those two words to me I was to cover my butt real fast."

It all took more time than Blair had anticipated. It was a good thing he had started early, because the first men were already lined up and grumbling when he and Luke slid the last pans into the steam table and started serving.

And the line didn't seem to get any **shorter**, no matter how many he served. "Luke," he whispered, comparing the fast dwindling stores of food to the line still left to serve, and not coming up with a comforting proportion. "What the **hell**? Simon said about fifty guys."

"Unless there's somethin' they really like, an' they're **real** fond of the breakfast pizza. Oh, an' most of the crew usually comes by to scope out a new cook. Guess Simon shoulda warned you."

"I guess he should." He was going to be scraping the bottom of the pan on breakfast meats in a minute or two, and there was still a couple of dozen men in line. "Can you handle this alone for a little while I throw some more meat on the griddle?"

"Sure. I was kinda wondering why you were so skimpy this morning."

"Well, why didn't you **say** something?"

He shrugged. "You're the boss. It ain't my place."

Blair hurried back into the galley and started throwing bacon and ham on the griddle, muttering, "Terrific. What little respect I get in this job may get me pitched over the side." There wasn't time for more home fries, so he quickly threw together a pot of instant grits. They could have those with butter and sugar. Red necks liked grits, didn't they?

Luke was scraping the last crumbs of fries out of the corner of the pan before a darkly muttering group when Blair hurried back in with the fresh supplies. The grumbling eased as they began to pile pork products on the offered plates. Some of the men nodded approval at the grits, though there were inquiries along the line of 'If you're gonna have ham, an' you're gonna have grits, then why the hell doncha have red eye gravy?' *Red eye gravy*? Blair had no idea what that was, but the very idea made him shudder.

He was down to the last meager spoonfuls when the last man came through the line. Jim Ellison. He held out a plate that showed smears of his previous helpings. Blair, spoon in hand, hand on hip, regarded him tiredly. "Seconds?"

"Thirds. Pretty good grub."

Blair sighed. "Thank you." He scraped the last of everything onto Jim's plate, then threw the spoon into an empty pan with a clatter. "And anyone else is just shit out of luck. Christ, and I thought this was gonna be an **easy** job."

Jim grinned as he strolled over to one of the tables. "What ever gave you **that** idea?"

All Blair wanted to do was go and fall back into his bunk, but there was no time. Luke had already started to carry the empty pans back into the galley, so Blair started to gather up the ravaged platters of baked goods. About the only thing that was left was what looked like a prune danish and a bran muffin. He was suddenly ravenous. All this time handling huge amounts of food, and he'd been too busy to feel hungry.

He was just about to pick up the danish when a skinny guy that he knew for a **fact** had consumed at least a pound of bacon (post cooking weight) hurried over. "Waitta minnit!" He grabbed up the danish, tearing off half of it with one bite. "I dun't us'lly like dese yere," he confided, giving a charming view of half masticated food. "But Rafe can do 'em pretty good, eh?"

"I wouldn't know." *Okay. Looks like it's a bran muffin for breakfast.*

As he started to walk away, the man reached out and grabbed the muffin. "An' I t'ink I'll jus' have me this wit' my coffee later."

"Fine. Enjoy." Blair muttered to himself as the man walked away. He slammed the platters into a stack. "I **knew** there was **some** reason why I'd been avoiding responsibility all my life." As he carried the plates back to the galley, he wondered what Ellison, sitting on the other side of the room, was grinning about.

Part Five: Awareness

Blair found one left-over, sad, day old muffin in the galley, and scarfed it in hasty bites while he helped Luke clean up. Luke protested that he could, indeed **should** do it alone, but Blair didn't listen. He personally **hated** doing dishes, and felt a little guilty about leaving such work to someone else.

Simon came in while they were finishing up, and frowned at him. "Sandburg, you're doing Luke's job. Son, I can appreciate that you're eager to not seem overbearing, but you have to learn to delegate some work, or you'll exhaust yourself. I would have burned out a long time ago if I hadn't learned to trust my staff to do what they were paid to do. Sit down and work out what you're going to make for your midnight meal.

"I'll need to have at least a week's worth of menus from you by tomorrow so I can check for duplication. You have no idea how pissed a group of people can be if they get served baked beans too many times in a row."

"Or how **stinky** they can get," confided Luke, which made Blair laugh. "But when they're pumping on the floor, they don't notice it much with the oil and gas smells."

Blair had to sit down and hold his sides. He wiped his streaming eyes as he picked up a pencil and dragged a pad of paper toward him. "Dif-different kinda natural gas, huh?" That even got a grin out of Simon.

Simon sat with a cup of coffee, watching Blair as he moved around, studying the supplies he had to work with, making notes. The boy knew how to go about **that** in the right way. He'd heard that this was a college boy. Looked like he was putting his organizational skills to use, which was more than a lot of diplomaed boys Simon had met were capable of. "I heard you had kind of a tight squeak through this morning. Almost finished before the men did."

Blair grimaced. "I underestimated."

"You can't **do** that, Sandburg. Listen close to what I'm tellin' you. We do **not** send anyone out of here with a less than full belly. Always make more than you think you need, because very little goes to waste around here. What someone doesn't steal for snacks can usually be used some other way. Left over roast in a stew, stale cake in a pudding. Though I gotta tell ya, that last item is as rare as hen's teeth. There's almost **never** any left over cakes or cookies since we got Rafe as a baker. He'll be in a little later to set his bread and mix up the rolls."

"Looking forward to meeting him. That was a luscious looking pastry of his I almost had, and the bran muffin restored some of my belief in health food."

"It shouldn't have." Rafe entered. "If you saw how much sugar and butter I used in them, your arteries would start to clog on general principles." He was an almost ridiculously handsome dark haired man, a few years older than Blair. Rather than the usual jeans and T-shirt, he was wearing neat dark trousers and a carefully ironed white shirt, sleeves rolled up to show strong forearms.

Nice. But still not what I want. "I guess I should have known that, but we just keep on hoping that someday there will be something healthy that actually **does** taste like the real thing. Dreams are nice. You just let me know if you want anything particular for any of your menus. I wouldn't mind a bit of a challenge, now and then. It gets a little boring cranking out the same cakes and cookies, day in, day out."

"Yeah, but be careful," Simon cautioned. "These guys are like kids about that. People always think kids want to experience new things. They're wrong, I know from raising my own. Kids can't **help** but experience new things, 'cause they're meeting the world head on for the first time. What they **really** want is something familiar. I'm not saying you can't have a flight of fancy every now and then, but don't try to use my galley and my mess as a food lab."

Simon had a shelf of cookbooks, and Blair consulted them for ideas. If there was one thing he knew, it was research. He learned from Luke that there was even a computer in the rec area that had a wireless Internet hook-up. If he could ever find it free from roughnecks cruising the porn sites, or playing fantasy sports, he was sure he could search out a lot of possibilities.

He was making notes as Simon worked eggs and breadcrumbs into a massive amount of ground beef, getting up to his elbows in the greasy pink meat. "Yo, Mister Banks..."

"Simon, Blair. You're second in charge here, so there's no reason you can't call me by my first name."

Blair decided not to tell him how very much he **didn't** like the idea of being in charge of anything. "I'm guessing that for my midnight meal I'll need two entrees: a meat and either a chicken or seafood, right?"

"That's right. You really haven't had much training in this, have you, son?"

"No, sir," he admitted. "But I'm trying real hard."

"Yes, you are. And you're doing better on instinct and common sense than a lot of ones I've had that went to school for it. That's right, meat and alternative. You'll also need two or three vegetables, with at least one of them a green, so they don't get rickets, or beri-beri, or something, and at least one starch. We go through so much rice, potatoes, dried beans, and pasta on this platform it's downright scary."

"A drilling platform has to be the carb capital of the world," commented Rafe. He had been kneading dough like a madman. The bread was kneaded in a large commercial mixer, with a pastry hook, but he preferred to give his rolls and biscuits the 'personal touch'.

All that flour he sifted flying around, and he doesn't have a smudge anywhere. Is the man simonized, or what?

Blair didn't feel up to anything too complicated his first night, so he settled on baked chicken and stuffing, and pepper beef over rice for his entrees. The vegetables were not a problem, since all he had to do was dump the cans in a pot, season them, and let them heat.

Simon nodded his approval of the menu. "I like the idea of the green peppers. Looks like you're gonna sneak some vitamins in on these turkeys without them realizing it. You might have noticed we don't carry a lot of salad stuff. I just can't get the men to eat it, and it hurts me to put good food down the grinder."

Blair made sure he had plenty of beef and chicken out of the freezer and thawing in the refrigerator. It was only about ten. He figured he had time for a leisurely shower, then he could safely sleep till six or seven and grab something to eat before beginning the midnight supper.

"Luke, how do we do this bathing thing on the platform? Do we have fresh, or am I gonna have to use sea water? Because I **really** don't want to do that to my hair if I can help it."

"Oh, no, nothing like that. We have plenty of water for cooking, cleaning and drinking. The ship pumped in a fresh load before it left yesterday. Just go on down to the showers and do what ya gotta do," he explained.

"Terrific. What's the policy on travel? I mean, is there a locker room to change in, or do I go back and forth in a robe?"

Luke scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, I guess that depends on how modest you are. Sure won't nobody mind if you want to show up with just the robe, so you can step into a stall before you take it off, an' don't have to dress and undress in public. However, I gotta warn ya, there's been robe snatching known to happen, 'specially with the new guys."

"Great. Locker room it is."

"You'll find the towels an' soap an' hair stuff there."

"Thanks. Brought my own."

"Oh. Okay, but be sure to take 'em back and forth with you if you don't want 'em to get used up. Some guys aren't too swift about asking permission."

"After what that stuff cost me? **They'd** be swimming home." Blair had bought his soap, shampoo, and conditioner at a special salon store. They had no artificial ingredients, no coloring, and only natural herbal scents.

He went back to his room and gathered his supplies, getting fresh clothes while he was at it. He sniffed a lock of his hair as he walked to the showers. *Mph. That bacon smell do linger about one.*

He arrived at a good time, there was only one crew member showering, and another just lacing up his boots. The night crew had apparently done their ablutions, and moved on to bed or recreation. When the other crewman left, Blair stripped quickly, dumping his clothes in a locker, and wrapping a towel around his waist. Then he padded over to the shower stalls with his supplies.

He eyed the showers without great enthusiasm. Privacy stalls, they'd said. Well, there was precious little privacy with these babies. They were partial, only coming up to... Well, for Blair it was up around his shoulders. For a tall man, it would be more about, say, nipple height. You had a clear view of the upper portion of anyone showering. And he was getting a clear view right now of a very **nice** set of bare male shoulders.

Oh-kay. Blair looked down at his crotch briefly, and had a quick conversation with his genitals. Look, guys, I know you're lonely, but no waving, okay? Don't embarrass me, or you two at the bottom may end up trying to crawl back inside. The North Sea is awful cold this year, and he may send us for a sea water bath if ya get too... mmm... outgoing. Just behave, and, when we get back to the room, we'll have a party with that nice magazine I got onshore. You know, the one with the 'cop' in it?

He shouldn't have said that. 'Little Blair' (or, as he liked to think of it, 'Not-So-Little Blair' expressed interest.

Blair, unsure of what protocol was in a situation like this, went into the stall next to the other man, figuring it was better not too look **too** skittish. He turned the taps on, getting a nice, hot spray, and stepped under the water, groaning with relief.

"Sore?"

Shit. Ellison. Damn, that man is everywhere "Yeah. I had no idea that being a cook could include so much grunt work."

"It's **all** grunt work out here, unless you're the company man. Even then, it has its moments."

Blair had taken a wash cloth from a shelf in the open area, and he quickly began to work the bar of soap in it. Looked like he wouldn't be able to enjoy a leisurely shower after all. With Hot Stuff in the next stall, he couldn't risk it, or else he'd end up having to switch over to cold water.

He was scrubbing industriously when he noticed that Ellison... Well, yeah, he **shouldn't** have been paying enough attention to notice, but he **did**. Ellison didn't seem to be scrubbing as much as he was **scratching**. And he had a miserable look on his face. Unable to resist, Blair dared a quick peek over the edge of the barrier.

"**Jesus**, man!" The buff torso and brawny arms were streaked with angry looking pink welts from his nails. "**Stop** that! Are you trying to skin yourself?"

Jim stopped, but his fingers twitched in an obvious desire to continue. "I can't help it. I think this soap irritates my skin."

"Here, try this." Blair passed the bar over to him. "That's all natural, and it has aloe in it. Good for itch." Jim lathered up, and started to smooth it over his body. Immediately the tense, miserable look fled, replaced by almost dreamy pleasure. *Mm. He looks good like that.*

Quick look at his own crotch. *No! Down! He doesn't play, remember?*

"This is fantastic. Can I buy it from you?"

"No, but you can have it. I brought two, and I won't use mine up before I get some time off."

"Okay. Don't mind if I do."

Blair wet his hair and prepared to wash it, then hesitated. "Hey, man, do you have problems, too, with the industrial goop they give you for your hair?"

"Do I? It's worse than the soap. I've been washing my hair with bar soap to avoid it."

"Shit! You can't do **that!** Here, hold out your hand." Jim did, and Blair squirted a dab of shampoo into his palm. "Try that." Jim worked the soap into his scalp, and almost purred with pleasure. "Nice, huh? I have conditioner when you need it. Just let me know whenever you're gonna do the clean thing, and I'll fix you up."

"**This** I gotta pay you for."

"Nah. It's not like you'll be using all that much, the little bit of fur you have."

"How kind of you to notice." His tone was dry.

"No, it looks good on you. You're not the long and flowing type. And I dig the high forehead."

"You're the master of the backhanded compliment, Sandburg."

"Don't take it wrong, man. You look great."



"Um. Thanks."

Blair washed his hair quickly, deciding he could go without conditioner this time. This kind wasn't supposed to build up on the hair, but you never knew. When he emerged from the shower, still slightly damp despite a toweling, Ellison was almost dressed. Blair had a towel wrapped around his waist, riding low on his hips. Jim seemed to be fascinated by the line of hair that ran from his belly button under the towel, where it eventually merged with his pubic hair.

Blair regarded him as he toweled his hair. Ellison was starting to get that blank look on his face again, the same one he'd had in Blair's cabin. "Ellison?" he said quietly. No response. Blair went to him slowly, and touched his arm. "Jim? Can you hear me?" A slow blink was his only response. "You've gone somewhere, haven't you? Come back, man. Listen to me, and follow my voice back."

He didn't know why he did it. The situation was a little creepy, and his first instinct had been to just grab his stuff and run to his room, risking a towel snatching along the way. But... The big guy seemed so... helpless. Blair kept talking to him softly. He wasn't really sure what he was doing, he was working on instinct.

It seemed to work. Slowly the pupils that had become dilated focused again. Ellison shook his head, dazed but once again in the real world. Blair pushed him gently down on a bench, sitting beside him. "What **was** that?"

"I don't know." His voice sounded lost. "It hasn't been that bad before. It's getting worse."

"Are you, like, epileptic, or something?" Blair had a feeling that there was probably some sort of policy about hiring epileptics on a job like

this. If they were pissing in their pants over a cook having steel toed boots for the insurance's sake, they probably wouldn't want anyone on hazardous duty who might drop off the edge of reality unexpectedly.

Jim shook his head wearily. "No, I've been tested." His eyes rolled toward the ceiling briefly. "**God**, have I been tested. They just don't **know**." He looked at Blair anxiously. "Look, don't tell anybody about this, will you? I can keep it under control. It doesn't happen when I work. It's more when it's quiet, and I concentrate too hard on something."

Blair frowned. "I don't know. If you're sick..."

"I'm not **sick**. I... just get lost sometimes, and need someone to pull me back a little. I'm okay, really."

"Well... If it gets any worse, you gotta **promise** me to do something about it, 'kay?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And if you need any help, I'm here, right? I mean, I've brought you out of it twice, haven't I?"

"You've **caused** it twice."

Blair sat back. "Not my fault."

"No, it isn't." There was a gym bag on the bench. Jim pulled out a small, but powerful looking blow drier. "Wanna borrow this? I don't know why I bothered to bring it with my little pelt. I can almost wipe it dry."

"Hey, thanks! This mess takes ages to dry on it's own." Blair plugged the drier in an outlet by one of the sinks and went to work. His hair dried quickly with the heated air. He finished it off by bending over, letting his hair fall in a cascade before him, and playing the hot stream over the back and along the neckline. Finally, he clicked off the machine and stood up, tossing his head so that the hair flew back in a shining wave to spill halfway down his back.

Ellison wasn't zoning, but he was staring again. Blair handed him the drier. "Thanks." He dressed quickly, turning his back to Ellison till he got his pants on. "See ya in the mess at midnight, I guess." he said, heading for the door.

"Yeah..."

Part Six, Need

Blair strolled out of the locker room, but once he got out of sight, he put on some speed. Not-So-Little Blair was starting to make a fuss. He was irritated that there had been all that nice beefcake right there within reach, and he couldn't have a taste. Not-So-Little Blair needed some serious play time.

In his room, Blair dumped his things on the dresser and ripped his shirt off. He dug in one of the wall drawers and came up with one of the magazines he'd bought on shore. This one had a spread featuring a big, seriously ripped dude with short, dark hair //almost// wearing a 'police uniform'.

Blair settled himself comfortably on the bed, propping himself up at a good angle on his pillow, and opened to the pictures he'd been thinking about. "Oh, yeah." **Very** nice. Still a little young for Blair's tastes, not more than, say, twenty-five, but still choice. He started with the photographs that showed him fully clad. "Lookin' sharp, m'man. **Love** those uniforms." Then the clothing disappeared, a piece at a time. Blair reached down with the hand that wasn't holding the magazine, and lightly rubbed his crotch. As his eyes wandered over the male beauty spread out in the glossy photos, he started to harden.

Soon his erection was pressing almost uncomfortably against his fly. Wanting to tease himself a little, he didn't open his pants right away. Instead, he eased a hand down his waistband. His fingertips found the slick wetness of his cock head, and he pinched himself lightly, groaning with pleasure. He managed to flip to the centerfold one-handed while he skimmed his fingers around his thickening shaft.

"Oh, damn. They left the gun belt and nightstick. And just **look** what he's doing with the nightstick!" This definitely called for a firmer grip on the situation, and he quickly opened his jeans and pulled out his rigid staff. But when he looked at the centerfold again...

*Dammit, he's just too *bland*. He needs a rougher edge. Kinda like... Oh, yeah. Ellison. Perfect.* Blair closed his eyes and pictured the big man with the ice blue eyes. He wished he'd dared to take a really close look at the guy's body while he'd had the chance, but he had enough to fuel some fantasies.

Blair stroked himself slowly, imagining Jim pushing him back on the bed and crawling over him. *I top*, he'd said. "Becha do, Big Guy." Blair breathed, his hand working faster.



There was a knock on the door.

Blair froze, eyes flashing open, hand stilling. "What the **fuck?**" Maybe they would go away. He lay there for a moment, dick in hand, and the banging came again, more insistent this time. "Shit!"

Much as he wished to ignore it, it could be Simon with something important, so he stuffed himself back into his pants and pulled up the zipper, with difficulty. Getting off the bed, he went and jerked the door open. "**What?!◆**"

Jim Ellison was standing in the hall. "Oh, Christ! What do **you** want? I'm kinda in the middle of something here, Ellison..." His voice trailed off.

Jim was looking weird again, but in a different way. Now he didn't look blank, or vacant. He looked **intent**. His nostrils were flaring, and his eyes were like lasers. They took in the magazine Blair still had clutched in one hand, then bounced to the prominent bulge at his fly, and up to the stiff points of his nipples, peaking through his chest hair. Finally they came to rest on his face. "I can see that." He put his hands on Blair's shoulders, and pushed him back into the cabin, entering after him and kicking the door shut.

Jim then took the magazine away from Blair and tossed it to the floor. "You don't need that."

Blair found that he was breathing hard, and his prick had somehow managed to get even stiffer. "You weren't asked, man."

Again Ellison gripped his shoulders. This time he pulled Blair against his body. Blair felt a warm, solid nudge against his lower belly. Ellison was looking down at him. "Ask me," he demanded.

Blair looked up at him through his lashes, and moistened his lips, seeing the way Jim's eyes followed the passage of his tongue. He grinned slowly, slyly. "Ya wanna?"

"Hell, yes!" Ellison's mouth came down on his so quickly that he barely had time to part his lips. He instantly got a mouthful of hot, wet, aggressive tongue. It was heaven.

In under three seconds the roughneck had him moaning out loud. Ellison's hands slid down from his shoulders to knead at his chest. Slightly callused fingers lightly pinched one nipple, while the ring in the other was gently tugged. Blair jerked his head back, saying breathlessly, "Shit, you work fast!"

"I'm only fast when it suits me," Jim murmured. One hand slid down Blair's abdomen and settled on his fly, while the other skimmed around and slipped down his waistband in back. "When it counts, I can be **real** slow."

Blair clutched at him as a finger delved into the crack of his ass, sliding up and down the crease. "I'm not sure I'm gonna want slow," he gasped. "I'm not sure I can **wait** for slow."

"We can do slow next time." There was a pop as Jim unsnapped Blair's jeans, then the faint rasp of his zipper being lowered. A warm hand slipped inside the gap, and Blair closed his eyes as Jim found his arousal. "Hey." His tone was pleased. "No underwear?"

"You noticed." Although his mind was already starting to dissolve in a delicious sexual haze, something was troubling Blair. Being an

academic had it's curse. Sometimes he just **had** to know... "How did you know?"

"Know what?" Ellison licked a path up his neck, nuzzling his ear.

"This. How'd you know I wanted this? And I don't mean just from remembering the book shop. You came to my room at a specific time, exactly when I was at my horniest. You **knew**. **How** did you know?"

Blair dissolved into a whimper as Jim sucked his earlobe, then nipped it. "Can't that wait? I'm kind of busy here to play twenty questions."

"No." Summoning will power he didn't believe he had, and he **knew** would last only if he could keep Ellison's hands off his body, Blair pulled away. "Tell me, or we both die of blue balls."

Ellison sighed. "You're gonna be a bossy bottom, aren't you?" Blair shrugged. "Alright, Einstein. If you must know, I smelled you."

"Hey!" Blair was indignant. "Man, I **just** showered. You're a witness, you saw."

"Right, and nearly went blind from staring. But not like that. Not BO. Pheromones." Blair's forehead puckered. *Damn, he's cute when he's puzzled*, Jim thought.

"Pheromones? But those are hormonal secretions."

"Arousal scents. You smelled like sex." He leaned toward Blair breathing deeply. He almost quivered, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. "It's coming off you in waves, Chief. I could probably come just standing here, smelling you. But I'd rather fuck you."

"I'm doable."

This time Blair didn't have to fantasize about Jim Ellison pushing him down on his bed; he had the real thing. When he was on the bed, Jim pulled Blair's jeans the rest of the way off, leaving him naked. Then he started on his own clothes.

Blair suddenly winced. "Shit! What about protection?" Jim silently slipped a foil pack out of his pocket and flipped it to the younger man. As he tore it open, Blair said, "Ex Boy Scout, huh?"

"Ex Ranger."

The man was quick. He was already minus shirt, and working on those damn boots. "What do we do for lube, oh Prepared One?"

Jim skinned off his pants and underwear in one move. He moved to the bed, grabbed Blair's legs, and pushed them up and open, lying on the mattress between them. "Nature provides."

"Oh, geez." Blair fell back, stunned, as Jim bent, spread his ass cheeks, and began to rim him. That had happened only once before, and it had taken a solid hour of begging, and fellatio till his jaw was numb to get the guy to apply a few reluctant licks. Jim went at it like he was a gourmet, and Blair was a particularly fine morsel of haute cuisine.

Blair twitched as the sensual wetness bathed the little pucker, over and over. He could feel himself starting to relax, the muscles softening. Then Jim pushed, and he got the incredible sensation of that talented tongue penetrating his ass. He couldn't help it. He bucked, hoping vaguely that he wasn't going to break his nose or anything. It was alright, though. He heard a muffled laugh. *Oh, damn, what a sensation!* and the probe came again.

When Jim had tongue fucked him to his satisfaction, Blair was beyond ready. Jim finally came up for air. "Gimme the rubber," he grated. Blair, hand trembling, handed him the rubber circlet, and watched avidly as he smoothed it down over his straining erection.

*Maybe I should ask him to open me a little more. That is one **big** chunk of beef.*

He didn't need to worry. Jim slapped the outside of his thigh and said, "Get 'em up." Blair quickly lifted his legs, arranging them over Jim's shoulders. Ellison moved a little closer, spat in his hand, and rubbed it into the crease of Blair's ass. Blair felt one thick, slick finger slip smoothly into his ass, and put his head back, closing his eyes.

He felt it move inside him a few times, then it was joined by a second finger, increasing his sense of fullness. He heard Jim rumble, "You look good like that." The fingers spread, then crooked, and pushed, and glided across his prostate. Blair gasped at the sudden burst of hot pleasure, hips arching. Again there was a low, purring laugh, and Ellison did it again. "Yeah, that's nice, isn't it? You like that. But I can do better."

He shifted, fingers sliding out, and Blair felt the hot nudge of latex covered flesh against the spread opening. His eyes flew open, going to the face looming over him. He wanted to see Ellison's eyes as he slid inside him for the first time.

Ellison stared into the eyes of the man spread open beneath him. The generosity and openness of the younger man was almost humbling. After Jim had rejected him in such an off-hand manner, he was now willing to share this pleasure with him. Jim wanted to make it good for Blair. He deserved it.

He moved slowly, starting to sink into the tight clasp of his lover's body. Blair whined in approval as the thick member eased up inside him,

stretching muscles that hadn't been used for awhile. Jim kept going, feeling the smaller man's body seem to form itself around him. At last he was buried full length in the hot, clinging depths, and he paused there.

The sheer ecstasy of the feeling washed over him. His vision started to grey, and he thought, *NO! God, not now!*

But strong hands gripped his, and a calm voice said, "No, you don't. Listen to me, Jim. Feel me. You're inside me now, I'm all around you. You should be able to feel my pulse. Can you feel it?" He did. It was a hot, sweet, steady throb. "Concentrate on that, man. Concentrate on my heartbeat, follow it back. Be with me."

His vision cleared, the world returned, and he was looking into Blair Sandburg's flushed face. When he saw that clarity had return to Jim Ellison, Blair squeezed his hand in relief. "You were zoning again."

"It was just too much, Chief. You feel too good."

"I know I'm good, but that's the first time I've ever been accused of knocking someone senseless. Are you gonna be alright?"

"I'm gonna be better than all right." Jim moved, pulling back and pushing back in with one smooth motion.

Blair's head rolled on the pillow as Jim's glans nudged over his prostate, "Oh, yeah," he whispered.

Despite both their expectations, this time it **was** slow, and gentle, and very, very satisfying for both of them. They found a rhythm that suited them both and moved together. Blair's hips made small thrusts up, seeking that little bit extra of the hard flesh that filled him so well. Jim slid inside him with an ease and sense of completeness he hadn't found in any other partner. It was very new, but somehow it was sweetly familiar. *We fit*, Jim thought.

As the dance sped up, becoming more forceful, Blair reached over his head and grabbed the bar that ran across the headboard, hanging on as his new lover began to pound into him. He grunted softly with each lunge, feeling at once both vulnerable and powerful. Jim *Bless 'im for a thoughtful bastard* reached between them, took Blair's weeping cock in his hands, and began to jerk him off, his touch firm.

Even though Blair had a head start, Jim came first. He stiffened over Blair, his lips pulled back from his teeth in what looked like a snarl. Even through the shielding of latex, Blair felt the heated throb of his semen as it jetted. He bore down with his internal muscles very deliberately, milking at the embedded prick. Jim moaned as the rippling sensation coaxed the last few drops of sperm from him.

Blair never would have thought anyone that big could be so limber, but Jim bent and, softening cock still in the clasp of Blair's body, lowered his mouth onto the smaller man's erection. Blair cried out at the sudden combination of pleasures. He'd never expected to experience both of his favorite types of sex at the same time unless he made it into a trio, and certainly not at the hands of one man. Jim Ellison was special, alright.

As he shot a geyser of hot spunk into the welcoming mouth, Blair thought dazedly, *If we move to Hawaii, we can get married. Same sex marriages are legal there.*

Part Seven, Discovery

Blair yawned, and reached sleepily for the man who should be lying beside him. No one there. He frowned, eyes still closed. "Ah, shit." He wasn't expecting extended cuddling and good-morning (or in this case, good-evening) kisses, but it **did** hurt a little that he'd slipped off without even a thank you.

"Over here, Chief." Sandburg opened his eyes to find Jim Ellison, fully dressed, sitting in the chair at his desk, watching him. Blair regarded him silently for a moment, feeling unaccountably shy. *The guy practically turned me inside out, now I turn into a thirteen-year-old girl with a crush.* At last he managed, "Hi."

Ellison smiled. "Hi yourself. It's almost seven. If you want anything but scraps, you'd better get up and come with me to dinner."

"Oh, yeah. Gotcha." Blair sat up, raking his hair out of his eyes. "It was gonna be meatloaf for lunch, but I... Um, I kinda got... sidetracked."

Ellison's smile was wicked. "Me, I had sausage."

Blair threw the pillow at him, laughing. "You are **bad**, man." He stood up, stretching luxuriously. He had the heavy, languid feeling that could be caused only by either an extremely long soak in a hot bath, or LOTS of good sex. "No, I mean you're GOOD. REAL good."

"You, too." Jim reached out, grabbing his hip, and pulled him down onto his lap.

Blair snuggled closer, throwing an arm around his neck. "We gotta go eat."

"Yeah." Jim's hand slid along the inside of his thigh, and Blair parted his legs.

"Really, all I had was a freakin' muffin. I'm starved."

"Uh huh." Jim had reached his crotch. One big hand enclosed Blair's soft cock, squeezing gently.

Blair sighed, and reluctantly pulled the groping hand away. "I'm serious, man. Later, huh? Neither one of us is going anywhere. Anyway, I want to eat fast and see if I can scrounge an hour on the computer before I start supper."

"Oh, all right." Jim let him stand up and watched as he pulled on fresh jeans and sweatshirt. "You think you might find a few minutes to spare around supper break for a horny old man?"

Blair paused in lacing on his boots to grin up at him. "Changed your mind about knee tremblers?"

"I like 'em, just not as a steady diet."

Blair felt more cheerful than he had in quite a while as he walked down to the dining room with Jim. He hated eating alone, there'd been too damn much of that in school. He'd **always** been the youngest in his class, and no one wanted to eat with 'the baby.'

It hadn't improved when he got to college. In fact, it had been worse. He couldn't count the number of times he'd been in some college hangout, sitting alone with a book and his food, watching couples and trios all around him, happily chattering away. Now he had someone to sit with. It was great to feel like he belonged somewhere, with someone.

Dinner turned out to be a choice of pork chops or baked cod. Jim had the chops, Blair had the fish. Jim scraped every last trace of gravy off his chops before starting on them. "I never would have pegged you as a fussy eater," Blair said.

"The gravy is kind of... intense. Simon's doing his Cajun bit tonight, and that means a lot of spice."

"Mm. The taste thing?"

Jim sighed. "Yeah. There are times I end up going a little hungry because I just don't want to go through it. If I manage to eat, my stomach rebels, and I lose it anyway."

"Bummer." As he watched Jim worry a scrap of meat off a bone, Blair observed, "You're something of a carnivore, aren't you?"

Ellison shrugged. "I went through a period where I had to eat a lot of roots and fruit, not much meat. I learned to appreciate it."

"So, what were you doing? Changing your diet to try and help with your allergies?"

"I don't **have** allergies."

"What about the soap and shampoo?"

He frowned. "I've been tested, no actual allergies. I'm just **sensitive** to some things."

"So why were you on a restricted diet?"

"It wasn't from choice. I just didn't have much access to meat. Game was scarce, we had to hunt it down, and it had to be shared."

Blair sat back, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I just can't picture you in a commune. A wilderness survival camp, maybe."

"It was survival, all right."

He didn't say anything else, drawing patterns with his fork in the last of the gravy on his plate. At last Blair said, "Want to talk about it?"

"Not really." He pushed his chair back and stood up. Seeing the hurt look on Blair's face, he said more gently, "It's not you. I just don't talk about it much and there's no time to go into it. Let me think about it, okay? Maybe after this shift. That is... if you want to get together again?" He wasn't pushing, and he wasn't begging, but there was a hopeful tone in his voice.

Blair tipped his head back, gazing up at him with a mock-stern expression. "Don't **make** me come lookin' for you, man."

Ellison smiled, leaning over him. His voice so low that only Blair could hear, he muttered, "Take some vitamins, Chief. I'm gonna wear you out in the next couple of days."

Blair's heart sped up as he watched the smooth flex of Jim's flanks as he left the room. "Fuck. Where can I get my hands on some B-12 and E?"

After dumping his scraps and stacking his plate in the dish bin (a lot of the men just left them on the table, making the kitchen assistants' work that much harder), Blair headed to the recreation room. Luck was with him, and the computer was free. He read the instructions, and got onto the Internet, then sat there and thought for a moment.

He had intended to research recipes, but he could always do that. Something was nagging at him and, when it came to curiosity, a cat had **nothing** on a Sandburg. What **was** it? Something about Jim and his sensitivities.

No, his **senses**. That was it. He was showing symptoms of highly developed senses. That bit about being able to smell the pheromones, the unusual tenderness of his skin, the way he seemed to sort of read Blair's mind... Blair had decided that wasn't any sort of psychic ability, but

some very finely tuned hearing and sight. And these 'zones.' Blair knew that it was possible to go into a trance state from sensory **deprivation**. He'd spent some time in a salt-water sensory deprivation tank himself, earning money in a research lab. Couldn't the exact opposite of deprivation, overloading, produce something of the same effect? It was logical. The brain would just sort of shut down in self-defense.

And this is leading where, Sandburg? It meant something, he was sure of it. He'd run across something pertaining to this in his studies, if he could just pinpoint it. Something about heightened senses, and guardians, and... English actors?

He frowned. *Where the hell did that come from?*

"Sandburg, **use** the damn thing or get off it and let me on. I think they updated 'Satan's Sluts' last night."

Blair glowered at the roustabout standing behind him impatiently. "I got an hour, okay? Read the sign." Still, he figured he'd better show **some** activity.

Okay, British actors. I'll see if something jogs my memory. He started searching on every British actor he could think of. Anthony Hopkins, Lawrence Olivier, Michael Caine, Alec Guinness, David Niven, Rupert Everett *Yum yum yum...* Lots of entries, nothing even remotely familiar.

Wait a minute. Richard Burton. Search. There were lots and lots of sites, nothing that seemed to apply, though. *I'm almost sure it was Richard Burton. Did he play a scientist in something, or what? I guess I need to narrow the search.* He tried 'anthropology/Richard Burton'. This time a handful of references came up on the screen. He looked at the first one, and suddenly his mouth went dry, and he felt light headed.

Sir Richard Burton and His Theories on The Sentinel and Guide in Ancient Cultures. It all flooded back to him. How could he have forgotten that? It had fascinated him when it was presented in one of his advanced classes. He had spent hours researching it in the library, even getting to read a first edition copy of Burton's book.

He remembered thinking what a magnificent concept it was, and wishing it could actually be true. Sentinels: rare individuals born with the ability to use their natural senses in a far greater capacity than ordinary men. Guides: shamans and spiritual advisors who helped the Sentinels develop, control, and use the gifts that might otherwise overwhelm them. Together the pairs protected their tribe, patrolling the perimeters. They warned of approaching enemies, monitored the environment, searched out food and game that might otherwise be difficult to locate. They were, in short, the guardians of their people.

Many of the class had snickered at that, feeling it was a hopelessly outdated concept. But it had touched something deep inside Blair. There was something of a knight-errant hidden by the new-age, post-hippie persona he presented to the world.

Blair hadn't been this excited since... Well... He blushed. Since that second he had Jim's cock in his ass and Jim's mouth on his cock, actually. *Different kinda 'excited', Blair.* He thought. Another part of him replied, *Yeah, then why are your nipples hard?*

"Sandburg."

"All right, all ready." He selected 'Print All', and the printer beside the machine started chattering. Looking at his watch, he jumped up. "Crap, I gotta go start supper. Look, just let that print, then put it aside for me, 'kay?" The crewman grumbled, but Blair was pretty sure he'd do it. People usually had enough sense not to mess with someone who handled their food.

Luke was waiting for him when he breezed in, wrapping his hair into the net. As he started to wash his hands, Luke said, "Rafe checked your menu. He wasn't sure if you meant bread or cornbread stuffing, so he made enough for both. If you use bread, the cornbread can be reheated at lunch to go with pinto beans, if you go cornbread, the bread can be used for pudding."

Blair considered, drying his hands. "Ya know what, Luke? I'm felling kinda festive right now. I think I'll make **both**. Give the guys a choice."

"Oh, they'll like that," Luke agreed.

They worked steadily. It would have been prettier if the chickens were whole, and he could have stuffed them, but putting the stuffing in the pans and baking the chicken parts on top was a lot neater, and a lot less time consuming.

Blair was shaking his seasoning canisters over a bowl of cornbread stuffing, when a thought occurred to him. He set aside a couple of portions of the bread stuffing, and worked on them separately. Avoiding the more pungent spices, he used a lighter touch, concentrating on the fresh herbs that he discovered Simon had growing in a tiny planter under an ultra-violet light.

Luke, coring, seeding and chopping pepper and onions, watched curiously. "Making somethin' special for yourself?"

"No. I found out that one of the guys has... uh... certain food sensitivities. I thought I'd try to do a little something for him."

"That's nice of ya. Everybody on a rig wants to be a cook's pet."

Blair laughed. "I don't know about **him** being **my** pet. It would be kinda like treating a panther like a pussycat."

The food was ready right on time, and the serving went smoothly. Blair saw with satisfaction that he was in no danger of running out of anything, but that there wouldn't be great, honking tubs of leftovers, either. *I think I'm gonna make it on this, as long as I pay attention and don't get slack.*

Jim Ellison came into the mess. His eyes zeroed in on Blair, and he licked his lips. *That is if I'm not happily fucked to death.*

Jim joined the line. He saw Blair whisper something to Luke, and felt just the tiniest twinge of something. Irritation? Why would he be irritated because his new bed partner was whispering to his assistant, those luscious lips almost brushing the boy's ear, warm breath fanning him...

Ellison stood up straighter abruptly. *Jealous?! I'm fucking jealous of a guy I've known less than two days and fucked just once?* He watched as Luke chuckled, and they both glanced at him. He felt the scowl forming on his face. *Yeah, I'm jealous. And I'm gonna have to have a talk with the Professor before I go back on the floor. I was hoping to get a quick one, but I think this ought to be settled first.*

Blair slipped back into the galley as he neared the front of the line. He'd just picked up his tray when Blair came back out, carrying a couple of small dishes. "All right, Ellison, you can pick whatever you want, but I want you to try these for me." He set a bowl of dressing and a plate containing a breast and a drumstick on his tray.

Jim looked at them blankly, then looked up at him. "I fiddled with the seasoning for you, man. You should be able to stomach them without your belly pitching a fit, but you don't have to feel like you're on a bland diet."

"You fixed this special for me?"

He beamed. "No trouble."

"Ay!" The man behind Jim was the pastry-snatcher of this morning. "You mean he gets special grub? What da hell's so special 'bout **him**?"

"Well, for one thing, he eats his danishes in more than two bites. For the other, you wouldn't believe me if I told you." He looked at Luke. "Can you handle the rest of the line?"

"Sure, go take a break."

"I'll help you clean up when they're gone."

"No, ya won't. What did Simon tell ya 'bout that? I can handle it. You rest up and decide what you're gonna do for breakfast. Simon didn't leave any pizza this time."

"I know. Jim, go sit, and I'll be with you when I get a plate."

Puzzled, Jim went and sat down. He poked experimentally at the dressing in front of him. It didn't **look** any different from the other. As usual when he came in the mess, he'd been trying to damp down his sense of smell. Now he opened himself to it cautiously.

Sage, turmeric, garlic, onion... but all subtle instead of overwhelming. His mouth filled with saliva. It had been a long time since food had been anything except a fuel for his body and a chore to get down.

Blair came over with his plate and sat beside him. "Well?" Jim took a small mouthful. Blair watched him, trying not to look anxious. Ellison just sat there for a moment, holding the food in his mouth. *Shit*, Blair thought sadly. *He's gonna spit it into his napkin.*

Instead, Jim started to chew rapidly. Then he began shoveling the rest of the dressing down his gullet in a manner never approved by Emily Post. Blair felt relief wash over him. "So it doesn't suck?"

Jim leaned close and said quietly, "Ya know, Chief, you should find another term to use for rotten. I happen to think that sucking is one of the most pleasant experiences on earth. In that spirit, this comes very close to sucking. I could have handled about another pint of it."

Blair slumped happily. "Try the chicken. I marinated it instead of loading it with salt and pepper." Jim tore into it. "How is it? Or do I need to ask? Damn, are you gonna leave the **bones**?"

Jim licked his fingers. "Tender and juicy." Again he leaned close. "Just like the cook."

Blair blushed, murmuring. "Man, you aren't as far in the closet as you seem to think you are."

"Blair, back in line, was this what you were talking to Luke about?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just suddenly find myself with more free time than I anticipated."

Blair swallowed a bite of chicken and regarded him, eyebrows raised. "Mhm. Did you have any plans on how to spend this free time?"

Jim gave him a sultry glance. "I thought you might have a suggestion."

Blair continued eating. "Actually, I do. But it may not be quite what you're picturing."

"Hey, I'm flexible."

"I noticed that." Blair finished his meal quickly. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Jim put away their plates and sat back, spending a few happy moments considering what Blair could have planned. He wasn't expecting the thick sheaf of computer printout that thumped down in front of him. He stared at it, then looked up at an eager Blair. "Chief, if this isn't porn, I'm going to be very disappointed."

"Later. I'll read you excerpts from 'Skin Star Studs' complete with scene re-enactments if you want, but read this now."

"What is it?"

"I think it's the key to what's going on with you."

Jim sighed. "Look, Blair, I know you mean well, but I was in and out of hospitals for months. I've had tests I couldn't even pronounce, much less understand. I've had every fluid, and I mean **every** fluid I could produce analyzed and quantified. By the way, it turns out I have a lot of protein in my sperm..."

"I'll have to remember that if I get low blood sugar."

"Stop it. The thing is, it isn't likely that this is going to be any more help than all that was."

"But it **might**. Isn't it worth looking to find out?"

Jim turned a couple of pages. "I don't think I'm going to be able to digest this any easier than I could the Cajun gravy."

"Just try, okay? I read it in college, and I really think it has something to say about your condition. I think it's the solution."

"You think it can cure me?"

Blair shook his head. "No, you're thinking about this wrong. This is how you are, it isn't some sort of disease or malfunction to be cured or fixed. You need to learn to deal with it, live with it."

"That's what I've been doing."

"But not with much success, huh?" Jim was silent. "You haven't been controlling it; **it's** been controlling **you**. And it doesn't have to be that way."

Jim picked up the stack of paper and considered it. "You really think so?" His tone was almost wistful.

"Yeah. I do."

Jim looked at his watch. "I have to go back on the floor. I'll try to look at it when I get off." He cut a glance at Blair. "**If** you promise to try some of my own personal recipe for sausage stuffing later on."

Blair almost choked on the sip of water he'd been taking. "That," he declared, "sounds tasty."

Part Eight, Connection

Blair was stirring a fragrantly bubbling pot when Jim came into the galley a few hours later. He looked up in surprise. "Hey."

"Hey." Jim went to pour himself a cup of coffee, nodding a greeting to Luke, who was once again denuding potatoes.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but shouldn't you be out there on the floor, doing manly things with manly men?"

"The Good Lord, in his infinite wisdom, decided it was time for the fucking chain to break. We lost a part down the shaft. Luckily no one got hit by popped links. Those things are like .45 slugs."

Luke looked up with interest. "They called for the boat yet?"

"Just now." He explained to Blair. "They have to send out special equipment to fish out the part. The boat will be here right around shift's end, but God knows how long it will take them to get it up, and we can't do anything till then."

"So, what, you guys just sit on your duffs and get paid? That doesn't sound like corporate America to me." Using a disposable plastic spoon, he sampled the concoction, then shook in a touch of garlic powder.

Both of the other men gave him disbelieving stares. Jim said, "Hell, no! Sunnline will get it's money's worth. We'll take care of all the cleaning, painting, and maintenance while we're down. They'll find **something** for us to do, believe me."

Luke nodded. "We were down a solid week on one of my gigs. The company man ended up having us go down and scrape barnacles offa the pilings to keep busy. God, we **loved** him."

"So, Chief, you better make sure you have plenty of chow made up. We'll have the crew of the boat to feed from breakfast to whenever, and when the guys on the platform get bored, they eat."

"More than they do **normally**? Crap. It's a wonder this thing doesn't sink with the poundage."

"Yeah, weight gain is a problem in this line of work."

Walking over to get a cup of coffee himself, Blair patted Ellison's flat belly. "You don't seem to have a problem with that."

Jim bumped a hip into Blair as he passed, "High metabolism."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't," he agreed. But Blair tilted his head at Luke, who quickly bent over his task, vegetable peeler flashing. Luke, not looking up, mumbled. "It's all right."

Ellison, suddenly realizing he'd been being indiscrete, said, "What's all right, kid?"

A blush was rising in Luke's cheeks. "If you two are together. I... um... Well, my hometown honey is named Bart." The two older men exchanged looks, then burst out laughing. Luke peeked up at them, smiling shyly. "Since I was fourteen, okay?"

Jim shook his head. "You're an early bloomer, Luke."

Blair nodded agreement. "Yeah. Took me till I was seventeen to catch the clue bus."

Jim sighed. "Okay, I'm the socially retarded one around here. I didn't know... I didn't **admit** it to myself till I was past twenty."

"Yeah, but you seem to be making up for lost time." That earned Blair another swat on the behind.

Jim took over peeling potatoes and sent Luke out to begin setting up the cold foods. As he guided the peeler over the spud, a brown spiral curling away from the blade, he said, "Look, Chief, I'm not stupid, but that dictionary you gave me would take a while to wade through. Couldn't you, like, give me the Reader's Digest condensed version for right now? I promise to try to read it all later."

So, as he put together the shrimp curry that would be the second entree, Blair explained to Jim about Sentinels and Guides. Simon would later wonder how curry got on the ceiling, but he had never witnessed Blair Sandburg talk when he was really wound up, and the spoon had just been too handy for making points.

As Blair went on about spirit guides and shamans, sacred duties and heightened senses, Jim Ellison got even quieter, which hardly seemed possible. At last, seeing the stiff look on his lover's face, Blair ground to a halt. "You don't believe me."

Jim sliced a last round of potato into the bowl and carried it over to the stove, dumping the contents into a pot of salted water. As he turned on the burner, he said, "Just the opposite, Chief. I believe every word you've said."

This took Blair aback. He had expected resistance to the idea. "You do?" Jim nodded. Eyes narrowing, Blair asked, "Why? I love the idea, but even I admit it's pretty farfetched."

"Personal experience. Can you sit down for a minute?"

Blair checked the rice, stirred the curry again and turned down the flame, then sat beside Jim. "Talk to me."

Jim wasn't looking at him. He was studying his hands where they were folded on the table, studying them intently. Fearing another zone, Blair reached out and covered Jim's hands with his own. "Whatever it is, you can tell me, man. It's safe with me."

Jim's eyes flicked up to his face. "You know, anyone else, I'd have just smirked when they said that. But you..." He shrugged, and took a deep breath. "I told you I was an ex-Ranger. I meant I was in Special Ops."

Blair sat back a little, surprised. "No shit?" It was almost a squeak. "I thought you were, like, a Smokey the Bear. You know, Forestry service, only you can prevent fires, or something."

"Disappointed?"

"Hell, no! Army is way sexier. Do you still have your uniform?" His tone was very interested.

Jim smiled. "We can discuss role playing later, Sandburg. The thing is, I was in Special Ops, and a mission I was on went bad. It's still classified, so I can't give you any details. I **can** tell you that the rest of my men were killed, and I was presumed lost. I spent eighteen months

in the jungles of Peru."

Blair whistled softly. "Oh, man. Survival camp on steroids and PCP."

"Interesting way of putting it, but it **was** pretty intense. That's where this... thing kicked in." He paused. "No, I'm not going to lie to myself anymore. It had happened before, when I was a kid. It drove my parents nuts. I was in and out of hospitals, flown around to specialists. I think I got written up in medical journals, and no one knew any more about it than they did this last time."

"But you're talking like it stopped. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. But I could see that the stress of dealing with me was straining my parents' marriage. I decided that if they had a normal kid, everything would be all right. I'm a stubborn cuss, Sandburg. They needed normal, I became normal. I shut it down. Somehow, I just ignored the wild input I was getting long enough and hard enough till it just sort of faded away. It didn't help, though. They still broke up."

Blair rubbed his shoulder. "Wasn't your fault, man."

"I know."

The answer was too quick, too pat. "No, I don't think you do, but we don't have to deal with that issue right now. Go on. The abilities were gone until...?"

"They re-emerged during my time in the jungle. For the longest time I was living like an animal. It was a matter of survival. The civilized part of me didn't want it, but the primitive part of me wanted to survive, and it won out."

"Shit, you had to deal with that all by yourself?"

Another hesitation. "No. That's why I believe what that book says. I wasn't alone in the jungle. I was taken in by the Chopec."

Blair's eyes widened. "No shit? People have been trying to study them for years but they just kinda melt back into the forest. How did you manage it?"

"I wasn't trying to study them, Chief. I was just trying to stay alive and do my duty. Anyway, they took me, and helped me patrol the territory. Their wise man, Incacha, more or less adopted me. He's the one who told me about Sentinels and Guides. Of course, we weren't speaking English, so the terms didn't seep in the first time I heard you use them. He told me that I was a Sentinel. I was born to be a Protector. And I didn't like that one damn bit."

"But why? That is so cool..."

"Because I don't like the idea of anyone or **anything** determining my fate, Chief. I rejected the idea, flat out. I performed the duties, I lived the life, but I kept telling myself it was just the necessity of the situation, and things would go back to normal once I got back home." He laughed shortly.

"Air surveillance finally spotted the graves of my comrades, and came for the bodies. That's when they found me, and I went home. And it didn't stop." His eyes were haunted. "It just got worse, being around so many people, so much activity... So much **everything**, just pouring over me and into me, twenty-four/seven."

Blair was silent, rubbing his shoulder in sympathy. Thinking about it like that, it was a wonder that Ellison hadn't ended up in a corner, wrapped in canvas, gibbering and drooling down his chin. Blair's estimation of his strength of character rose significantly. Jim continued. "I had joined the police force, even made it up to detective, when it just got to be too much. I quit, dropped out. I went into jobs that would take me away from the highest concentrations of people. I worked as a farm laborer, a logger, a fisherman..."

"Oh, man, but that is such a **waste**! You could be supercop, with your senses. Hey, a **real** Sentinel."

"But I couldn't use them effectively, Sandburg. They were **interfering** with my work."

"You didn't have a Guide to help you channel them? What about this Incacha guy? Wasn't he your Guide? Why did you leave him?"

"No, he wasn't my Guide, he made that clear from the start. 'For each, there is the other, but only the one,' he said. 'You must find yours.'"

"That's what the paper says, too," Blair agreed. "And you haven't found yours yet? Man, you **need** a Guide. A Sentinel is incomplete without a Guide. Find a Guide, and you can go back to police work. Man, you would be **such** an asset to the community, it would be unreal."

"I haven't **looked** for one. The way he explained it, it's not just a partnership, and it doesn't work with just anyone, Chief. It's a bonding on so many different levels that it can't really be explained or understood, it can just be experienced. And I don't believe in soulmates." He hesitated, looking at the younger man, then amended. "I **didn't**, then."

Blair's voice was very low. "And now? You know, Jim, you said that you just needed someone to pull you back sometimes. I think you meant 'guide' you back." He gave Jim a level, no bullshit look. "I think I could do that for you. Hell, I **have** done it for you."

Jim reached over and cupped Blair's cheek, then let his hand slide down his throat to rest against the strong pulse that beat there, just

beneath the skin. Already the rhythm was familiar to him, and soothing. "I don't know," he said honestly. "There's... something here. Something more than just the fact that I frantically lust after your body. Though that **is** part of it."

"I'm relieved "

"It's been different since the first time I spotted you in that skanky bookstore. The first thing I thought was, what the hell is God thinking, letting one of the angels hang around here? Then I thought, I want to screw his ass into next week."

"Good thoughts."

Blair half closed his eyes as Jim's fingers skimmed around and began playing with the few curls that had escaped his hairnet in back. "And right behind that was a thought that scared the shit out of me."

"He might be underage?"

"No, I figured the ogress at the counter would've checked your I.D. No, I thought, 'I wonder what he's going to look like twenty or thirty years down the road, and how can I fix it so I'm around to find out?'"

Blair got up and went to the coffee pot, unable to look at Jim. He had experienced plenty of physical intimacy in his life, but it had all been of a temporary, casual nature. Something about the last few minutes was so much more intimate than any sexual encounter had ever been for him. And he realized, perhaps better than Jim knew, how hard it had been for the other man to make an admission like this. Jim Ellison didn't believe in letting anything or anyone have power over himself. What he had just said to Blair Sandburg left him vulnerable, and he knew it.

The pot was empty, and he started to fix another. Not looking around he said quietly, "I'll probably get a pot belly, and I'll have to wear my glasses all the time instead of when I do close work. But if you really want to hang around and see, all you have to do is ask, man."

He heard a chair scrape as Ellison stood up, and the rap of his boot heels as he came toward him. Then Jim reached around him, pulling the box of coffee filters out of his hand and putting them on the counter. He turned Blair around, pulled him up snugly against his body, and kissed him.

It was different from the other kisses they'd shared. There was still a hint of passion, but sex wasn't the main element. This kiss was deep, gentle, questioning, and, yes, loving. Blair put his arms up around Jim's neck and tried to tell him without words how much he was feeling right then. He was willing to be with his Sentinel for as long as he needed him.

Jim was speaking again. "You read the whole paper, right, Chief? From what I remember from Incacha, this isn't a casual type thing. It's a commitment. Kind of like a marriage. There's bliss, but there's shit, too."

"I think I understand that," Blair smiled faintly. "I can see that you wouldn't exactly be a stroll in the park to be around all the time. Well, neither am I."

The next kiss was deeper. It was a claiming kiss, and a giving kiss. Blair felt himself melting in the strong, sheltering arms, and he wasn't afraid, and he wasn't worried. Jim Ellison was his Blessed Protector. Blair would be his Guide. Together, they might actually make a difference in the world.

Jim broke the kiss to graze along Blair's cheek. His lips against Blair's ear, he whispered. "We have a week off for every two weeks on, and the company will fly us anywhere we want to go. How do you feel about Hawaii?"

"Hawaii sounds great. I'll even wear one of those funky shirts for you. But why Hawaii when we're so close to Europe?"

"Because." Jim reached down and grabbed his ass. "Same sex marriages are legal in Hawaii."

Blair burst into startled laughter. Jim smiled, but asked, "What's so funny?"

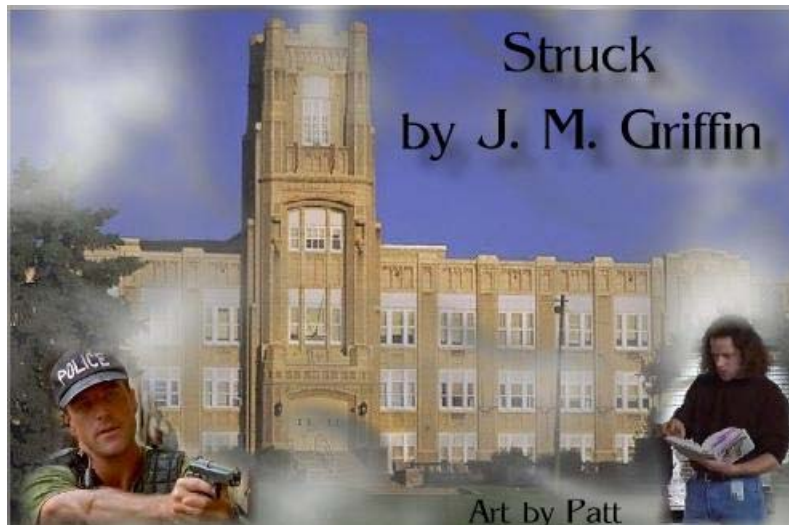
"Nothing. I was just thinking that great minds work alike. All right by me. But I gotta warn ya, man." He slanted a seductive look up at his friend, his Sentinel, his lover, and now his mate. "I'm not eligible to wear white."



The end.

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Struck



Struck - J. M. Griffin

In his memory, the day was so bright the sun hurt his eyes. Warm for April, the very air seemed to thrum with violence. The roses planted in front of the school were dying on their stems. How odd that everyone else remembered an ordinary day, with no hint of the menace in the breeze.

Cascade High School was humming with excitement. It was Career Day and teachers and students alike were milling in the halls before the first session started. Carolyn Plummer's room was filling fast. The speaker was a friend of a friend, a highly regarded professor of anthropology who had recently published a ground breaking discovery of a here-to-fore unknown tribe in the deepest jungles in Peru. It seemed inconceivable in this day and age that there could be an unknown people. Hadn't every part of the world been explored and exploited? It seemed not. Everyone wanted to hear Blair Sandburg speak of his find.

"Dr. Sandburg, can I get you a bottle of water or something." Ms. Plummer asked the short, but oh so intriguing, man leaning against her desk.

"Just call me Blair, please. And, yes, I think I would like some water, thanks."

"I'll go get it. They have some stashed in the teacher's lounge just down the hall." She turned to one of her students, a senior with common sense, a rare combination, but not unheard of. "Paul, you hold the fort until I get back."

God, the professor was cute as they came, Carolyn thought as she hurried to the lounge. The man had intensely blue eyes and lush lips and for all his prettiness, a very masculine jaw. Carolyn knew herself to be a sucker for men with blue eyes. Her ex-husband had pretty blue eyes, though Jim had looked nothing like this young man. Too young for you, Plummer, she told herself sternly. She ducked into the

teacher's lounge, only to find the two parent volunteers in a sea of bags and boxes of goodies.

"Water?" she asked.

"Oh, in the cooler over there. You'll have to dig it out from under the cokes."

Back in Ms. Plummer's room, Professor Sandburg wandered over to the lectern and idly checked his notes. Not that he really needed them, but they were a security blanket of sorts. And a reminder that he had only 50 minutes with each group and not to get too far off the beaten track.

The Chopec had been an inspiring group of people, and it gave Blair great pleasure to bring some of their wisdom to the people in his hometown. However, he had not given out the location of the tribe. Nor had he told of the most incredible part of his discovery, that the tribe had within its people a sentinel, a tribal guardian and watchman; a man who could see farther, smell more, touch, taste, and hear better than any normal person. Sandburg had read about such tribal guardians in a monograph written by explorer Sir Richard Burton, but to actually find such a person had been a huge dream of his. The Chopec sentinel had been very old, however, and when he had died six weeks after the professor had made contact with the tribe, Blair had mourned along with the tribe.

The bell rang and a few students dashed into the classroom to stand in the back. The senior left in charge started arguing with them. "Hey, Ms. Plummer said the audience was limited to the number of seats available."

"Awww, man, that is so gay . . . ," one tall kid whined.

During the ensuing uproar, Sandburg picked up his paper and cleared his throat. He was wondering what was taking Ms. Plummer so long when there was a loud whoosh and a funny pop that did something to the eardrum without really being an audible sound. The following "Blam," was heard, however, and the building shook, a girl screamed, and nothing was ever the same at Cascade High School again.

The people that were gathered across from the school breathed premature sighs of relief when they saw the tall, black man step out of the SWAT van. Here was safety. Here was know-how and experience. Everything was going to be fine.

Captain Simon Banks and his well-trained SWAT team knew better.

"All right, people," Banks growled. "We're going to follow the book here. No bumbling, no messing around. Move quickly and quietly. A kid on a cell phone says the shooters are on the second floor." Banks scanned his elite squad and made some quick decisions. "Ellison, you and Brown take that back stairwell to the second floor. Connor, McAllen, and Rafe, you'll be checking the out buildings. Ricardo and Simms, get to the room on the first floor where the pipe bomb blew."

His team nodded. They had been over it all in the van; the primary goal was to halt the assault and seize the shooters. Everyone had the diagram of the school memorized. No one was likely to freak out and rush things or be too cautious. This was not going to be a repeat of the horrible Columbine bumble.

"Okay, people, go."

Jim Ellison was well aware his ex-wife's classroom was on the second floor. As he and his partner, Henri Brown, raced quietly up the stairs, he could tell Brown remembered this.

"Jim," Henri hissed as they neared the top of the stairs, "No heroics, right?"

Jim nodded tersely, then he opened the door to the hall a crack and used one eye to gaze down the hallway. No one was there. He did not tell Henri he could hear the heartbeats of the scared students in the classrooms that lined the hallways. He did not tell him he could smell the acrid odor of recent gunfire and the high, sweet smell of copious amounts of blood.

He signaled for Henri to follow him as he slipped out of the stairwell and into the hall.

Moments before Jim got to the top of the stairs, a young man in a long black trench coat opened the door of Carolyn Plummer's room and waltzed in. He slipped his hand inside his coat in a manner not unlike the guy on the show "The Highlander." But instead of pulling out a sword, he brought out a shotgun.

Someone hissed, "Oh God."

The teen in the coat walked over toward the sound and pointed the gun in the terrified speaker's face.

"What did you say?" He curled his lip in a sneer as he looked down at one of the boys who sat at the lunch table across from him five days a week. One of the ones who called him 'fag' and 'loser.'

"Who's the loser now, Creep?" he asked as he cocked his weapon.

"Hey." Blair stood up from behind the podium where he had been crouching. The trench coat swirled around the skinny, jean clad legs of the shooter. The shotgun was now aimed at Professor Sandburg's chest.

"Hey, what?"

"They used to call me 'loser,' too. And 'fag.'" The part about kids calling him 'fag' was true. By the time he was this kid's age, however, Blair had been in college and sixteen year old freshmen were rarely called 'loser.' Still, he knew what it was like to be different, to be the outcast. "You can't listen to them; it will mess with your head and you'll turn out as fucked as they are."

The shooter cocked his head as if he had heard some truth in the professor's words. Then his face once again resumed its mask of indifference.

"Hey, it's true." Blair said quietly. "Right now you're the person doing the scaring. That feels good for a change, huh?"

The kid with the gun gave a long sigh.

"But if you shoot someone, you'll be the one that gets fucked."

"The bomb in the woodshop took out a teacher and three kids. There ain't no going back even if we wanted to." For a moment the kid's face held a thousand sorrows, a million regrets. "Today, Carl and I are the big men on campus." He gave a weird, wired smile and the girl cowering between him and the professor let out a strangled gasp.

The shotgun swung down and centered on the girl, caressing her right temple. She looked up with big dark eyes that were amazingly void of tears. Softly, softly, she began speaking, saying the rosary in a stream that seemed to pour almost silently from her mouth.

The shooter's eyes narrowed and he began a slow steady squeeze of the trigger. The girl closed her eyes.

Outside, Jim nodded his head at Henri. "There. In there," he said with no words. Henri nodded. They positioned themselves in the proscribed manner, one to the left, the other to the right. "Gun," Jim signed and "No time." Henri was used to his partner's excellent hearing and sixth sense for things going on where they couldn't be seen. He did not question the information he was being given.

Together, they made their move.

Something slammed against the door of the classroom stopping the shooter's finger in mid-squeeze. There were gasps and hissed exclamations from the kids. The slamming sound came again and this time the door flew open. The kid swung the shotgun up and fired. He hit the black cop full in the chest and knocked him back on his butt. His partner, coming in from the other direction, was hit in the arm by a spray of ricocheting shot. It didn't stop him from moving so quickly it would have made Blair's head spin if he hadn't been focused on the bright arterial blood that spurting from the cop's outstretched left arm and arced down to spatter on the floor.

But the tall cop was anything but paralyzed from his wound. He took aim carefully and shot. The trench coat billowed out as the young man slowly fell into the arms of the girl who had been praying at his feet.

Then the cop staggered and went to his knees as the blood continued to pump from his arm.

Blair was out from behind the lectern and over to him in a flash. He went to his own knees and reached out a hand to touch the cop on the chest. To his great surprise, he found himself looking into the soul of the man. There, a black panther slumbered, quiet and fierce as the jungle where it slept.

Blair jerked out of the vision to shake his head and whip out of his vest and tear off the cotton shirt he wore underneath. Now dressed in his tee, he bunched his shirt up and held it against the cop's arm. Under his fingers, he could feel the man's arterial pulse and he applied fierce pressure for long moments until he felt it stop.

"Here," the senior who had tried to corral the other kids was at Blair's side offering him a big green bandana. Sandburg used it to tie the bandage tightly. He looked up into the eyes of the man to whom he was ministering. Pale blue eyes gazed at him with a quizzical expression. "Who are you?" the cop asked him in a whisper. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped into Blair's arms.

"Who has a phone? Call and get help," Blair ordered the kids.

"I already did," a girl with red hair and a bright orange top said. "I told them where we are and what just happened."

"Then help should be here soon," the senior added. Blair nodded just as screams erupted in a room down the hall, followed by a hail of gunfire.

A boy near the door grabbed the black cop's feet and pulled him into the room. A couple more kids closed the door and quickly pulled the heavy teacher's desk in front of it. The girl with the red hair went to crouch over the fallen cop.

"He's alive," she whispered to Blair. "He has on a kevlar vest. I think maybe he isn't hurt too badly."

The room got very quiet as the gunfight down the hall escalated. There were more shouts and screams and the kids in Carolyn Plummer's room huddled together and held each other and shook. Looking at the dead boy on the floor, Professor Sandburg didn't realize he was speaking until he heard himself whispering.

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
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We are the dreamers of dreams,
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And sitting by desolate streams;
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On whom the pale moon gleams;
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Next, the praying girl spoke:

*I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail shaking,
And the grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking."*

And then the senior boy:

*There's sunshine in the heart for me,
My blood sings in the breeze;
The mountains are a part of me,
I'm fellow to the trees.
My golden youth I'm squandering,
Sun-libertine am I;
A-wandering, a-wandering,
Until the day I die."*

When he said 'die' all eyes went to the dead body on the floor, then to the black cop who was beginning to moan and, finally, to the other cop slumped in Blair's arms.

There was sudden inexplicable silence down the hall, then one last ringing gunshot and a choked scream. Next came another brief bit of silence and then the very walls of the school seemed to hum and murmur as people began to speak again.

"We wait, we wait," someone said.

"Yes," the professor nodded his head. "We wait."

The students began to move out of their huddled mass in the center of the room and into little groups where they talked in muted tones. Blair suddenly remembered the senior boy's name was Paul as he watched him take off his sweater and cover the shooter's blank face with it.

The man in Blair's arms came back to consciousness with a jolt.

"Shh, you're okay. The paramedics will be here soon," Sandburg told him.

The man peered into up into the professor's face and frowned. "Wolves don't have blue eyes," he said thickly.

At the strange utterance, Blair felt himself jerk upright as if he too had been struck by something. He stared down into the face of the handsome man in his arms.



Several hours later, Blair watched as Carolyn Plummer climbed into the back of the ambulance to ride to the hospital with her ex-husband. The professor tried not to mind that he wasn't the one escorting the cop to Cascade General. He sighed heavily, knowing it was a tiny thing in the scope of all that had happened, but he had felt an intimate connection to the police officer he had held cradled in his arms until a group of cops and paramedics showed up at the classroom door.

Feeling oddly bereft, Blair swiped at his face wearily.

"Hey," A very tall black man in a "SWAT" team jacket said to him. "Is any of that blood yours, or does it all belong to Ellison?" The man's voice seemed gruff, but his expression was caring and kind.

Not having the strength to speak, Blair merely shrugged.

"Are you all right?" The black man asked, now genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine."

"I appreciate what you did for my officer. Hell, Jim is more than just one of my team, you know. He's a good friend."

Blair nodded wearily and began walking to his car.

A day, a week, a month and then two went by. Sometimes Blair dreamed he was looking down the barrel of Larry Demmings shotgun; other times he stared into the light blue eyes of another man. He would wake with the roar of a jungle cat ringing in his ears.

His life was ordinary. He went to work, came home, went out with friends. They were solicitous of him, knowing he had gone through an ordeal. The media had been much less polite. And though he had refused to give interviews, his face was splattered all over magazines and newspapers. "Teacher Saves Cop's Life" and "Professor Keeps Cop From Dying."

It didn't seem right to him to celebrate when a teacher and five kids had died and another teacher and two cops had been wounded.

Jim Ellison, that was his cop's name. Once they'd whisked him away in the ambulance, Blair hadn't seen him again. The news reports stated Officer Ellison had been hospitalized for a day and then had gone home. He was bound to be back at work by now. Blair ached to pick up the phone and call the man. But he couldn't think what he'd say and he was sure the cop wouldn't want to hear from him. So he lived day to day in a sort of haze, feeling like he'd gone through the crucible and come out the other side with his heart scoured and empty.

He wondered what it would take for him to feel his life was complete again.

"Hey, Jim, good to have you back, man." More than one person stopped him on the way into the police station and shook his hand. Jim did his best to be polite, though he suspected his best was pretty poor. Still, no one lost their smile.

Truth was, though Ellison was thrilled to be back at work, he still didn't feel one hundred percent. His wound had been relatively simple, but after he'd gone home he'd developed an infection and that had landed him back in Cascade General for a much longer stay. Which was why he was just getting back to work two months later.

He should be happy, he should be fine. He should have been able to shake this hollow burned out feeling in his chest. He couldn't figure why he couldn't.

When he got inside headquarters, Henri wrapped him in a bear hug. "Hey, partner, long time no see."

Jim just gave his friend a sour look. It wasn't like they hadn't seen each other in ages. Henri had missed a few days of work due to his own injuries, but then he'd spent a lot of time in and out of Jim's place while his partner got well.

Despite the warm welcome, Jim found his first day back to be grueling. He'd been certified fit to work by his doctor, but felt woefully out of shape. So he spent most of the day behind his desk getting updated on what had gone on while he was out of commission. Still, he was tremendously relieved when quitting time came.

Friday couldn't come soon enough for Sandburg. When he finished his last class, he made it out of Hargrove Hall faster than a bat out of hell. He put on his helmet and mounted his Silverwing with a sigh of relief. Before, he'd loved every minute he spent in the classroom. Now he was beginning to think it was time to dream up a new expedition and get out of the halls of academe for a bit.

He found himself humming as he contemplated going back to Peru and the Chopec people. In that other world so many thousands of miles away he'd be safe from the random violence of Cascade. There he'd be safe from...

Slowing as he came up to a light, he didn't see the red Honda until it loomed in his rear view mirror and by then it was too late. The bumper of the car came too close and though it only tapped his motorcycle, Blair went down with astonishing speed. As he slid sideways along the road, the left leg of his jeans burned off right down to his boot.

He came to a stop practically under the bumper of the truck across the intersection. Caught under his bike, Blair looked up to see shiny grill work with a Ford logo in the middle.

The driver was already out of the Explorer and running toward Blair.

"Damn! Are you all right? I can't believe that idiot in the Honda just drove away!" A tall man with blue eyes exclaimed as he crouched down beside Blair. Pulling out a cell phone, the man dialed 911. When he'd reported the accident, he shoved his phone in his pocket and put a hand on Blair's shoulder. "Okay, how badly are you hurt?"

Blair felt his mouth open in order to reply, but he couldn't get any words out.

"That's okay, Chief. Don't try to talk. You're gonna be all right. An ambulance is on its way."

Blair shook his head and found his voice. "No, man. No, I think I'm okay. Help me get my bike up."

The cop's eyes narrowed. It **was** him, of course; the SWAT officer from the school. Blair would never mistake those blue eyes for any other.

"Are you sure? You slid all the way across the intersection."

"I have on motorcycle boots. I think that saved my leg from being torn to shreds."

The cop ended up helping him slither out from under his bike, first. He stood up with relief, leaning against the grillwork of the SUV as he pulled off his helmet.

"Shit," the man in front of him said as soon as Blair had gotten the thing off and started to shake his hair free. "Shit, it's you."

Blair knew his smile was absurdly bright, but he couldn't hold it in. "Yes."

"Damn," Jim Ellison breathed. "You're Blair Sandburg, the professor from the school," he said slowly. "I believe I owe you a thank you."

He limped up the stairs to his loft, thankful to have the muscular arm of the other man to lean on.

"Are you sure your okay?" Jim asked him gently as they stood in front of his door and Blair scrambled for his keys. "Here, let me do that for you."

Jim opened the door and stepped in first. Then he stopped moving and Blair plowed into his back.

"Shit," they said simultaneously, but for completely different reasons.

Blair ended up having to walk around the cop who was standing stock still peering around his home. "I... um... I mean..." Jim stuttered.

Blair shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I know it can be a lot to take, but it's home to me."

"It's beautiful," Jim breathed, as he walked into the center of the big room and stared at the large stone carving of a jaguar resting on the mantle. The walls of the room hung with native masks of various jungle animals. The furniture was wicker and quite unique, obviously not from Pier One. A hand-woven blanket was slung over the back of the couch and the coffee table was a big brass bound trunk. If the place

hadn't been so spacious, the decor might have seemed cloying or silly, but it simply made Jim feel he had entered some wondrous space where he felt perfectly at home.

Blair walked into his kitchen on shaky legs. He turned on the tap and began to rinse his skinned hand under the cool water, hissing involuntarily when the cool water hit his raw left palm.

"Hey," Jim was suddenly at his side, taking Blair's hand in his own and examining it. When he was satisfied with his inspection, he peered into Blair's face. "Come sit down on the couch and let me pull your boot off. I can smell more blood."

Blair walked over to the couch, feeling a bit lightheaded. It might have been due to the accident, but he didn't think so. As he watched, Jim sat down on the big trunk in front of him and cradled Blair's extended leg in his big capable hands. Blair let out his breath slowly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd brought a lover home to the loft. It was all so close, so strange, so wonderful to have someone this far inside his personal space.

Jim began to gently work the boot off his foot and Blair found himself hissing again at the slight torque of his knee.

"Damn," Jim said as the boot slid off and he pulled the shredded jean leg up and began to examine Blair's skinned knee. Fortunately, it didn't seem to be much more than that and maybe a slight sprain. Blair slumped back on the couch and closed his eyes, lost in the sensation of Jim's hands on his skin.

"Blair. Blair Sandburg."



"Yes," Blair's eyes flew open as he felt the couch shift on either side of him. Jim was on his knees straddling him, arcing his body as he cupped Blair's face in his hands and kissed him gently. Blair opened his mouth eagerly in response. He loved the warmth of Jim's mouth, his smooth even teeth, the delicious taste of him. He didn't want the kiss to end and when Jim made to move away, Blair groaned and let his arms encircle the shoulders of the broader, taller man. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"I dreamt of you." Jim whispered, as he cupped Blair's face in his hands, then slid them up to bury them in Blair's long hair. "I dreamed you were a wolf...running beside me in a vast jungle. And then I...I read your book."

Blair licked along Jim's stern jawline before he answered. "You did?"

"Yes. I couldn't get your face out of my head after the shooting. And since I was cooped up in the hospital for almost a month, I had to do something."

"Almost a month? I thought your wound was relatively minor." Blair was horrified at the idea of Jim being so badly hurt and he not realizing it.

"It was. I got blood poisoning and had to go back in the hospital."

Blair looked at the older man closely, seeing that his face was slightly leaner than before and noting the toll the illness had taken.

Jim shook his head. "I'm fine now."

Blair smiled. "Then let's take this upstairs," he whispered.

"What's upstairs?" Jim asked, but he smiled back, because he'd seen it was Blair's bedroom. Before Blair could answer, Jim scooped him up into his arms.

"Hey!" he protested.

Jim stopped where he stood, holding Blair over the couch. Blair looked up into the vivid eyes of the man holding him and grinned. "What? Did I say something?"

Jim just shook his head and headed for the staircase.

There was sex and there was making love. Blair decided he had never made love before he had Jim in his bed, in his arms, in his body. He'd had sex with both men and women, but there had never been this exquisite meshing of bodies, this entwining of souls.

Jim worshiped Blair's body with his hand and mouth, taking his slow easy time as he catalogued all of Blair's body bit by bit. It made Blair shiver with delight, to be so desired. Jim's touch on his cock was both light and sure and Blair had never felt anything like it, though he'd both given and received such in the past. Jim's lips wrapped round him, his tongue laving him, suckling him, absorbing his essence as he climaxed, was so fantastic it was almost more than Blair could take. He stayed still for a bit in the aftermath, Jim's head pillowed on his abdomen.

"I love you," he said quietly as he stroked the bigger man's fine stubble of hair. "How can I love you after knowing you for less than a day?"

Jim gave a soft sigh against Blair's belly. "Less than a day? It isn't possible. I've looked for you always, my blue-eyed wolf."

Blair squirmed in pleasure, curling his body in order to take Jim into his own mouth, to elicit groans of delight from his lover. Jim's body was beautiful, nearly hairless, sculpted like a Greek statue and Blair caressed the flat planes and muscled mounds as he explored it, not leaving out a single nook or cranny. Jim moaned in delight, a most sensitive lover... a sentinel...

In the midst of their lovemaking, it flashed in Blair's mind that this was what the man was. Like Incacha, the aged Chopec sentinel he hadn't had enough time with, but who had told him he would find his sentinel, his destiny, far from the Chopec tribe. The old man had been right.

But Blair didn't let the realization break the rhythm of Jim's body beneath his hands and mouth and when Jim climaxed, Blair eagerly gulped his seed, hearing the satisfied roar of the black jaguar of his dreams in his lover's shout.

They slept then, curled around one another, and nothing at all, not nightmare or dream or even the phone, disturbed their new-found peace.

The End.

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Untitled

Struck - J. M. Griffin

In his memory, the day was so bright the sun hurt his eyes. Warm for April, the very air seemed to thrum with violence. The roses planted in front of the school were dying on their stems. How odd that everyone else remembered an ordinary day, with no hint of the menace in the breeze.

Cascade High School was humming with excitement. It was Career Day and teachers and students alike were milling in the halls before the first session started. Carolyn Plummer's room was filling fast. The speaker was a friend of a friend, a highly regarded professor of anthropology who had recently published a ground breaking discovery of a here-to-fore unknown tribe in the deepest jungles in Peru. It seemed inconceivable in this day and age that there could be an unknown people. Hadn't every part of the world been explored and exploited? It seemed not. Everyone wanted to hear Blair Sandburg speak of his find.

"Dr. Sandburg, can I get you a bottle of water or something." Ms. Plummer asked the short, but oh so intriguing, man leaning against her desk.

"Just call me Blair, please. And, yes, I think I would like some water, thanks."

"I'll go get it. They have some stashed in the teacher's lounge just down the hall." She turned to one of her students, a senior with common sense, a rare combination, but not unheard of. "Paul, you hold the fort until I get back."

God, the professor was cute as they came, Carolyn thought as she hurried to the lounge. The man had intensely blue eyes and lush lips and for all his prettiness, a very masculine jaw. Carolyn knew herself to be a sucker for men with blue eyes. Her ex-husband had pretty blue eyes, though Jim had looked nothing like this young man. Too young for you, Plummer, she told herself sternly. She ducked into the teacher's lounge, only to find the two parent volunteers in a sea of bags and boxes of goodies.

"Water?" she asked.

"Oh, in the cooler over there. You'll have to dig it out from under the cokes."

Back in Ms. Plummer's room, Professor Sandburg wandered over to the lectern and idly checked his notes. Not that he really needed them, but they were a security blanket of sorts. And a reminder that he had only 50 minutes with each group and not to get too far off the beaten track.

The Chopec had been an inspiring group of people, and it gave Blair great pleasure to bring some of their wisdom to the people in his hometown. However, he had not given out the location of the tribe. Nor had he told of the most incredible part of his discovery, that the tribe had within its people a sentinel, a tribal guardian and watchman; a man who could see farther, smell more, touch, taste, and hear better than any normal person. Sandburg had read about such tribal guardians in a monograph written by explorer Sir Richard Burton, but to

actually find such a person had been a huge dream of his. The Chopec sentinel had been very old, however, and when he had died six weeks after the professor had made contact with the tribe, Blair had mourned along with the tribe.

The bell rang and a few students dashed into the classroom to stand in the back. The senior left in charge started arguing with them. "Hey, Ms. Plummer said the audience was limited to the number of seats available."

"Awww, man, that is so gay . . .," one tall kid whined.

During the ensuing uproar, Sandburg picked up his paper and cleared his throat. He was wondering what was taking Ms. Plummer so long when there was a loud whoosh and a funny pop that did something to the eardrum without really being an audible sound. The following "Blam," was heard, however, and the building shook, a girl screamed, and nothing was ever the same at Cascade High School again.

The people that were gathered across from the school breathed premature sighs of relief when they saw the tall, black man step out of the SWAT van. Here was safety. Here was know-how and experience. Everything was going to be fine.

Captain Simon Banks and his well-trained SWAT team knew better.

"All right, people," Banks growled. "We're going to follow the book here. No bumbling, no messing around. Move quickly and quietly. A kid on a cell phone says the shooters are on the second floor." Banks scanned his elite squad and made some quick decisions. "Ellison, you and Brown take that back stairwell to the second floor. Connor, McAllen, and Rafe, you'll be checking the out buildings. Ricardo and Simms, get to the room on the first floor where the pipe bomb blew."

His team nodded. They had been over it all in the van; the primary goal was to halt the assault and seize the shooters. Everyone had the diagram of the school memorized. No one was likely to freak out and rush things or be too cautious. This was not going to be a repeat of the horrible Columbine bumble.

"Okay, people, go."

Jim Ellison was well aware his ex-wife's classroom was on the second floor. As he and his partner, Henri Brown, raced quietly up the stairs, he could tell Brown remembered this.

"Jim," Henri hissed as they neared the top of the stairs, "No heroics, right?"

Jim nodded tersely, then he opened the door to the hall a crack and used one eye to gaze down the hallway. No one was there. He did not tell Henri he could hear the heartbeats of the scared students in the classrooms that lined the hallways. He did not tell him he could smell the acrid odor of recent gunfire and the high, sweet smell of copious amounts of blood.

He signaled for Henri to follow him as he slipped out of the stairwell and into the hall.

Moments before Jim got to the top of the stairs, a young man in a long black trench coat opened the door of Carolyn Plummer's room and waltzed in. He slipped his hand inside his coat in a manner not unlike the guy on the show "The Highlander." But instead of pulling out a sword, he brought out a shotgun.

Someone hissed, "Oh God."

The teen in the coat walked over toward the sound and pointed the gun in the terrified speaker's face.

"What did you say?" He curled his lip in a sneer as he looked down at one of the boys who sat at the lunch table across from him five days a week. One of the ones who called him 'fag' and 'loser.'

"Who's the loser now, Creep?" he asked as he cocked his weapon.

"Hey." Blair stood up from behind the podium where he had been crouching. The trench coat swirled around the skinny, jean clad legs of the shooter. The shotgun was now aimed at Professor Sandburg's chest.

"Hey, what?"

"They used to call me 'loser,' too. And 'fag.'" The part about kids calling him 'fag' was true. By the time he was this kid's age, however, Blair had been in college and sixteen year old freshmen were rarely called 'loser.' Still, he knew what it was like to be different, to be the outcast. "You can't listen to them; it will mess with your head and you'll turn out as fucked as they are."

The shooter cocked his head as if he had heard some truth in the professor's words. Then his face once again resumed its mask of indifference.

"Hey, it's true." Blair said quietly. "Right now you're the person doing the scaring. That feels good for a change, huh?"

The kid with the gun gave a long sigh.

"But if you shoot someone, you'll be the one that gets fucked."

"The bomb in the woodshop took out a teacher and three kids. There ain't no going back even if we wanted to." For a moment the kid's face held a thousand sorrows, a million regrets. "Today, Carl and I are the big men on campus." He gave a weird, wired smile and the girl cowering between him and the professor let out a strangled gasp.

The shotgun swung down and centered on the girl, caressing her right temple. She looked up with big dark eyes that were amazingly void of tears. Softly, softly, she began speaking, saying the rosary in a stream that seemed to pour almost silently from her mouth.

The shooter's eyes narrowed and he began a slow steady squeeze of the trigger. The girl closed her eyes.

Outside, Jim nodded his head at Henri. "There. In there," he said with no words. Henri nodded. They positioned themselves in the proscribed manner, one to the left, the other to the right. "Gun," Jim signed and "No time." Henri was used to his partner's excellent hearing and sixth sense for things going on where they couldn't be seen. He did not question the information he was being given.

Together, they made their move.

Something slammed against the door of the classroom stopping the shooter's finger in mid-squeeze. There were gasps and hissed exclamations from the kids. The slamming sound came again and this time the door flew open. The kid swung the shotgun up and fired. He hit the black cop full in the chest and knocked him back on his butt. His partner, coming in from the other direction, was hit in the arm by a spray of ricocheting shot. It didn't stop him from moving so quickly it would have made Blair's head spin if he hadn't been focused on the bright arterial blood that spurting from the cop's outstretched left arm and arced down to spatter on the floor.

But the tall cop was anything but paralyzed from his wound. He took aim carefully and shot. The trench coat billowed out as the young man slowly fell into the arms of the girl who had been praying at his feet.

Then the cop staggered and went to his knees as the blood continued to pump from his arm.

Blair was out from behind the lectern and over to him in a flash. He went to his own knees and reached out a hand to touch the cop on the chest. To his great surprise, he found himself looking into the soul of the man. There, a black panther slumbered, quiet and fierce as the jungle where it slept.

Blair jerked out of the vision to shake his head and whip out of his vest and tear off the cotton shirt he wore underneath. Now dressed in his tee, he bunched his shirt up and held it against the cop's arm. Under his fingers, he could feel the man's arterial pulse and he applied fierce pressure for long moments until he felt it stop.

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"Then help should be here soon," the senior added. Blair nodded just as screams erupted in a room down the hall, followed by a hail of gunfire.

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"He's alive," she whispered to Blair. "He has on a kevlar vest. I think maybe he isn't hurt too badly."

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Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?"*

The red haired girl took up after him:

*We are the music makers.
We are the dreamers of dreams,*

*Wandering by lone sea breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams;
We are the movers and shakers of the world for ever, it seems."*

Next, the praying girl spoke:

*I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail shaking,
And the grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking."*

And then the senior boy:

*There's sunshine in the heart for me,
My blood sings in the breeze;
The mountains are a part of me,
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My golden youth I'm squandering,
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A-wandering, a-wandering,
Until the day I die."*

When he said 'die' all eyes went to the dead body on the floor, then to the black cop who was beginning to moan and, finally, to the other cop slumped in Blair's arms.

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"Yes," the professor nodded his head. "We wait."

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The man in Blair's arms came back to consciousness with a jolt.

"Shh, you're okay. The paramedics will be here soon," Sandburg told him.

The man peered into up into the professor's face and frowned. "Wolves don't have blue eyes," he said thickly.

At the strange utterance, Blair felt himself jerk upright as if he too had been struck by something. He stared down into the face of the handsome man in his arms.

Several hours later, Blair watched as Carolyn Plummer climbed into the back of the ambulance to ride to the hospital with her ex-husband. The professor tried not to mind that he wasn't the one escorting the cop to Cascade General. He sighed heavily, knowing it was a tiny thing in the scope of all that had happened, but he had felt an intimate connection to the police officer he had held cradled in his arms until a group of cops and paramedics showed up at the classroom door.

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Not having the strength to speak, Blair merely shrugged.

"Are you all right?" The black man asked, now genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine."

"I appreciate what you did for my officer. Hell, Jim is more than just one of my team, you know. He's a good friend."

Blair nodded wearily and began walking to his car.

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His life was ordinary. He went to work, came home, went out with friends. They were solicitous of him, knowing he had gone through an ordeal. The media had been much less polite. And though he had refused to give interviews, his face was splattered all over magazines and newspapers. "Teacher Saves Cop's Life" and "Professor Keeps Cop From Dying."

It didn't seem right to him to celebrate when a teacher and five kids had died and another teacher and two cops had been wounded.

Jim Ellison, that was his cop's name. Once they'd whisked him away in the ambulance, Blair hadn't seen him again. The news reports stated Officer Ellison had been hospitalized for a day and then had gone home. He was bound to back at work by now. Blair ached to pick up the phone and call the man. But he couldn't think what he'd say and he was sure the cop wouldn't want to hear from him. So he lived day to day in a sort of haze, feeling like he'd gone through the crucible and come out the other side with his heart scoured and empty.

He wondered what it would take for him to feel his life was complete again.

"Hey, Jim, good to have you back, man." More than one person stopped him on the way into the police station and shook his hand. Jim did his best to be polite, though he suspected his best was pretty poor. Still, no one lost their smile.

Truth was, though Ellison was thrilled to be back at work, he still didn't feel one hundred percent. His wound had been relatively simple, but after he'd gone home he'd developed an infection and that had landed him back in Cascade General for a much longer stay. Which was why he was just getting back to work two months later.

He should be happy, he should be fine. He should have been able to shake this hollow burned out feeling in his chest. He couldn't figure why he couldn't.

When he got inside headquarters, Henri wrapped him in a bear hug. "Hey, partner, long time no see."

Jim just gave his friend a sour look. It wasn't like they hadn't seen each other in ages. Henri had missed a few days of work due to his own injuries, but then he'd spent a lot of time in and out of Jim's place while his partner got well.

Despite the warm welcome, Jim found his first day back to be grueling. He'd been certified fit to work by his doctor, but felt woefully out of shape. So he spent most of the day behind his desk getting updated on what had gone on while he was out of commission. Still, he was tremendously relieved when quitting time came.

Friday couldn't come soon enough for Sandburg. When he finished his last class, he made it out of Hargrove Hall faster than a bat out of hell. He put on his helmet and mounted his Silverwing with a sigh of relief. Before, he'd loved every minute he spent in the classroom. Now he was beginning to think it was time to dream up a new expedition and get out of the halls of academe for a bit.

He found himself humming as he contemplated going back to Peru and the Chopec people. In that other world so many thousands of miles away he'd be safe from the random violence of Cascade. There he'd be safe from...

Slowing as he came up to a light, he didn't see the red Honda until it loomed in his rear view mirror and by then it was too late. The bumper of the car came too close and though it only tapped his motorcycle, Blair went down with astonishing speed. As he slid sideways along the road, the left leg of his jeans burned off right down to his boot.

He came to a stop practically under the bumper of the truck across the intersection. Caught under his bike, Blair looked up to see shiny grill work with a Ford logo in the middle.

The driver was already out of the Explorer and running toward Blair.

"Damn! Are you all right? I can't believe that idiot in the Honda just drove away!" A tall man with blue eyes exclaimed as he crouched down beside Blair. Pulling out a cell phone, the man dialed 911. When he'd reported the accident, he shoved his phone in his pocket and put a hand on Blair's shoulder. "Okay, how badly are you hurt?"

Blair felt his mouth open in order to reply, but he couldn't get any words out.

"That's okay, Chief. Don't try to talk. You're gonna be all right. An ambulance is on its way."

Blair shook his head and found his voice. "No, man. No, I think I'm okay. Help me get my bike up."

The cop's eyes narrowed. It **was** him, of course; the SWAT officer from the school. Blair would never mistake those blue eyes for any other.

"Are you sure? You slid all the way across the intersection."

"I have on motorcycle boots. I think that saved my leg from being torn to shreds."

The cop ended up helping him slither out from under his bike, first. He stood up with relief, leaning against the grillwork of the SUV as he pulled off his helmet.

"Shit," the man in front of him said as soon as Blair had gotten the thing off and started to shake his hair free. "Shit, it's you."

Blair knew his smile was absurdly bright, but he couldn't hold it in. "Yes."

"Damn," Jim Ellison breathed. "You're Blair Sandburg, the professor from the school," he said slowly. "I believe I owe you a thank you."

He limped up the stairs to his loft, thankful to have the muscular arm of the other man to lean on.

"Are you sure your okay?" Jim asked him gently as they stood in front of his door and Blair scrambled for his keys. "Here, let me do that for you."

Jim opened the door and stepped in first. Then he stopped moving and Blair plowed into his back.

"Shit," they said simultaneously, but for completely different reasons.

Blair ended up having to walk around the cop who was standing stock still peering around his home. "I... um.... I mean....," Jim stuttered.

Blair shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I know it can be a lot to take, but it's home to me."

"It's beautiful," Jim breathed, as he walked into the center of the big room and stared at the large stone carving of a jaguar resting on the mantle. The walls of the room hung with native masks of various jungle animals. The furniture was wicker and quite unique, obviously not from Pier One. A hand-woven blanket was slung over the back of the couch and the coffee table was a big brass bound trunk. If the place hadn't been so spacious, the decor might have seemed cloying or silly, but it simply made Jim feel he had entered some wondrous space where he felt perfectly at home.

Blair walked into his kitchen on shaky legs. He turned on the tap and began to rinse his skinned hand under the cool water, hissing involuntarily when the cool water hit his raw left palm.

"Hey," Jim was suddenly at his side, taking Blair's hand in his own and examining it. When he was satisfied with his inspection, he peered into Blair's face. "Come sit down on the couch and let me pull your boot off. I can smell more blood."

Blair walked over to the couch, feeling a bit lightheaded. It might have been due to the accident, but he didn't think so. As he watched, Jim sat down on the big trunk in front of him and cradled Blair's extended leg in his big capable hands. Blair let out his breath slowly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd brought a lover home to the loft. It was all so close, so strange, so wonderful to have someone this far inside his personal space.

Jim began to gently work the boot off his foot and Blair found himself hissing again at the slight torque of his knee.

"Damn," Jim said as the boot slid off and he pulled the shredded jean leg up and began to examine Blair's skinned knee. Fortunately, it didn't seem to be much more than that and maybe a slight sprain. Blair slumped back on the couch and closed his eyes, lost in the sensation of Jim's hands on his skin.

"Blair. Blair Sandburg."

"Yes," Blair's eyes flew open as he felt the couch shift on either side of him. Jim was on his knees straddling him, arcing his body as he cupped Blair's face in his hands and kissed him gently. Blair opened his mouth eagerly in response. He loved the warmth of Jim's mouth, his smooth even teeth, the delicious taste of him. He didn't want the kiss to end and when Jim made to move away, Blair groaned and let his arms encircle the shoulders of the broader, taller man. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"I dreamt of you." Jim whispered, as he cupped Blair's face in his hands, then slid them up to bury them in Blair's long hair. "I dreamed you were a wolf...running beside me in a vast jungle. And then I...I read your book."

Blair licked along Jim's stern jawline before he answered. "You did?"

"Yes. I couldn't get your face out of my head after the shooting. And since I was cooped up in the hospital for almost a month, I had to do something."

"Almost a month? I thought your wound was relatively minor." Blair was horrified at the idea of Jim being so badly hurt and he not realizing it.

"It was. I got blood poisoning and had to go back in the hospital."

Blair looked at the older man closely, seeing that his face was slightly leaner than before and noting the toll the illness had taken.

Jim shook his head. "I'm fine now."

Blair smiled. "Then let's take this upstairs," he whispered.

"What's upstairs?" Jim asked, but he smiled back, because he'd seen it was Blair's bedroom. Before Blair could answer, Jim scooped him up into his arms.

"Hey!" he protested.

Jim stopped where he stood, holding Blair over the couch. Blair looked up into the vivid eyes of the man holding him and grinned. "What? Did I say something?"

Jim just shook his head and headed for the staircase.

There was sex and there was making love. Blair decided he had never made love before he had Jim in his bed, in his arms, in his body. He'd had sex with both men and women, but there had never been this exquisite meshing of bodies, this entwining of souls.

Jim worshiped Blair's body with his hand and mouth, taking his slow easy time as he catalogued all of Blair's body bit by bit. It made Blair shiver with delight, to be so desired. Jim's touch on his cock was both light and sure and Blair had never felt anything like it, though he'd both given and received such in the past. Jim's lips wrapped round him, his tongue laving him, suckling him, absorbing his essence as he climaxed, was so fantastic it was almost more than Blair could take. He stayed still for a bit in the aftermath, Jim's head pillowed on his abdomen.

"I love you," he said quietly as he stroked the bigger man's fine stubble of hair. "How can I love you after knowing you for less than a day?"

Jim gave a soft sigh against Blair's belly. "Less than a day? It isn't possible. I've looked for you always, my blue-eyed wolf."

Blair squirmed in pleasure, curling his body in order to take Jim into his own mouth, to elicit groans of delight from his lover. Jim's body was beautiful, nearly hairless, sculpted like a Greek statue and Blair caressed the flat planes and muscled mounds as he explored it, not leaving out a single nook or cranny. Jim moaned in delight, a most sensitive lover... a sentinel...


In the midst of their lovemaking, it flashed in Blair's mind that this was what the man was. Like Incacha, the aged Chopec sentinel he hadn't had enough time with, but who had told him he would find his sentinel, his destiny, far from the Chopec tribe. The old man had been right.

But Blair didn't let the realization break the rhythm of Jim's body beneath his hands and mouth and when Jim climaxed, Blair eagerly gulped his seed, hearing the satisfied roar of the black jaguar of his dreams in his lover's shout.

They slept then, curled around one another, and nothing at all, not nightmare or dream or even the phone, disturbed their new-found peace.

The End.

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 It Happened One Night

It Happened One Night - Silk

It was one of Cascade's finer restaurants. Not generally affordable on Jim Ellison's pay as a detective with the Cascade PD, it fell into the category of bridge-building. His date was Carolyn Plummer, head of Technical Support at the PD. But Jim knew her better as his ex-wife.

At the end of his stint in the Army as a Ranger, Jim was lost in the wilds of Peru for a year and a half. Hailed as a hero upon his return, he became a police officer, rising quickly through the ranks due to a significant closure rate. In search of that inexplicable something that everyone needs in his life, Jim quickly romanced and married Carolyn. They were just as quickly divorced eighteen months later.

Despite the fact that they never had all that much in common, Jim was reluctant to give up on his relationship with Carolyn. It wasn't so much denial as fear of being alone. Cast out. Misunderstood. That was something he was well-acquainted with.

Now that he was having trouble with his senses, he didn't know where to turn. As a detective with Major Crime, Jim worked for Captain Simon Banks, a gruff, cigar-smoking black man who would have towered over him, no matter how tall he was. Simon had been his mentor as well as his boss when Jim came into Major Crime from Vice. In so many ways, he had turned Jim's life around. When Jim was in Vice, he was set on a collision course heading straight for disaster. But Simon and Jim's partner, Jack Prendergast, changed all that.

But there was still no denying that Jim was a son-of-a-bitch to work with and even worse to live with. That was something that Carolyn would be glad to attest to. She loved Jim, but she was no longer "in love" with him. She wanted him to be happy, but in truth, she doubted that it was possible.

Still, she had her moments.

Like this dinner with Jim. She offered to pay for her half of the meal, but Jim wouldn't allow it. When she considered the man he had been, she found it hard to reconcile that man with the one he was now. Rigid, unyielding, unable to bend. But with all that iron control, if he were given one good push, he would shatter once and for all. And this time, she wasn't so sure he could put himself back together.

"Why are we here?" Jim looked weary. He hadn't been sleeping since his senses began raging out of control. Every little noise was amplified beyond belief, right down to the sound of his skin scraping against the woolen blanket, and he suffered from constant headaches, no doubt brought on by the overwhelming sensory bombardment.

"Dinner. And yours is getting cold." Carolyn gestured at his plate with her fork and Jim sighed.

"We haven't had dinner together since last July."

"I know. I just thought we should catch up."

She meant well. He knew she did. But he had no patience for any more conversation about her sister's wedding or her father's idiosyncratic way of coping with it. What in God's name did gutting salmon have to do with **him**?

"Look, I liked your sister okay, but right now I could give a rat's ass about the Plummer family newsletter." Jim rubbed his forehead with his fingertips and winced. Even that hurt.

"I'm sorry. I've asked you out before. You've always turned me down. Why tonight? Did Simon put you up to this? Are you supposed to get me to go back to work? Is that it?"

"No!" she automatically protested. The look on his face was compelling. "Okay, yes."

"It won't work."

"I know."

"So don't bother."

"I won't."

"Good."

Jim handed his wineglass to the waiter. "Could I get another one of these, please?"

Carolyn waited until the waiter moved away, eyeing Jim carefully. She thought she knew him, but then again, did she really know **this** man? "You know, Jim, you're not the first cop who's ever lost a suspect," referring to the incident that brought Jim to this point.

Jim's pale blue eyes flickered back and forth anxiously. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But if you did talk about it, maybe I could help you." She reached across the table and trapped his hand with hers. He stared at her hand. The smell, the textures, the pattern of the tiny hairs that grew on the back of her hand.... He was mesmerized.

"Jim? Jim!"

With a start, he shook his head and blinked sleepily at her. As if the intervening space between them did not exist. "Let's just drop it, okay?"

"Sure, why should I expect anything to be different?" she snapped bitterly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jim's eyes narrowed their focus to Carolyn's face, but it was a struggle.

"Light's out. No one's home. Or if there is, how would I know?" Suddenly she stood up. "I give up."

"Good. I'd like to eat my dinner now."

Carolyn wondered what things might have been like if Jim had trusted her enough to let her in. That was the real problem between them. Not sex. The sex was great. What there was of it. But Jim always held back that piece of himself, that crucial piece, and that was what **she** needed for them to be truly intimate. Oh, what was the use?

Jim took a bite of his food, tasting nothing. "Where are you going?"

"Home. I can get more out of my toaster."

Carolyn's attempt at sarcasm was lost on Jim. He was too busy coughing and choking. Jumping up, he clutched at his throat, then grabbed his wineglass, draining it in one huge swallow. When that didn't help, he began moving to nearby tables, reaching blindly and knocking over glasses.

For all her experience as a police officer, Carolyn could do nothing but stand and watch. She had no idea what was going on. "He's choking! Jim! What's wrong?"

The same waiter who replenished his wine earlier ran to Jim's side. Jim pointed at the plate on his table. "What the hell is in this?"

"Herbs and paprika, I think. Do you have a food allergy?"

"No! Maybe this is your cook's idea of a joke."

Aghast at the suggestion, the waiter drew back. "No, sir."

Carolyn reached for the fork and took a tiny bite of Jim's food. She didn't taste anything unusual. "Nothing.

"There's nothing in your food, Jim. I don't know what's going on with you. Just-" She patted his arm, feeling completely useless, but damn glad to be on her way out. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

With that, she left. The only woman he had ever cared enough about to make some sort of a commitment to probably thought he was crazy. Well, so did he. His body still reeling from its peculiar reaction to his food, Jim realized that his anger had not dissipated. He still needed answers, dammit. And there was only one way he was going to get them.

The waiter hovered anxiously, anticipating that Jim would want to speak to the manager. However, Jim bypassed the dapper little man, preferring to go directly to the source. The cook.

Brushing by the manager and the waiter, Jim stormed into the kitchen, pushing the door so hard that it swung into the wall. The entire line of pots and pans hanging from the ceiling shook, then began to fall, one by one, with a terrible clatter. Jim covered his ears and groaned, doubling over from the pain.

When he could stand again, he was pale as a sheet, not to mention diaphoretic. Tiny beads of sweat stood out all over his face, but he wasn't hot. Oh, no. He was cold. So cold. He was dangerously close to slipping into shock.

And then it happened. **He** came. "Whoa, man, you are in serious danger of tripping out here. Lean on me. That's it."

Jim blinked. He didn't even know who this fool was, but he instinctively followed the direction of his voice. What did that mean?

"Who are you?"

Taken aback by the thinly veiled contempt in that voice, the cook took a step back. Glancing warily at Jim, he said, "Name's Blair Sandburg. What's yours?"

"Jim Ellison. I'm a detective with the Cascade PD."

Blair gulped. "Something wrong, officer?"

"Yeah, I'll say, Chief. I want to speak to the cook."

"I'm the cook, man."

"Riiight. Pull the other one, Short Stuff."

"I'm serious. I work here, man. I'm the cook."

Jim grimaced as though he smelled something bad. "You? You look like you couldn't whip up a cake in an Easy-Bake Oven, kid."

Sandburg seemed considerably younger than Jim. He looked to be about 25, tops. Jim scrutinized the so-called cook. He wasn't tall, perhaps 5'8" at best. Average weight for his size. No, compact, even muscular, to look at those thighs. Long, dark brown curly hair. Some kind of highlights, though he couldn't tell what exactly because of the overhead fluorescents. Dark blue eyes. A man could get lost in those eyes. And that mouth. Made for kissing. Or fucking. Jesus, what was he thinking? Is this what dinner with his ex did to him?

"I'm not a fucking kid. I'm 30."

"Oh, come on, I've got shirts older than you are."

"Can't say much for your taste in shirts then."

"Okay, sunshine, you're the cook. What did you put in my dinner?"

"Your--? Man, I don't even know you! Why would I put something in your dinner?"

"Look, I just had an allergic reaction out there in the dining room. I nearly choked to death! **Someone** put something in my dinner!"

"Do you have food allergies?"

"No!" Jim shouted, losing the battle to keep his temper in check.

"O-kay...."

"Don't patronize me! I'm not making this up!"

"I'm sure you're not, I just don't see what I've got to do with anything."

"You...you...I..." Suddenly Jim didn't know either. But he was blindingly angry and all that anger had no place to go.

Grabbing Blair by the shoulders, Jim shoved the younger man up against the wall, knocking down several more pots and pans. Jim's face so close that Blair could feel his breath on his lips, Blair struggled vainly to get free. But only for a moment. The truth was, Jim's fists clenched around the collar of his shirt was a powerful turn-on. All it took was one errant thought of what it might be like for Jim's hands to touch his bare skin, anywhere at all, and Blair was as hard as a rock.

"Listen, you neo-hippie witch doctor punk, I don't care if you put some kind of herbal concoction into my food or you cast some kind of fucking spell over me, but you'd better do something about it before I haul your cute little ass into jail!"

Blair could barely breathe, but he looked directly into those pale blue eyes and kissed his chances of an easy escape goodbye. He wanted to get caught by this man. "You think my ass is cute?"

"I-say, what are you trying to do?"

All at once Jim's senses quieted. As if someone had thrown a switch, all of the clicks, pops and whirs that flooded Jim's tortured brain stopped. "What did you do?"

"Um...excuse me?"

"What did you do? You must have done something! The noise in my head-it's gone!"

"You hear voices, man?"

"Sometimes," Jim replied absently. It didn't occur to him that might be a poor answer to give someone who thought he was crazy in the first place.

"Heh heh. Maybe it was **my** voice that did the trick."

"Are you hypnotizing me?" To Blair's astonishment, the detective took his comment seriously.

"Come on, man. What do you think, I have the magic touch?"

Jim's fists unclenched, releasing Blair from his precarious position. Cocking his head to the side, Jim listened. "The engaged couple at Table 4 want to thank you personally for your contribution to their future happiness," he intoned without inflection. "Hey, what did you do for them, sleep with the bride?"

"Helloo, Detective Ellison, I've been busy in my kitchen all night long. Just because **you** find me irresistibly attractive doesn't mean that anyone else does."

"Who said I find you attractive, Chief?"

"You are such a dick, man," Blair chuckled.

"That's detective to you."

"No, I mean you're a real **dick**, dammit."

"Takes one to know one," Jim teased. A moment later, he was wondering if he was feverish from his reaction to the food. Could this be the same angry man who stormed the battlements earlier?

Annoyed at himself for even entertaining the idea of sleeping with another man, and a young, irresponsible hippie wiseass at that, Jim said, "Look, you can't help me. Hell, I can't even help myself at this point. I'll just let you get back to your cooking."

"Wait, man. Maybe we can help each other."

"Do what, Darwin? You're a cook. I'm a cop. An about-to-be-fucked over cop, if I don't get my act together soon," Jim added under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

Jim raked a hand over his face, ordering his rampant arousal to stand down immediately before Sandburg noticed. "Umm...it's kinda hard to explain."

"Try me," Blair chirped brightly, his blue eyes sparkling.

"Do you **always** get so excited?"

Blair instantly became the very picture of contrition. "Jeez, I'm sorry, man. It's just...it's been a long time for me."

"For what?" Jim couldn't help but ask, wondering what the answer would be like.

Blair's eyes crinkled at the corners as he laughed softly, and Jim fought desperately against the pull of the attraction stretching between them. If he didn't know better, he would say he was falling in love. But that just couldn't be. It wasn't on his program. If there was one thing that Jim was, it was a creature of habit with an obsessive-compulsive streak a mile long. He didn't like change.

But he didn't think he was going to be given a choice this time.

"I'm a grad student in the Anthropology department at Rainier-"

"Thought you said you were a cook."

"I am. Now." Blair heaved a sigh and gestured with his hands, his energy crackling around him like an aura that Jim swore he could sense. "I'm studying for my doctorate, but my grant ran out. Sooooo...until it gets renewed, here I am."

"O-kayyyy, Chief, if you say so, but what does that have to do with me?"

"Were you really able to hear that couple out in the dining room?"

"Yeah. So what? It wasn't exactly a scintillating conversation."

"You're missing the point, Jim. Can I call you Jim?" At Jim's nod, Blair continued. "You heard a conversation that was taking place at least 100 feet away. Behind closed doors. With all the ambient noise that surrounds a busy restaurant."

"I have good hearing."

Blair snorted. "Evidently. Are any of your other senses like that?"

"Like what?"

"Enhanced. Hypersensitive." At Jim's blank look, he offered, "Extra touchy feely?"

Jim blushed at where his thoughts took him. Straight to bed with a vengeance. "Um, that's personal. Could we skip that part?"

"Sheesh, I didn't ask you whether you wanted to fuck me. Now **that** would have been personal." When all Jim could manage was a dumbfounded look, Blair coughed. "By the way, you do, don't you?"

"Christ."

"Not quite. I have been called a god once or twice, but no, I don't have any aspirations other than to get my doctorate."

He must have sensed that Jim was ready to bolt. Gripping Jim's arm, Blair said, "Talk to me, Jim. Tell me what it's been like for you."

To his surprise, Jim did just that. He described the way things had been going rapidly downhill ever since his senses went spiraling out of control. During the entire time that Jim was speaking, Blair regarded him avidly, even hungrily. It was as if he could not get enough information about Jim Ellison and whatever it was that made Jim Ellison tick.

When Jim was done, Blair's eyes were gleaming. "You don't know how amazing you are, do you?"

"What? We're not talking about me leaping buildings in a single bound here, Sandburg. So far all I've got is a lot of static on most of my wavelengths. How does that translate into a positive for you?"

"Well, sure, you're having problems. That's because you don't know how to **control** your senses."

"No kidding. And you do?"

"Well, no." Jim's face twisted with disappointment. "But I could figure it out. Hey, I'm a sharp guy. I know what's wrong with you. Hell, I oughta, it's the basis for my thesis."

When he felt that he had Jim's full attention, he continued excitedly. "Y'see, there was this guy. Sir Richard Burton. The explorer, not the actor. He wrote this monograph way back in-well, that's not important," he said, noting that Jim's eyes were starting to glaze over. "What is important is that Burton hypothesized that there were people who were given a certain genetic advantage. Burton called them Sentinels. These Sentinels used their enhanced senses to watch for approaching enemies, changes in the weather, movement of game. In tribal cultures, survival depended on them."

"Okay, but what does this have to do with me?"

"I've got hundreds of cases of people with one or two heightened senses. Not one with all **five**. You could be the real thing, Jim."

"And what do you get out of this?"

"My doctorate. My thesis, man. With someone like you as my subject, the committee might re-evaluate my grant status early, give me back my teaching position."

Jim's ice-blue eyes went dead. For a moment, Blair feared that there was something seriously wrong. Then he realized what he'd said. How he'd said it.

"Oh, no, Jim, I didn't mean that was like my only interest in you, man."

"Right," Jim said flatly.

He'd had him right where he wanted him. This close to letting Blair inside his carefully-erected defenses. But he'd blown it. Jim clearly thought Blair was an opportunist. Set to perch himself atop Jim's bones and pick him clean.

"Jim, I know how that must have sounded. I'm sorry, man. Let me explain."

"I've gotta go. Is there a back way out of this place?"

Blair tried to stop the older man, but it was like getting in the way of a train. Pushing open the back door, Jim stepped out into the alleyway. Behind him, Blair yelled, "Wait, Jim! There's something else I have to warn you about!"

A shard of broken glass glinted in the moonlight, catching Jim's eye. Suddenly he couldn't look away. The light was so incredibly...white.

A truck horn sounded, but Jim didn't move. He reached out a hand to touch the glass, oblivious to the truck bearing down on him. From out of nowhere, Blair appeared. Reacting quickly, Blair tackled the larger man, throwing both of them to the ground in time for the truck to pass over them with a huge whoosh.

Close. Close. That was too fucking close. Blair shuddered to think of what might have happened if he hadn't gotten there in time. Then he shivered to realize that he was lying on top of Jim, his forgotten erection surging to life with renewed purpose. Shit, he wondered what Jim was thinking. Almost run over by a truck and now another man's dick nudging the crack in his ass.

Jim rolled over, toppling the younger man to the ground. "Ugh." Blair jumped up, his feet almost dancing, as he tried to brush off the dirt from the alley. But that was a bad idea. Brushing his hand across his already over-stimulated cock only served to make him harder.

Jim lay there for a minute, looking up at Blair with wide-eyed wonder. "You saved my life."

Blair grinned cheekily. "Um, yeah."

He got to his feet slowly. "So...what happened?"

"**That** was what Burton called the zone-out factor. Sometimes a Sentinel gets so focused on the details, he loses sight of the bigger picture."

"So...you're saying that these Sentinels needed someone to watch their backs?"

"Exactly."

"Are you...volunteering for the position, Chief?" Jim moved stealthily, trapping the younger man within his embrace. His eyes looked anything but glacial now. His mouth, oh, God, his mouth was so achingly close to touching his that Blair wanted to cry out, Kiss me, dammit.

"Would you accept if I did?"

Jim smiled enigmatically. "That depends. Just how close did these Sentinels get with their...what would you call them?"

"Guides?" Blair could barely breathe. His heart felt like it was going to pound right out of his chest. He wanted to kiss Jim so badly, he could taste it, but he was afraid. Afraid of fucking things up again.

"Yeah. You want to be my Guide, Chief?"

"That depends. Just how close would you let your Guide get, Jim?"

Jim let his fingers trail along the side of Blair's face in an artless caress. "I wouldn't kick you out of bed."

"Oh, fuck."

"Kiss me first. I'm an old-fashioned guy."

Jim pulled the younger man behind him in an effort to clear a path to his truck as soon as humanly possible. Blair tried to get Jim's attention, but the detective was as far away as if he were zoned. Finally Blair was forced to dig his heels in and hope for the best. "Jim?"

No answer.

"Oh, Jimmm," Blair sang, trying to see if that did the trick.

"Jim!" he said in a soft but firm voice.

Like a well-trained dog brought to heel, Jim turned to face his would-be lover, a question in his eyes. "Yes?"

"I can't leave right now."

"Why not?" Jim sounded more than annoyed. He sounded seriously pissed.

"I'd lose my job."

"Fuck your job."

"Hey, man, that's easy for you to say. You're a big deal detective. I'm just struggling to keep a roof over my head. Besides, Larry would never forgive me if I didn't maintain him in the style he's become accustomed to, man."

"Who the fuck is Larry?" Jim demanded, his light blue eyes now tinted shards of ice.

Blair grinned unrepentantly at the older man. "We live together. Hey, you'd love him. Larry's a real sweetheart. He's got the nicest disposition and-

"I'm not into threesomes."

"Oh, no, man, you've got it all wrong. Larry's just-

"I don't give a fuck **who** Larry is. I want you all to myself. Is that clear? I don't share."

"Whoa. There's something you ought to know, Jim, before you go making exclusive commitments here-

All at once Jim buried his face in Blair's deliciously scented curls. "I don't want you to belong to anybody else, Chief. I know we just met, and maybe this is scaring the hell out of you, too, but I've never felt this way before. Not even about my ex."

"That the uptight chick who was looking daggers at you all through dinner?"

Jim drew back abruptly. "You saw Carolyn and me?"

Blair had the grace to blush. "I...might have peeked...just a little bit. To see what all the fuss was about."

"Riiight."

"Okay, I was checking out my competition," Blair reluctantly admitted.

"Chief, I don't know if you realize it or not, but you have **no** competition."

"Wow. Way to turn a guy's head, Jim."

With a faint smile, Jim turned on his heel and headed back the way he'd come. Blair raced after him and got there first, insinuating his body between Jim and the door. "Where are you going now, man?"

"Inside. To see the manager."

"About what, man?"

"About you, Chief. What do you think?"

"Tell me you're not going in there to get me fired, Jim."

"Even the slaves got freed, Sandburg."

"How will I live? What about Lar-"

"You can come live with me in the loft. As for Larry, I apologize for what this sounds like, but frankly, I don't give a shit what happens to him."

"He's a poor defenseless animal, man."

"I don't care what he's like in bed, Chief." Jim winced as if the mere thought of Blair being with someone else gave him a physical pang. "I want you."

"Do I get a vote in all this? Or are you planning to run roughshod over me, too?" The last thing Blair wanted was to drive Jim away, but he wasn't about to become someone's rent boy either.

Jim took a half-step back, but Blair grabbed the lapels of his shirt, making further movement impossible. "Jim...I don't want to be your kept man."

"Isn't that what Larry is to you?" he countered almost angrily.

Blair rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow and began to smile. "Well, actually-"

"Well, actually **what**?"

"Larry's an ape."

"That's cold, Chief."

"No, no, I mean, Larry is a Barbary Ape. A monkey? Part of an experiment I'm running? Or **was** running, I should say, till the money ran out."

There was a long pause as Jim considered this last bit of information. "You're telling the truth?"

Blair nodded.

Jim heaved a great sigh of relief. As he relaxed, his entire body weight began to press Blair into the door, a fact that went unnoticed until Blair protested, albeit weakly. "You're crushing me, man." Chuckling under his breath, he continued, "Not that that's necessarily a bad thing. I could think of a number of situations where I'd seriously enjoy being crushed, um, under your body, I mean."

Jim kissed him, temporarily interrupting the flow of words. Winding his fingers through Blair's long dark hair, he whispered against his mouth, "Come home with me, Chief. Please."

Blair was nothing if not impulsive and well-used to relying on his instincts. Leaving his job was a big step to take on faith. But the minute he opened his mouth, he knew what he was going to say. "Okay, Jim."

Implying that he was doing his best to keep the restaurant from becoming embroiled in a major lawsuit, Blair obfuscated his little heart out. In the end, the manager was so grateful that Blair was going to take care of things that he agreed to take him back at some unspecified date in the future. Blair knew what people often thought about him. That he was incapable of thought beyond the moment. But he was far more complex than that. He wanted this relationship to work. Jim was worth sacrificing his job. But he wasn't stupid.

He had never been involved in a long-term relationship before. He honestly didn't know if he could make that kind of commitment, but he wanted to try. More than anything else, he wanted to try.

But as he rejoined Jim outside the restaurant door, he was struck by the magnitude of what he was undertaking. What if Jim just wanted a one-night stand? What if Jim, who admittedly was just coming off a bad marriage, was only experimenting with his attraction to Blair? What if Blair was putting his heart and soul on the line, only to find them in jeopardy?

What if, what if, what if. He silenced the dissenting voices in his head. He would seduce Jim. He would make himself necessary for his very survival. Because the truth was, Blair was beginning to think that the tall, well-built Sentinel was responsible for **his** survival.

Jim couldn't keep his hands off Blair. He was constantly touching his hair, his face, his thigh. It was as if touching Blair grounded Jim in some way, kept his senses within a bearable range. But he didn't want it to be that. Or at least, not only that.

He wanted Blair to be with him, to love **him**, Jim Ellison. Not some idealized version of himself. Not the embodiment of his life's work. Not some fictitious Holy Grail come to life. If they were two halves of the same whole, it would be a dream come true, for Jim suddenly realized that was what he needed. Not someone **like** him. But someone who could fill the empty spaces within him. And there were so many.

When they finally pulled up in front of the loft, Jim hesitated before he opened the door of the truck. "Come upstairs and see your new home, Chief," he said shyly.

"You sure about this, man?"

"100 percent."

Silence reigned in the elevator until it dislodged its passengers on the third floor. "That way," Jim indicated.

Jim gave his would-be lover a gentle push in the small of his back towards the door of #307. "That's my place."

They were no sooner across the threshold than Jim had the door closed and locked behind them. Blair opened his mouth to say, "Are you sure about this?", but the words never made it past his lips. Jim seized his mouth, his tongue plundering its way inside like the most rapacious of pirates.

"Mmm," the younger man sighed, wrapping his arms around Jim's neck. His long, well-shaped fingers clutched at Jim's short hair, the roughened pads of his fingertips intermittently stroking his nape.

Jim's hands slid down Blair's back to cup the curves of his buttocks. In seconds, Blair broke away, gasping for air, moaning, "No, too close."

"Already?" Jim smiled. He was no slouch when it came to making love, but no one, not even Carolyn, had ever tried to slow him down because things were getting too intense too quickly.

"Yeah," Blair answered huskily.

"I think I can fix that."

In one smooth movement, he lifted Blair and placed him on the kitchen counter. His hand went to the top snap of Blair's jeans and froze at the touch of Blair's hand on his.

"No, man, I want this to be mutual."

"So do I, Chief. But think of this as something extra, a way to take the edge off. You want to last, don't you? When I fuck you?"

If Jim's words were mesmerizing, his actions were even more so. He was licking a path from Blair's hairline to his neck. The young anthropologist-cum-cook squirmed in his arms. "Actually, Jim, I was hoping that you'd, um, let me fuck you."

"I...I don't know. I've never let anyone do that before." His voice was hushed, clearly laden with some emotion that he was unable to express.

Blair's face fell. "I understand, man. It's not like we know each other all that well-"

"Chief...Blair, I feel like I've known you all my life. The fact is, I have a problem with relinquishing control. Even the idea makes my dick go limp. And yet...I find that I can deny you nothing."

"So?"

"So if you're willing to risk a major attack of impotence here, I'll do it."

No one had ever trusted him like that. Not even his mother, Naomi. It gave him a feeling of power that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with love. "Oh, Jim. You are so fucking beautiful." With that, Blair reached up and kissed Jim quite tenderly, belying the obvious passion throbbing between the two men.

A moment later, Blair hopped off the kitchen counter, a man with an agenda. "You go take a shower, Jim. I'm going to make dinner."

"Dinner? I was trying to eat dinner when I had that allergic reaction, Chief. Maybe I shouldn't eat anything else."

"Maybe you should leave these things to the trained chef, Jim."

"I thought you turned out to be an anthropologist."

"I am. But I am a man of many talents, Jim, and if you're lucky, you'll get to experience several of them tonight."

There was no mistaking the sexual meaning Blair implied. Jim's mouth went dry at the prospect of the younger man touching him in his most intimate places. "I'll go take that shower now," he whispered.

"You do that."

Blair was in his element now. A full-sized, well-stocked, kitchen to work in. It was a cook's dream, and Blair wasn't wasting one single bit of the knowledge he had acquired in the past year.

He was going to prepare a feast. He was going to make a meal out of Jim Ellison.

Blair's talents did not lie exclusively in the field of anthropology. As soon as Jim walked into the living room, his lower body sheathed in a towel, he whistled. "Whoa, Chief! Suddenly I feel like I'm wearing way too many clothes!"

"You are," said the naked young man. He moved forward to pluck Jim's towel from around his hips, and the older man drew him into a

fierce embrace. His lips buried in Blair's dark curls, he whispered something unintelligible.

Small dishes of delicacies and desserts decorated the living room. Some were sweet, some spicy, but all of them were within reaching distance of Blair Sandburg, chef extraordinaire.

Blair took Jim's towel and spread it on the carpet, creating a makeshift bed for them to lie upon. Once Jim was lying on his back, Blair straddled him, his half-hard cock resting on his lover's firm abdomen. "Oh, my God."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, Jim."

He stirred the first container. It was filled with stuffed mushrooms. One at a time, Blair placed them on Jim's nipples. "Mmm, they look delicious."

"**You** look delicious," said Jim, his fingers caressing the cleft of Blair's ass.

"I meant, you look good enough to eat."

"So do you."

Bending his head, Blair took a mushroom into his mouth, the motions of chewing against his bare skin driving Jim crazy. When he was quite sure that he had licked Jim's now-erect nipple clean, he moved on to the next. This time, however, he held the mushroom in his mouth. Sealing his mouth over Jim's, he transferred the marinated mushroom by way of an incredibly intimate kiss.

"Jesus," groaned Jim.

They took turns feeding each other, popping the tasty morsels into one another's mouths, following each addition with a series of sizzling kisses. After they ran the gamut of nearly every item in Blair's repertoire, they were both breathless and yearning for union.

Slowly Blair began to ladle chocolate syrup down the center of Jim's body. It was chilled compared to the mushrooms, which were almost hot, and the shift in temperature made Jim's senses sit up and take notice. Along with his cock.

Blair shook the can of whipped cream before applying a small dab to his nipples, his armpits, and his navel. When he saw how Jim's eyes gleamed, he chuckled and traced a line along the inside of Jim's inner thigh. "You're going to kill me."

"Nope, I'm going to eat you."

Blair was a man of his word. He sucked and laved the rigid little nubs that threatened to pierce the cream. With a throaty growl, he buried his face inside Jim's armpits, tugging gently on the hair he found there. Then he began the inexorable journey down Jim's body towards his navel.

His tongue swirling around his navel, he paid particular attention to where the chocolate syrup had pooled. He circled his lover's dick with his tongue, teasing him by moving closer, only to dart away before making actual contact.

Carefully licking his way along the inside of Jim's thigh, he let his tongue flick out to caress the heavy balls there. When he could wait no longer to taste Jim's cock, he daubed a bit of whipped cream on its tip. After several tantalizing forays, he eventually swallowed his hardened length, warming it in his mouth before he began to suck in earnest.

Jim arched up off the towel, his groan of approval sounding overly loud in the otherwise silent room. By the time Jim was ready to come, Blair was panting, his own weeping dick letting him know that he couldn't postpone the moment. Breaking away from Jim with an audible pop, he heard Jim's discontented sigh.

"Don't worry, Jim, I'm going to make this good for us both."

Coating his straining erection with vegetable oil, Blair then quickly prepared Jim for its intrusion into his body. One finger, two fingers, three fingers. Jim was responding to Blair's touch with alacrity. It wouldn't be long now. He would be inside Jim.

"Turn over onto your stomach, Jim."

Jim shook his head. "I want to see you. See your face. Watch you fuck me. Watch you come."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus God, do it, Blair! Please!"

Blair placed the oil-slicked head of his cock at the entrance to Jim's snug passage. Slowly he pushed, feeling the initial resistance of the ring of muscle guarding the inner recesses fade to nothing. Suddenly he was in.

Jim sighed again, but this time it was the sound of a man contemplating the fulfillment of his heart's desire. "Ohhhh, yesssss...."

Once Blair began to move inside him, Jim was lost. Thrusting his hips upwards, he sought completion and found it. When he came, he

spattered Blair's chest, provoking Blair to wipe a finger through it and lick it. That led to an erotic overload that Blair simply could not withstand. Bucking wildly, he came inside Jim, his hot essence filling the narrow channel to overflowing.

Reluctantly withdrawing from him, Blair settled atop Jim's rock-hard body, his own senses suddenly all a-quiver. He was wet and slick and sticky...and he wouldn't change a moment of it if he could.

"Jim?" he whispered.

"Yeah, babe?" Jim mumbled sleepily.

"Did you, um, like it?"

"Like it? I **loved** it. Couldn't you tell?"

"Um, yeah, I guess so. It's just that--"

"Spit it out, Chief."

"Are we going to, like, do this again sometime?"

All at once Blair sounded so shy and so tentative that Jim realized his error. He had been so intent on letting go of his hard-won control that he neglected to tell Blair how he felt. Not that it would be easy. Not for Jim.

"Chief, I'm not as good with words as you--"

"Liar. There are very few words I want to hear with this kind of desperation. If you can't guess what they are, you're fucking hopeless."

"I want you to stay, Blair."

Blair snuggled closer, his mouth all but caressing Jim's chest. "Good start. More, please."

"I want us to be together."

"As?"

"As a real couple. I don't know if I'm ready to come out at work or anything like that, but--"

Blair kissed the underside of his chin. "You're doing great for a guy who doesn't grasp the English language. Keep going."

"I don't know what else you want me to say."

"Yes, you do."

"Well, maybe I do," Jim colored, "but I don't think I can say it."

Blair rubbed his face against Jim's bare skin, his long eyelashes brushing the tiny little hairs there. "Is it okay if I say it?"

"Can I stop you?" Jim asked, a smile softening his features.

"I love you."

"You sure about that, Chief?"

"Oh, yeah," he murmured, closing his eyes.

When he was certain that Blair was asleep, he cradled the younger man in his arms and huffed gently into his hair. "Then in that case, I love you, too."

Blair smiled in his sleep.

End

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 Hot For Teacher

Hot For Teacher - Roxanne

Blair Sandburg sighed at the stack of papers in front of him. He'd read over each of them once just to determine how much his class had absorbed from his lectures and to compare subjects and writing styles. Now all that was left to do was grade them. Well, grade most of them. He lifted the top paper and scanned through the text one more time. He'd been tempted to mark it up with bright red comments ... comebacks to the accusations rather than annotations of his thoughts on the inappropriateness of the text on the page. But then wouldn't that

just make him as immature as the author?

He'd never read anything quite like the paper before. It was littered with both profanity and hatred, mostly directed at him. Blair considered himself pretty much a man of the world, but some of the words used were new to him ... at least in the context they'd been used. And he was pretty sure that several of the suggestions were just physically impossible. Blair pulled his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes, suddenly feeling very tired.

Six years as a high school sociology teacher had done little to dampen his natural exuberance. Blair knew he was a popular teacher ... closer in age to his students than any of the rest of the faculty. He could still relate to teenage hormones and youthful idealism and never feeling like you fit in anywhere and that made him a buddy to some and a mentor to others. That's one reason why this paper was such a slap in the face. Could this be Blair's wake-up call that now he was old enough to be considered the enemy?

General education classes at Rainier couldn't have prepared him for the ordeal ahead, but growing up as Naomi's hippie son should have. He was used to talking to people who didn't like him ... who took one look at him and made their prejudices known. Tagging along behind his flighty mother, following her right into arguments with Moslems about the Ayatollah and Cuban exiles about Fidel. Blair wasn't afraid of a clash of opinions, but angry parents were always more about emotion than logic.

But Blair had chosen to be a teacher and this was just one more aspect of the job that he had to face in a few short minutes ... another angry parent of another troubled kid. That still didn't mean he had to look forward to it. Blair put his glasses back on and glanced down at the page, eyes focusing on the profanity scattered throughout the essay. A simple assignment on patriarchal societies in Central America had turned into an obscene diatribe on Blair's own questionable parentage. Now he got to explain to the dad that yes, his wonderful son would likely get kicked off the school basketball team if Blair turned in a failing grade for the semester.

Will Ellison was 17-years-old, 6'3", thin but muscular with sandy blond hair and icy blue eyes. He was drop dead gorgeous with chiseled features and perfect skin, a star athlete and one of the most disturbed kids that Blair had ever had in a class. He wasn't disruptive ... that might have been easier to deal with. Blair had experience with class clowns, kids with anger issues and those so hyperactive that they were in a constant state of motion. But no, Will was quiet to the point of unresponsiveness. He never talked in class, didn't seem to have any friends and was openly hostile to all figures of authority. He'd turned in a few assignments so Blair could tell he was intelligent, but he never talked in class and spent the biggest part of his time staring out the window.

Blair had tried to get copies of his past records to figure out what the deal was on the kid, but they had been lost in the morass of bureaucracy that ruled Lincoln High School. The principal had made some remark about "troubles" and "isn't it sad", but when pressed for details, she always had something better to do. Will had transferred to the school on Cascade's industrial west side in November which, frankly, was an odd time of year for a move. All Blair knew was that he'd come from Hazel Crest, an extremely wealthy suburb of Cascade late in the semester, had been an honor student there and had immediately been recruited for Lincoln's basketball team. It was the only thing that seemed to hold the boy's interest.

Blair had seen him on the basketball court. Will had a grace and agility that made the other players look like a team of computer nerds. He could run. He could shoot. He was an intense competitor ... intuitive and ruthless. Coach O'Neal loved him. The fans loved him. The other players hated him.

The sound of a man clearing his throat interrupted Blair's thoughts. He immediately stood and turned to face Will's dad with his hand extended. His first glimpse of the man took his breath away ... his first touch was electric. Blair knew right away where the boy got his good looks. His dad was stunning ... tall and muscular with darker hair but the same piercing blue eyes. His elegant bone structure could have made him a pretty boy, but the set of his jaw and the faint lines of age just made him extraordinarily handsome. Ellison wore a gray overcoat over a charcoal gray business suit. All that gray just seemed to make his blue eyes more intense.

"I'm Jim Ellison," the man said. "Will's uncle. I understand there's a problem."

Blair blinked at the introduction. Will's uncle? Why in God's name was his uncle here when the note had specified a meeting with one of Will's parents. Blair had assumed the father would come ... fathers always came when athletic sons were involved in trouble. If the kid was just your average nobody, the mother would show up. But if the kid had a shot at the big league, Dad was on the job.

Maybe this was the cause of some of Will's problems. Maybe his parents didn't even care enough to meet with his teachers. Or maybe he'd been such a problem to them that he'd been shipped off to live with his strict uncle. Blair could certainly relate to that. His mom had dumped him at a few "uncles'" houses when the precocious brat got on her nerves once too often.

"I'm Blair Sandburg," he began in his most professional manner. "I think there must be some kind of misunderstanding. I can't really discuss this matter with anyone other than one of Will's parents."

Ellison dropped his hand and said, "Please, let me explain."

Blair wondered why they'd been holding each other's hand the whole time. Maybe it hadn't really been that long ... just a fleeting moment ... a connection made, then severed.

The older man looked uncomfortable as his eyes darted around the shabby classroom. Blair suddenly wished to god he looked more grown up. His curly hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, but he could feel the wispy strands that had come free over the course of the day and were now hanging in ringlets around his face. Blair was wearing his oldest jeans, a black and white flannel shirt over a red Henley and beat-up sneakers on his feet. He was lucky that he could dress comfortably at his job. The thought of wearing a suit to work each day made

him cringe.

The older Ellison didn't seem to notice Blair's unease. He was far too busy scrutinizing the classroom. Blair was immediately embarrassed by his surroundings. Will obviously came from money. How he'd ended up in this rundown part of town, Blair didn't know. Blair had been to a union meeting once at Will's former high school. It was this huge state-of-the-art techno-complex with computers for every student and Xerox machines that actually worked ... a far cry from Lincoln High School. Lincoln was the kind of place where you could spend the entire day looking for a bathroom with a door that shut right.

The school building had been erected in the 20s and Blair's classroom had probably only been painted once or twice since then. Large cracks spidered up the tan walls and posters from around the world did little to cover the peeling paint. An ancient computer sat in the back corner. Blair had brought it from home and paid for the Internet connection himself. Three broken desks were piled in the opposite corner. Those that remained intact were heavily marred and arranged in a circle from his last class's discussion period.

Blair gestured for Ellison to take a seat in the largest of the student desks and he moved to the one next to it. He sat down and rested his elbows on the desk top while Ellison removed his overcoat and laid it neatly across an empty chair before sitting down. Once seated, Ellison crossed his arms in front of him. His body language screamed impatience, but his face showed only concern.

"I'm Will's guardian, Mr. Sandburg. I thought you knew. Will's parents are both deceased. They were killed last fall. He came to live with me after their murder. That information should have all been in the paperwork that was sent over from his last school."

There was an edge of impatience in the man's quiet voice. He was obviously a man that didn't tolerate screw-ups well.

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Ellison," Blair said quickly. "I've never been able to review any of that material. I was told by the principal that Will's records were lost and she did not give me any other information about him ... just that he was a transfer student and a hell of a basketball player. Had I known that was the situation, I certainly would have taken it into consideration before calling you in."

"Call me Jim. And no ... no, I need to know what's happening with him. Will's my responsibility now," Jim responded. He brushed off the apology with a flick of his hand.

"Perhaps you could give me some background on Will before I start then. What kind of kid was he before this happened with his parents? He seems very troubled now ... which is entirely understandable, but I can't get him to open up at all."

Jim face clouded with sadness and the broad shoulders sagged slightly. He was silent for several moments, studying the names and obscenities carved into the oak desktop, before he began to tell Blair his story.

"I was never particularly close to my brother. I left home when he was in high school and hadn't seen him since. Our mom left when he was little and our dad ... well ... there were problems. Apparently, Stephen had Will when he was 17. He married the girl and they both put themselves through college without any help from either set of parents. Stephen became a stockbroker. Alison was a dentist. They were doing really well ... house in the suburbs, members of the country club, great stock portfolio. You know, living the American dream. From all accounts, they seemed like the perfect family.

"Then last Halloween, some kids broke into their house while Will was at some friends. The kids were strung out on something and were looking for cash, guns, you name it. It's hard to piece together exactly what happened, but they ended up beating Stephen and Alison to death. Will came home the next morning and found his parents. Needless to say, he's had a pretty rough time since then."

Jim stood up and walked over to look out the third story window. The classroom had an uninterrupted view of the harbor. It was one of the best features of the school. He stood with his hands in his trouser pockets and gazed out the window for several moments before resuming his story.

"I think my dad wanted to take him ... wanted to become his guardian, but Stephen obviously didn't want him to get his hands on Will. Alison's parents were gone and she was an only child so all that left was Dad and me. I didn't even know that Stephen had left provisions in his will for me to become guardian if I would agree. The lawyer told me that right before the funeral. I don't think Will was that happy about coming to live with me, but I just couldn't let my old man get his hands on another kid ..."

Blair looked across the room at Jim and the picture he saw broke his heart. With that unfinished sentence, Blair could only imagine what a horrific childhood this guy had suffered. He silently cursed the father that would be so terrible that both his sons would reject him so. What he must have put Jim through didn't bear thinking. Now Jim had been thrust into looking after a kid he'd never met after tragedy had claimed his only brother. Blair could tell by Jim's whole demeanor that he was a man who met his responsibilities head on. It didn't matter that Jim hadn't even known his nephew existed before the murder. It only mattered that the boy needed him now.

Blair brought a hand up to his mouth as he watched Jim regain his composure. Slowly, Jim squared his shoulders, then once again crossed his arms in front of him.

"I'm so sorry, Jim. I had no idea that was Will. I remember reading about the case at the time but I didn't make the connection. That explains a lot about his behavior. The kid is obviously still grieving for his parents. Plus, he's been pulled from his own school and away from all his friends. It has to have been a real upheaval. It's no wonder he's as troubled as he is. Do you and your wife have any other children?"

Jim turned and blinked at the question, then shook his head. His eyes were bright as he fought back his tears.

"I'm divorced. Carolyn and I ... we never had any. Marriage didn't last that long."

Blair jumped up and moved quickly to his desk. He pulled a ragged folder from the lap drawer and returned to his seat with it. Jim had already come back to his desk but he continued to stare out the window.

"I've managed to compile quite a list of resources in my time here. I have some information that might help you and Will out. There are a number of agencies that offer support for troubled teens. Plus, here's the name of a really great counselor. If Will's not already in counseling, I'd really recommend it."

Blair held out an ivory business card with black embossed writing. Jim's fingers brushed his as he took the card. Once again a strange tingle rushed through Blair's body. Jim's eyes darted up and Blair gasped at the look that crossed Jim's face. It was gone in an instant, but a desire so strong it astonished Blair had been clearly evident in those pale blue eyes. He wondered if his own eyes reflected that same level of need.

"Yeah, I know he should be. I'll see what he says. Thanks. Now was there something in particular that you needed to talk to me about?"

Blair was taken aback by Jim's brusque question. The man seemed to be able to turn his emotions on and off like a faucet. Blair got up again and went back to his desk. When he returned, he had the essay in his hand. He set it down in front of Jim, then retook his seat in the small desk.

"As you can see, Will went a little ... off topic ... with this essay. It was a shock, to say the least. He's obviously a very bright kid but a paper like this could be used as cause for removal from the basketball team. I wanted to discuss it with his fa ... you before I took any action. Now that I understand his situation better, I'll deal with it differently. If you would talk to him about it this evening, I'll probably just ask him to redo it. If he agrees to counseling and shows improvement, this shouldn't be any problem. I certainly don't want to heap any more misery on the guy at a time like this."

Jim studied the page in front of him, then brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. The gesture was that of a very tired man.

"Thank you, Mr. Sandburg," Jim said through spread fingers. "I'm pretty much in over my head with the kid as you can probably tell. I was hoping things were going better in your class than his others. I guess this just shoots that theory to hell. Yours is the only class he ever talks about so I thought he was doing okay in this one at least."

Blair placed a comforting hand on Jim's arm.

"Anything I can do to help, please let me know. I can tell that underneath it all Will's a bright kid with a lot of potential. He's suffered a horrible trauma at a time in his life where every emotion is amplified anyhow. It's going to take a lot of time and a lot of work to get back to anything resembling normal for him."

"Would you ..." Jim looked at the hand on his arm and laid his own on top of it. His eyes returned to meet Blair's as he began hesitantly.

"Would you like to maybe get together for a drink later so we could talk some more? I mean, you've obviously got a lot more experience dealing with kids than I do. I can use all the help I can get."

"Sure," Blair responded eagerly. "That would be great. How about O'Malley's at about 8 o'clock?"

Jim glanced at his watch, then back at Blair.

"Eight's fine. Or would you ...?"

Blair looked at Jim and waited for him to finish the question. Jim softly stroked the back of Blair's hand, sending goosebumps up his entire arm.

"Would you, maybe, like to meet for dinner?" Jim asked, his voice so soft it was almost inaudible.

Blair hesitated a moment ... only from the shock of the gesture. It was so gentle and innocent and so incongruous with the man himself. Jim must have mistaken Blair's hesitation as rejection because his posture instantly returned to ramrod straight and he was now staring over Blair's shoulder at a picture of an Inuit hut on the far wall.

Blair scooted in the desk a little to block Jim's view. With a broad smile on his face, Blair said, "I'd like that very much. How about O'Malley's at seven then?"

"Great," Jim exhaled. He looked at Blair a moment longer ... his eyes now dark and mysterious, then stood up and moved towards the door. He pulled on his coat as he walked.

"Thanks so much for your help with Will. I think he's a pretty good kid ... just really taking his parents' death hard."

Blair held out a page of the service agencies he'd mentioned to Jim. Jim took the paper with one hand and reached to shake Blair's with the other.

"See you tonight then."

A glimmer of a smile traveled across Jim's handsome face, then he turned and was gone.

Blair walked back to his desk and sat down in his chair with a thud. He gazed down at his hands and noticed them shaking.

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Blair sat in his car and engaged himself in debate. The radio was tuned to the college station and Lou Reed was singing about the joys of heroin addiction as he once again went over his options. He thought he knew what he'd seen in Jim's eyes earlier that day, but not knowing the man at all, how could he be sure it had been lust? Was it just because lust was what Blair had wanted to see? Or maybe it was because it was what Blair had known was in his own eyes?

He'd liked Ellison immediately. That much he was sure of. There was such a quiet strength in the man that Blair couldn't help but admire him. The fact that he looked like a Greek god didn't hurt matters at all. But that wasn't enough to jump to some pretty major conclusions with. And hadn't the guy said he'd been married? No, it wasn't a sure sign that he didn't swing both ways, but it sure didn't mean he did.

Blair, on the other hand, had never kept his sexual preferences a big secret but he'd never broadcast them either. Neither was a good idea when in the teaching profession. He'd talked to the union steward when he was first hired and was confident that he'd have their support if accusations of inappropriate behavior were made but Blair was always careful. He didn't cruise the bars or hang out near the swing sets in the park. He usually met guys in safe places like bookstores and night school.

Yeah, it had been a while since he'd had someone to hold ... to share his nights with ... to love. But Blair Sandburg was used to loneliness. His mother's lifestyle had never leant itself to forming long lasting friendships. As a child, he'd left more places than he could remember. Whenever the spirit moved her, she'd pack up her small child and embark on another trip to some godforsaken place in search of further enlightenment, great sex, or better drugs.

Blair had been lucky to get into college on a GED since he couldn't get enough credits to graduate from eighth grade, let alone high school. Once he got settled at Rainier though, he'd found a home he could settle into. He made friends, dated the same person more than once and grew comfortable in his surroundings. It was a first for the son of Naomi Sandburg.

But college ended and his friends moved away to take jobs in warmer, dryer places. Blair started teaching right away and while he loved it and the kids, he knew he had to be more discreet than ever before. He was friends with a couple other faculty members, but they were both married and he never fit in with their weekend plans. He'd met a couple of guys that were hot in bed, but it had been a long time since he'd had what he considered a date. Of course, dating a parent was almost a bigger taboo than hitting on a student when you were a teacher. The fact that Jim was Will's guardian didn't really make it better.

But tonight, Blair decided, he didn't care about being cautious or careful. He didn't care that he was skating on very thin ice. He wanted Jim and for the most part he was pretty sure that Jim wanted him. Of course, he could have it all wrong. Jim may not even consider this a date. Maybe Blair had read all the signals wrong. Maybe he did just want to talk about Will. He'd said it, hadn't he? He was in over his head. He wanted someone to help he deal with the kid. Then what was that with the hand? And the eyes? And the sensation that ripped through Blair's body each time they'd touched?

Blair shut off the car and pulled his gloves on before braving the harsh February wind. It was ridiculous to just sit in the parking lot and speculate. Better to just go in and put up or shut up. The worst that could happen was that he'd have a nice dinner with a gorgeous man. If Blair had misread Jim's signals, there'd be no harm done. It wasn't like he was going to jump the guy the second he saw him, was it?

The temperature had dropped drastically in the late afternoon and the thermometer was now hovering around zero. Blair stepped out of his Volvo and hurried across the restaurant parking lot, cursing the cold in muttering tones. His hair was loose and whipped against his face in damp lashes.

The lot was pretty empty, but a quick glance at the cars there let him know that there were already several patrons inside. He wondered if one was Jim's or if he'd be stood up by a man with second thoughts. Blair wished he knew what kind of car Jim drove. At least then he'd have a hint of what to expect. He imagined Ellison in something sturdy and reliable. Maybe that late model SUV with the chrome trim. No, there was nothing flashy or trendy about Jim. He was more like that old pickup ... built for endurance. Blair grinned at the implications as he opened the door and entered the restaurant.

O'Malley's was a yuppie's vision of an Irish pub with oak paneling on the walls and brass horse tacks over the bar. Fiddle music played in the background and the television over the bar was tuned to a soccer game. Blair had suggested the place because it was usually quiet, moderately priced and smoke-free. The food was decent, mostly ordinary American fare, so Jim could get a steak ... yeah, he looked like a steak and potato kind of guy ... and Blair could have something healthy.

Jim was already seated at a table in the corner by the fireplace. He had a half empty stein of beer in front of him. Two thick menus lay stacked in the center of the table. He was looking directly at Blair as he made his way over, like he'd sensed him even before coming through the door. A small smile played at Jim's lips but his eyes looked dark and serious. Blair couldn't help but grin back.

While Blair had dressed up for the evening, Jim had apparently dressed down. Blair could see a tight black t-shirt that outlined well-developed chest and shoulder muscles, black jeans and a black boot on a leg that stretched out from the table. Suddenly, Blair felt like a high school dweeb next to the most popular guy in school. He couldn't believe he had decided to wear his tweed suit with the suede patches on the elbows but it was a little late to run out and change clothes now.

"Evening, Mr. Sandburg," Jim said softly, rising from his seat to greet him.

"Blair, please!"

Blair shook hands with Jim and once again felt the energy charge between them. Before he could grab a chair, Jim leaned over and pulled out the one next to him, ensuring that Blair would take it and not the one across the table. He sat first, then shrugged his coat off and laid it over another chair. As Blair got situated, Jim called the waiter over.

"Something to drink, sir?"

Blair looked up at the waiter and smiled. He was one of Blair's former students - a tall, geeky brunette with bad skin and an overbite. Jeff Cheltenham had been one of Blair's best students a couple of years ago and Blair had just written a letter of recommendation for him recently. Jeff was the youngest of six kids from a single-parent family and was the first of his siblings to graduate from high school, let alone make it into college. He was on a full academic scholarship to Rainier but still struggling to make ends meet.

"Hey, Mr. Sandburg! What can I get you?"

"I'll have a draft beer, Jeff. How's college going?"

"Great! The double major in sociology and poli sci's pretty tough but I'm hanging in there. And I just found out that I got a legislative internship this next summer thanks to your help."

"Congratulations. Keep up the good work."

Jeff turned and headed towards the bar. Jim just sipped his beer during the conversation and watched the two with a bemused expression. Blair could feel him watching the exchange but Jim never said a word. As Jeff left, Jim put the beer down and turned in his seat so he was facing Blair.

"You must be a helluva good teacher. Will likes you and that guy sure seemed to. I didn't even remember my teacher's names once I got out of high school, let alone have any contact with them."

Just as Blair started to explain that two satisfied students did not a good teacher make, Jeff returned with his drink.

"This one's on me," Jeff said as he dropped a cocktail napkin onto the table. He set the frosty stein down on top of it, smiled at Blair's thanks and left the two men alone again to study their menus. Blair scooted one of them towards himself but didn't pick it up. He was more interested in studying Jim than deciding what to eat.

"Like I said," Jim grinned and touched Blair's glass with his.

"Thanks. I enjoy it most of the time. Jeff's a good kid and a real hard worker. He comes from a pretty poor family, so I was happy to help him out. But I'm surprised you'd say that about Will though. I didn't think he paid much attention to me or anything else in class. Do you know if he has any physical problems that would cause lapses in attention? He seems to just kind of zone out sometimes."

Jim drained his glass, then pushed it aside.

"Yeah, well, Will's got some special problems. I'm not sure yet how much of it's physical and how much is just from what happened to his parents. But he does seem to enjoy your class from what I can tell. He's told me several stories about things you've talked about in class. As a matter of fact, that's about all he talks about when it comes to school ... that and basketball. Mostly, he just tells me how much he hates the place and everybody in it.

"I'm really sorry about that paper. I don't think he's ever done anything like that before. I talked to him about it when I got home. He seemed real sorry. He said he'd do it over and apologize to you tomorrow. I'm not making excuses, but I think the subject matter just kind of got to him. He never talks about his parents, but I'm sure he misses them a lot."

"I can understand that," Blair said. He was watching Jim's body language as he talked and thought he could see where Will got his guardedness ... along with his looks. Although he was smiling, Jim was rigid in his chair. He held his hands clasped on the table and his feet firmly planted on the floor. A small muscle in the chiseled jaw jumped and Blair could practically hear Jim grind his teeth. Time to make his companion feel a little more comfortable.

"What do you do for a living, Jim?"

"I'm a cop ... a detective in the Major Crimes division of the PD."

Blair could see the pride well up in Jim as he spoke.

"Cool. That must be fascinating work. How long have you been a detective?"

"Going on six years now. Came to it after the service. Seemed to be a natural move."

"Really?" Blair responded, his eyes bright with interest. "How so?"

"I did a lot of ... special missions ... work with other agencies ... that sort of thing."

"Sounds like you've had a really interesting life. Are you from Cascade originally?"

Jim brought his hands up to steeple his fingers, then dropped his eyes to stare at a spot on the table.

"Yeah, born and raised here. I don't know why I stay. There's nothing to hold me here ... except for Will now."

The sadness that seemed permanently associated with any talk of Jim's family floated onto them like a veil. It obscured, but did little to conceal, the pain.

Blair gave Jim a moment, then spoke again.

"Jim, were you involved in catching Will's parents' murderers?"

Jim ran a finger down the outside of his empty glass and followed its progress with his eyes.

"No. My captain kept me informed, but I was pretty busy getting Will situated and dealing with family stuff. Besides, a rookie could've caught those guys. They left a trail of clues a mile wide."

"Do you like being a cop?" Blair asked more to keep Jim talking than anything else.

"Yeah. I'm pretty good at it, I guess. I've worked in Vice and Burglary and been on patrol, but Major Crimes is the most interesting. Lots of different kinds of criminals to catch. I work alone a lot, but my arrest rate's pretty good."

"I'll bet you work some pretty long hours," Blair commented. "Does Will spend a lot of time at home alone?"

Jim picked up the cocktail napkin in front of him and began to shred the dry corners.

"Yeah. It never mattered before ... when I was on my own. I've always been kind of a loner. Even when I was married. Carolyn hated ... But now ... it's not fair to the kid. But I'm not sure that me being home is what he wants either. I just don't know what to do for the kid."

Blair reached over and laid a hand on Jim's. It wasn't something he normally did to comfort a parent, but the hurt in Jim's voice was clear and regardless of where the evening was headed, all Blair could think about was consoling the man. Jim looked up at Blair as he turned his hand to twine their fingers together. They stayed that way for a long moment.

"You guys ready to order?"

Jeff had appeared at the table without either man realizing he was approaching. Blair snatched his hand back and grabbed up a menu. He started scanning the entrees as Jim cleared his throat and without looking ordered a steak, medium rare. Blair ordered the salmon, then turned the menu over to Jeff.

"I'll be right back with your salads."

"I don't mean to pry, Jim. But you said today that your father wanted to take Will in. Does he have a close relationship with Will?"

Jim barked out a bitter laugh. It was not a happy sound.

"William Ellison doesn't have a close relationship with anybody. He doesn't believe in friendship unless it can do you some good. He thinks needing people makes you weak ... less of a man. No, I think he just was hoping he could take Will and turn him into a young version of himself. At least then one Ellison male wouldn't turn out to be a disappointment."

"I can't imagine why he'd be disappointed in you, Jim," Blair said gently.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday."

Blair frowned at the curt response, but nothing else was forthcoming. He started to open his mouth to inquire further, but Jim just stared down at the table refusing to meet Blair's eyes. For several moments, the only sounds he heard were the clanking of dishes in the nearby kitchen.

Jeff finally arrived with a tray full of salads, bottles of dressing and a loaf of warm bread. There were tubs of honey butter and plain butter and a huge knife to cut through the loaf. Jim finally looked up at Blair, composed and confident again. Blair used the break in tension to start a new conversation, this time about something safer.

"You a Jags fan, Jim?"

"Yeah," Jim responded as he sliced off the crust of the small loaf and offered it to Blair. "I met Orville Wallace on a case once. Helluva nice guy."

"Orville Wallace? Cool! He's like my all time favorite player. I've got a card he autographed for me when I was a kid."

That seemed to give the two men a harmless topic to discuss as they dug into their meals with hearty appetites. Conversation drifted from

the Jags' latest season to Rainier University's varsity basketball team to Blair's original field of study. Blair found that he did most of the talking, but Jim seemed to enjoy listening and offered some pretty interesting insights along the way. They finished their meals, then moved on to coffee. They'd just finished their second cup when Blair noticed that the restaurant was almost completely empty and Jeff was staring at them from the bar.

"Hey, I think we're wearing out our welcome," Blair laughed.

Jim looked around the empty restaurant then began to blush. The red reached the tips of his ears and he looked totally chagrined. It was hardly the reaction that Blair had anticipated. Jim had seemed so self-assured only moments before. But Blair was learning quickly that Jim Ellison was a man of many contradictions.

"Yeah, I think we'd better head out," Jim agreed hastily. He leaned forward and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket.

Jeff spotted the movement and rushed over to collect the check. Blair reached for his wallet in his coat pocket but Jim pushed his hand back from the check.

"It's on me."

"Thanks."

As Jim counted out the tip, Blair pulled on his coat. He waited until Jim was ready, then they headed to the door. The hostess wished them a good night as they stepped out into the cold air. The parking lot was as empty as the restaurant. Blair grinned as he noticed the only two vehicles were his Volvo and the old blue pickup. Jim must have realized which car was his because he walked with Blair towards the Volvo.

As they reached his car, Blair turned to say goodnight. He stopped short as he saw the look of hunger in Jim's eyes. It was the same look Blair has seen for that split second earlier in the day. Now it was broadcast across Jim's handsome face. This time there was no doubt ... no question of what Jim wanted. And Blair wanted it too ... with all his heart.

Blair felt himself nod quickly then with one swift move, Jim pushed him against the car and captured his mouth with his own. His hands wove through Blair's curls and one knee pressed between Blair's thighs, easily prying them apart. Blair could feel the heat of Jim's erection pressing against his leg.

The kiss was the most deeply sensual experience of Blair's life. Jim's mouth claimed him and Blair surrendered willingly. An insistent tongue pushed at his lips and he opened them eagerly to suck it in. Jim tasted wonderful, smelled wonderful, felt wonderful. He was everywhere at once, sucking, licking and nipping at tender flesh. Blair felt like he was being consumed by the man and he loved it.

Blair gripped Jim's shoulders to keep from sliding down the side of the car as the onslaught of kisses continued. Jim rubbed his hard body against Blair's as he eventually released Blair's mouth and began to plant small kisses over his jaw and down his throat.

"Oh god, I want you so bad," Jim growled as he moved to suck on Blair's Adam's apple.

All Blair could think to ask was "where?"

Jim pulled free and took Blair by the hand, practically dragging him towards the pickup. Jim fumbled with the keys, dropped them once, got the door unlocked, slid in and reached over to open the passenger door. Once Blair was inside the roomy cab, Jim started the motor so that the heater could run. Blair sat motionless while Jim turned and placed his hand over Blair's heart. It was beating so hard that Blair was sure Jim could feel it through the layers of wool and leather.

The steady rhythm seemed to mesmerize Jim for a moment. Then he shook his head and slowly slid his hand down Blair's body until he reached his crotch. Jim popped the button and unzipped his trousers, all the while staring into Blair's eyes. Blair's dick was already hard, but when Jim bent over and mouthed the erection through his jockey shorts, he thought he'd come on the spot.

"Oh my god! Oh god, Jim," Blair moaned, his breath now coming in short pants.

Jim took Blair's dick in his hand and began to stroke it roughly as he raised up to kiss Blair some more. The kisses were hard and demanding, full of tongue and teeth fighting for dominance. Jim's hand quickened as the kisses grew more and more intense, Jim's tongue fucking his mouth in hard, relentless strokes. It didn't take much before Blair came thrusting hard into Jim's hand.

Blair's eyes grew huge and round as he watched Jim wipe his hand on his own t-shirt. The smear of semen on the black fabric glittered eerily in the dim streetlight. Without saying another word, Jim unzipped his jeans and pulled his own cock free. Blair lay sprawled against the passenger door and stared into Jim's eyes as with a few rough strokes he came all over Blair's legs.

"Oh my god!," Blair gasped before hurtling himself forward onto Jim's lap.

He was soon lost in more hot kisses, jerky thrusts and clumsy groping. They both came a second time with only small spurts of semen hot and sticky against their exposed stomachs. Totally exhausted, Blair lay against Jim's chest, the older man carding his fingers through Blair's hair in gentle movements.

"Jim?" Blair whispered in the darkness.

"Shhhh, baby," Jim said as he continued to stroke Blair's hair.

A knock at the window startled both men. Blair jumped back to his side of the truck and hastily tucked himself into his jeans. Jim just pulled his coat over his lap, glanced over to make sure Blair was covered and rolled down the fogged up window. Jeff's confused face appeared in the opening.

"You guys alright in here?"

Blair blessed the darkness and managed to wheeze out a curt "fine". Jim just nodded and rolled the window back up. The smell of sex permeated the interior of the truck and Blair knew that there was no way Jeff could not know what had gone on in there. He could see the outline of Jeff as he stood staring into the dark cab for a moment. When realization dawned, the former student beat a hasty retreat to his car.

"Well, there goes my career," Blair speculated as he tried to right his clothing.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Jim said softly. "I'll take care of you."

Blair looked up at the profile of the man he'd just had the hottest sex of his life with. He didn't think he'd ever seen such strength or resolve on such a handsome face before. It was easy to believe that Jim Ellison could make everything wrong in Blair's life right again just because he wanted it that way.

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Blair glanced at the clock for about the hundredth time since his last class. It was finally 4:15 and Will Ellison was due to arrive to discuss "the paper" at any minute. Blair had been looking forward to and dreading this time since he walked into his classroom that morning. Now there was no turning back. Basketball practice would be over by now. Will would've had plenty of time to shower and change and make his way from the gym to the third floor sociology room. If he was coming, he'd be here any minute.

Blair had asked him to come by after practice to talk about the essay. He'd been mentally preparing himself for the chat since then. This was going to be a tricky situation, made a thousand times worse by what had happened with Jim the previous night. Dealing with a kid who'd been through something as horrific as Will had was never easy. Dealing with a kid who's guardian you'd fucked in a restaurant parking lot the night before was unimaginable.

If Jim had gone home and told his nephew what the two men had gotten up to and Will reported him, his career as a teacher was over. Blair knew that the instant he'd offered himself up for that first kiss. What had happened afterwards had been fantastic but Blair wasn't sure yet that Jim was worth giving up his livelihood for. And he was damned sure that no reputable school would hire him with that kind of offense on his record.

Of course, there was another possibility that Blair hadn't let himself think about until just then. If Jim had told Will ... if Will was homophobic ... he could just as easily come into Blair's classroom and beat the shit out of him.

"Mr. Sandburg?"

Blair looked up and pushed his glasses up his nose. Will stood in the doorway, his arms full of books, coat and a basketball. He wore the same tan turtleneck sweater, black jeans and Nike running shoes he'd had on in class, only now there were obvious sweat stains under the arms of the sweater. It was amazing that Blair had never noticed how amazing looking the boy was before. The young Ellison looked so much like his uncle it was uncanny. While he still had a liveness that could only be achieved with youth, he was every bit as tall and handsome as Jim Ellison. Blair still preferred the uncle. The faint age lines and body to die for made the older man damned near irresistible.

"Come on in, Will."

Blair stood and gestured for Will to take a seat. The student hesitated at the door, then seemed to rethink a show of attitude. He dropped his armload on Blair's desk and the basketball rolled off onto the floor. Both men glanced at the ball but neither made a move to pick it up. Will kind of shrugged, then chose the same desk that his uncle had sat in the day before. This time though, Blair shoved his hands into the pockets of his corduroy pants and leaned back to sit on the edge of his own desk.

"Will, I spoke to your uncle last night. He told me what happened to your parents. I'm really sorry. I had no idea that was your family."

"I don't want your pity."

Will spoke the words softly but with a definite edge of bitterness. They were further muffled by Will's hand in front of his mouth. His eyes were icy as he stared out the nearest window, much like his uncle had the day before.

"I don't pity you, Will. I'm just saying that had I realized what had happened, I'd have tried to talk to you sooner to see if there was anything I could do to help. I won't pretend to know how you feel but I can help you ... if you'll let me."

There was a moment of cold silence. Blair let the boy have time to formulate his response. He was surprised not by the words but by the change in tone of voice.

"What could you do?"

The question wasn't asked with any sarcasm or rancor. It sounded more like plea for help from a very frightened child.

"I could talk to you about what you're feeling right now. I could listen to whatever you wanted to talk about and let you know that you're not alone. I could help you find a counselor that would help you deal with the grieving process. I could be your friend, Will, if you'd let me."

Will looked up and gave Blair a snort that the teacher knew really meant "yeah, right". Perhaps he hadn't worded that as well as he could have. How many times had Blair heard that line as a student? His reaction had always been the same, too.

"I don't mean that I want to be your buddy and hang out together. I meant that if you want someone to listen to what you're afraid of, what frustrates you, what you hate, I'll be here for you. You've been through a lot of changes in the last few months, Will. No one expects you to go through that alone.

"Jim ... your uncle ... said that you two didn't know each other before this happened. That has to be pretty strange ... moving and all. Jim seems like a pretty good guy though. Are things going okay there?"

Blair thought he saw a softening of the stony expression on Will's face. Then the ice in his eyes suddenly melted into tears. They rolled down the handsome face in salty rivers of grief. Blair hopped up and closed the door to the classroom, then went to his desk for some tissues. He laid a stack of them on the desk in front of Will, then returned to his spot on the edge of his own desk.

Will grabbed a tissue and blew his nose into it, tossed the wadded up paper into the trash can by Blair, then slammed his hand down on the desk.

"It's just so damned unfair," he shouted. "They never hurt anybody. Why'd it have to be them?"

Blair lay a hand on Will's shoulder and said, "I don't know, Will. I don't think anybody does. It's just the way life is. I wish I could tell you they died for a reason but there isn't any. From what Jim told me, it was just a random act of violence in a violent world."

Blair squatted down next to Will's chair. The angle put him at a lower level than the student. He looked up into Will's eyes, his own face filled with compassion.

"Will, would you do me a favor? Would you think about seeing a therapist? If you're uncomfortable with it, I'd be happy to go with you to the first few sessions. If you want, I'll talk to Jim about going, too ... whatever you're comfortable with. You don't have to go through this alone."

"Yeah ... maybe. Can I think about it, Mr. Sandburg?" Will said as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Of course. You just let me know, okay?"

Blair stood up and stepped away from the boy. He knew from experience that he couldn't crowd a kid like Will, either physically or mentally. He had to come to the hard decisions on his own. It was the only way. Blair stepped over to the window and looked out on the gray harbor. It had rained all day and now the dark, menacing clouds hung over the water, refusing to go away.

"Mr. Sandburg?"

Blair turned and faced Will. The boy had stood up and was now standing next to Blair, staring at the sky.

"Yes?"

"My uncle and I had a pretty long talk last night after he came home. He told me about how he liked guys instead of girls."

Blair held his breath waiting for the other shoe to fall. He didn't have to wait long.

"He said that it was important that I understood that if I was going to stay living there. Then he said that if I didn't want to ... stay with him, I mean ... he'd let me go live with my granddad."

"How'd you feel about that, Will?"

Blair watched Will's face carefully but the student just kept staring out the window.

"I was kind of freaked out about it at first but he said you were the same way. And well ... you seem pretty cool and you've never, like, come on to me or any of the other guys so I guess that's okay."

"I'd never do that Will," Blair said, measuring the words carefully as he spoke.

"I know. Anyhow, he wanted to know if it would bother me if you and he became friends. He seemed real concerned that I be okay with it but I could tell he really likes you. So I guess I just want you to know that I don't mind. I don't really understand it. I mean neither of you seems like ... you know. But I don't mind."

"Thank you, Will," Blair said, relieved beyond measure. "He's a nice man. I'd like the chance to get to know him."

"Yeah, he's seemed pretty sad since I moved in. I don't know if it's 'cause of me or what happened to my mom and dad or if he's always been that way. Last night though, he was really happy ... joking and laughing and stuff. He said it was because of you. He said you made him happy."

Blair smiled at the thought of a happy Jim Ellison. It was something he thought he could really get used to. But they were really treading on dangerous ground here and he so did not want to discuss his sex life with a student.

"I hope you know that I'd never do anything that would be inappropriate, Will."

Inappropriate? God, Sandburg, you had sex with his uncle ... a man you'd just met ... in a restaurant parking lot! How much more inappropriate could you get?

Will seemed to sense Blair's discomfort and turned and smiled at his teacher. It was the same smile Jim had given him when he'd told Blair what a good teacher he was. Once again, Blair was taken aback by the similarities in the boy and the man.

Out loud, he said, "If this begins to be a problem, you be sure and let me know."

Will nodded, then turned and started to gather up his belongings.

"I will Mr. Sandburg. And thanks. I'll do that essay over tonight. I'm real sorry about what I wrote before. I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know, Will, and that'll be fine. Have it in by class tomorrow and I won't take off any points for being late. And Will, give some thought to what I said about the therapist, okay?"

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Blair stumbled into his house with his arms full of groceries. He kicked the door shut with his foot, then hurried in to set the bags down on the counter before they tore apart. He shook out his arms and then walked over to the answering machine that sat on the divider between the kitchen and living room. The red light blinked insistently. Blair pressed the play button and the smooth sound of Jim's voice filled the small kitchen.

"Blair? Jim. Can we get together tonight? I really want to see you, Blair. Call me at 648-4484."

Blair recognized the exchange as one usually used for cell phones. He picked up the extension in the kitchen and quickly dialed the number. Propping the phone between his ear and shoulder, he set to work stowing the groceries in the fridge.

"Ellison."

"Hi, Jim. This is Blair."

"Hi, Blair," Jim's voice softened with the greeting. "How you doing today?"

Okay, Blair could do polite conversation. He could just picture Jim sitting at some old metal desk in the middle of a police squad room ... maybe wearing a shoulder holster over his tight t-shirt ... maybe even a Kevlar vest. Oh yeah, those cop fantasies were going to be fun.

"Good. You?"

"Well, except for this boner that I've been walking around with every time I've thought about you ... which is pretty much all day, by the way ... I'm just fine."

Okay, so Jim was obviously not in the middle of a squad room. Blair grinned at the new thoughts his mind so obligingly conjured up.

"Where are you, Jim?"

Blair heard a little chuckle.

"I'm parked around the corner from your house. I've been waiting here for about an hour. I think the neighbors are getting suspicious. Where've you been? I didn't think you'd ever get home. I was just getting ready to put out an APB on you."

Laughing with delight, Blair answered, "Jim Ellison! Did you run a background check on me? I don't recall giving you my address or my phone number for that matter! As I remember it, we were way too busy last night to exchange too much personal info."

"Not too busy to exchange a few body fluids though," Jim practically growled into the phone. "And I'm thinking I'm going to lose a few here just listening to your voice if you don't watch it!"

Blair gulped down the lump that had suddenly developed in his throat and pushed his hair out of his face with his free hand.

"Oh god, Jim. Get your ass and that boner over here as fast as that old heap you drive'll get you here!"

He'd no sooner finished the sentence when he heard a horn sound in his driveway. At the same moment Jim said, "I'm here."

Blair twirled around and hung up the phone then rushed to the front door just as the bell rang. He opened it and stepped back, letting Jim come striding in. Jim had a huge grin on his handsome face and was indeed wearing a tight t-shirt, tighter jeans and a shoulder holster, to boot. With no preamble, he pushed Blair against the living room wall and kissed him soundly.

"Oh god, I wanna fuck you so bad," Jim whispered as he came up for air. "It's all I've thought about since last night. I wanna stick my dick in your mouth and then I'm gonna fuck your sweet little ass so hard you won't be able to sit for a week. I'll bet your ass is real tight and real hot, too. God, you make me cream just thinking about it."

Jim punctuated the litany of filthy words with tiny kisses all over Blair's face. To emphasize his desire, Jim brought a hand down to roughly rub at Blair's crotch. That reduced the usually erudite teacher to spouting porn movie phrases like, "yeah, do me ... do me hard" and "oh god, fuck me".

Jim chuckled again at Blair's response, then grabbed the front of his flannel shirt and ripped it open. Buttons flew in every direction as Jim pushed the torn cloth aside and grabbed at one nipple to squeeze it. Blair moaned as Jim expertly worked the reddened flesh, twisting and pinching until Blair thought he would scream. Jim's mouth was latched onto his neck and his other hand was busy playing with Blair's hair. Just when Blair thought he couldn't take any more stimulation, Jim slid his hand down the front of Blair's pants. There was plenty of room in the baggy front for Jim's hand and the serious hardon that was growing larger by the second.

"God, you're such a little slut, aren't you, Blair," Jim growled as he palmed the swollen dick. "I just knew you'd be like this ... so responsive ... so easy to fuck. I could smell it on you the minute I met you. You wanted me then, didn't you? You were hot for me the minute I walked into that classroom, just like I was hot for you. I could have turned you over that rickety desk and fucked you into next week right then and there. I still might do that some day. Would you like that, Blair? Wanna take it up the ass at school? Maybe do it right in front of all snot-nosed kids?"

"Jiiiiim!!!"

Blair came hard, semen soaking his trousers. Jim's strong arms were the only thing that kept him upright as his body jerked and swayed and then finally grew lax. He leaned against the broad chest gripping Jim's biceps as he tried to catch his breath. Jim stole that away in an amazingly tender kiss. When they broke apart, Blair felt the dampness of Jim's own orgasm pressing against him.

"I think I could fall in love with you, Blair Sandburg," Jim murmured into his ear before he went back to kissing Blair some more.

After cleaning up, fixing dinner, doing a load of laundry with Jim's jeans in it, eating dinner and fucking each other senseless in the kitchen, laundry room and bathroom, Jim and Blair finally made it to bed. Blair was surprised when Jim crawled into his arms and lay his head on Blair's chest but it was nice surprise. He stroked the short, silky strands of brown hair and enjoyed the warmth Jim's body provided.

"I love listening to your heart," Jim said after a while. "It makes me feel safe ... secure. I could hear it last night when you laid against me in the truck. It felt so good ... like we fit together, you know?"

Blair couldn't believe how Jim's words affected him. Listening to Jim talk about Blair's heartbeat gave him goosebumps. Jim was such a walking contradiction. Here was this big, tough cop who probably knew how to kill a man with just a paperclip and he was about the biggest romantic Blair had ever met. He was quiet and seemed shy when Blair first met him, but on the phone today, he'd thrilled Blair with his amazing command of dirty talk. And it didn't seem to matter that he was built, gorgeous and smart, he still had his insecurities.

"I can't believe you told Will about us already," Blair said quietly.

He could feel Jim's mouth curve into a smile.

"I figured the kid deserved to know what he was living with. Cause right now, if it came to you or him, it'd be you I'd want to be with."

"Oh god, Jim," Blair moaned as he pulled Jim up for another hungry kiss.

Suddenly, an ugly and upsetting thought broke through Blair's lust-induced haze. He broke the kiss, gently pushed Jim away and sat up, letting the covers fall back onto the bed. Jim blinked up at him, waiting for the question that was certainly coming.

"What did you mean ... what he was living with Jim? Are you ashamed of wanting me? Do you think it makes you some kind of freak?"

Jim turned to take Blair in his arms. Blair cuddled close against Jim's chest, loving the feeling of being with this man. He knew that whatever explanation Jim gave for his statement would have to do. There wasn't much he could ever say that would be worth give all this up for.

"Oh god, no, Blair. I'd never be ashamed of you. No, it's me. I've always been ... different ... never what people thought I should be. My dad, my brother, Carolyn ... they never really knew the real me. I always felt like that had to be hidden. I guess that's always stayed with me. No, baby, you're the first one that makes me feel real."

Jim traced Blair's lips with his finger before lowering his head to bestow another kiss. Blair met it eagerly.

"Hey, Jim? About what you said earlier?"

Blair hesitated a second, then blundered on, looking Jim in the eyes as he spoke.

"I know we've only known each other a day and maybe what I'm feeling here is just due to one pretty incredible afterglow, but I think I've fallen in love with you, Jim Ellison."

Jim captured Blair's hand and kissed each finger lightly.

"I love you, too, Blair Sandburg."

They slept for a while after that, wrapped in each other's arms, but Jim had to get up and go at about midnight. It wouldn't have been an issue but he didn't want to leave Will alone for the whole night just yet. Blair got up and retrieved Jim's jeans from the dryer, then stood back and watched him dress.

"What about tomorrow?" Blair finally drew up the nerve to ask as Jim collected his socks from the bookcase. They'd landed there after Blair had pulled them off to suck at his toes.

"We'll see, babe," Jim said as he tied up his boots.

"I may have to work. I'll call, okay?"

Blair nodded, strangely sad that the evening was ending the way it was. Jim seemed to have switched gears again and the thought that he would give such a noncommittal answer made Blair's blood run cold. Jim seemed to sense his apprehension and rose up and pulled Blair to him.

"Hey," Jim said as he used a finger to lift Blair's chin. "We'll be together. This isn't a two-night stand, baby. I want to see a whole lot more of you. I want you in my life, Blair. I just can't guarantee that I won't be working tomorrow night, okay? I'm a cop. My schedule's not exactly nine to five."

He kissed Blair on the lips very gently.

"I love you, baby. I mean that."

Blair threw his arms around Jim's neck and hugged him tightly.

"I love you, too, Jim."

Maybe Jim Ellison was a guy that Blair would be willing to give it all up for, he thought as he headed back to bed.

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Three weeks later, Will Ellison appeared at Blair's school room door just as the teacher was grabbing his coat to leave. He had a union meeting to go to, then a date with Jim later. Blair was planning on cooking a romantic dinner for the two of them and he still needed to stop by the store.

"Mr. Sandburg," he began hesitantly. "Can ... can we talk a minute?"

"Sure, Will. What'd ya need?"

Blair set his coat back down and stepped aside for Will to pass. Regardless of his plans for the night, he really couldn't afford to blow the boy off. Will had made some minor progress over the last few weeks, actually participating in class discussions a couple of times, but he was still extremely withdrawn. Blair had taken special care to draw him out and had even coaxed him into joining a study group he led that met a couple nights a week. But there was still a wariness about Will that seemed to be a permanent part of his nature.

This day he just seemed like a nervous wreck. His eyes darted at Blair, then to survey the empty room. His shoulders were hunched forward and there was a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. Everything about him screamed tension. As he walked past Blair, Will brought his hand to his mouth to chew down a nail but every finger was already red and jagged. Blair walked over and pulled the door shut then came back to talk to the kid.

"What's wrong, Will? Are things okay at home?"

They'd never discussed his burgeoning relationship with Jim and it remained a source of concern for the teacher. He had rapidly fallen in love with Jim and was certain that Jim felt the same way about him. But Blair's responsibilities as a school teacher still came first as did Jim's duties as Will's guardian. They'd never really talked about how their affair affected Will, except to be careful to never to rub the boy's nose in it. Will had more than enough problems without dealing with his uncle's relationship with his sociology teacher.

Will glanced up at Blair, then returned to studying his inflamed fingers.

"No ... no, everything's cool with Jim. We're getting along fine. No, it's something different ... something kind of personal and I didn't know who else to talk to. Is it okay to talk to you? I mean ... you said I could talk to you any time. Did you mean that?"

"Of course, Will. Now just take a deep breath and tell me what's the problem."

"This is going to sound stupid."

Blair let Will contemplate his next statement without responding. In the past three weeks, he'd gotten to know quite a bit about the inner workings of the Ellison mind. If Will was anything at all like his uncle, he'd have to think things through completely before he'd ever open his mouth. Blair just let Will take his time. The kid had come this far. He'd get to where he needed to be on his own.

"Do you think ... I mean ... would it seem like I didn't care enough about my parents if I went on a date?"

Blair smiled warmly at the boy. He should have known. Teenage hormones could apparently conquer all, including devastating grief.

"No, Will. I don't think any such thing. As a matter of fact, I think your parents would be really happy if you found someone you enjoy being with."

"Like you and Jim?" Will asked quietly.

"Yeah, Will. Like Jim and I. Is there someone in particular that you're interested in?"

Will kicked a clot of dirt off one sneaker with the other, then studied his tormented cuticles some more.

"Elise Cohen asked me out. She wants me to go to this poetry reading with her on Friday. I don't care much about poetry but I think I'd like to go ... to just be with her. She's cute, you know? And nice. Does that make me a bad person?"

"Will," Blair began. "You can still love your parents and miss them terribly and love others, too. It doesn't mean that you don't care about them anymore. It means that they did a good job of raising a normal, well-adjusted boy. I think you should go with Elise. I know her. She's a really nice girl and I think you'd have a good time. You're allowed to do that, you know?"

Will gave what Blair had now come to think of as the Ellison chuckle but still looked worried. He picked at a loose piece of skin on his index finger, then cleared his throat.

"Do you think she'll ... expect much of me?"

"I think Elise is a very perceptive young woman. I think she'll just expect you to be yourself. Give her a chance, Will. And give yourself a chance to get to know her. Even if nothing else develops, I think you'll enjoy yourself."

"Okay."

Will stood and grabbed up his jacket. He started to step towards the door, then stopped and faced Blair again.

"One more thing, Mr. Sandburg. I made an appointment with that counselor you recommended. It's this Thursday at five o'clock. Did you mean what you said about maybe coming with me?"

Moving to face the young man, Blair looked up into his eyes and said as reassuringly as possible, "Of course, Will. I'd be happy to come along."

Will let out a deep breath.

"Thanks, Mr. Sandburg. Jim said he thought you would. He said that if he can get off work, he's gonna come too. Hey, Mr. Sandburg, could I ask you one more thing? It's kind of personal."

"Sure, Will. What is it?"

"Does it bother you that I don't ... you know ... like guys?"

Blair smiled up at his student with a twinkle in his eyes.

"No, Will. That just leaves more for me."

Will grinned broadly, then said, "I'm telling Jim you said that!"

He ducked out the door before Blair could think of a comeback.

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Friday night, Jim and Blair met at Jim's loft for dinner while Will went on his date. Jim made spinach lasagna from scratch. It probably would have been a really good meal if they hadn't let it burn while they made love on the couch.

"You should never cook in leather pants," Blair said between kisses to Jim's nipples. "Gives new meaning to the word hot."

Draped over his lover's body like a wonderfully furry blanket, Blair continued his travels over the expanse of chest before him.

"You should have that hair patented as a sex aid," Jim moaned. "I could come just from you dragging it over me. Have you ever given any thought to the benefits of spunk as an aid to the natural curl?"

Blair couldn't keep himself from busting out laughing at Jim's outrageous suggestion.

"As a what? Are you completely insane, Jim Ellison?"

"Well, I'm nuts about you," Jim replied, rolling the two off the couch and onto the floor with a thud.

Miraculously, they landed in pretty much the same position they'd started in. When Blair quit laughing he reached up and grabbed a blanket to drape over them.

"Will's appointment with Dr. Jagger went really well, don't you think? I think they really connected."

"I guess so."

Jim's response was blandly noncommittal.

Blair propped himself up on one elbow and lightly caressed Jim's face.

"What's the matter, Jim? Don't you want Will to see Bruce?"

"It's not that, Chief. I just don't know how much good all this'll do. Will's a lot like me. He's ... oh shit! He's back!"

Blair sat up and caught his jeans as Jim scrambled up from the floor and started throwing clothes at him.

"Jim, Will's out for a couple more hours at least."

Jim leaned down and gave Blair's arm a yank, pulling him up and shoving a shirt in his hands.

"Trust me, Chief. The date's over. Now, I'd suggest you get your ass dressed or you're going to have some explaining to do in about five seconds."

Blair was just tucking himself in when the front door opened and Will stepped into the apartment.

"Oh god," Will breathed as he took in the sight of two half-dressed men staring at him from across the living room.

"What happened, Will?" Blair asked, recovering from his confusion about what had just taken place. He finished buttoning up his shirt as he walked toward the boy.

"Elise got sick and had to cancel. Hey, I didn't mean to interrupt you guys. Did you know something's burning?"

Making a quick turn into the kitchen, Will ducked past his uncle and headed to the oven.

"Was this supposed to be dinner?" he asked with barely concealed mirth.

"Give me that, smart-ass," Jim growled as he edged Will away from the oven.

Blair watched the exchange in amazement. Maybe Jim didn't think Will was making progress but he sure did. He also had a strange idea that he knew what Jim and Will's special problem might be.

Jim talked Blair into staying the night. Blair thought it was too early and too chancy with Will being there but Jim actually pouted when he said no. A Jim Ellison pout was pretty near impossible to refuse, so Blair finally relented and agreed to stay. Jim was thrilled and Will didn't seem to mind the suggestion either.

They'd scraped the black parts off the lasagna and the three men had enjoyed a pleasant, albeit blackened, dinner before Will excused himself to go to his room. Once safely ensconced behind the French doors, Jim had resumed his seduction of Blair. They'd managed to keep the majority of their activity confined to the stairs up to Jim's bedroom but there was a touchy moment when Blair had a mouthful of Jim's cock and Will darted out to the bathroom.

"Not looking!" he yelled as he ran from his room with his hand shielding his eyes.

They finally made it to bed but neither man was sleepy.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"How'd you know Will was home before he'd even gotten on the elevator?"

"Oh god, Chief. I knew that one was coming."

Blair was snuggled up against Jim, an arm draped around his lover's waist. He pinched the closest flesh at Jim's sound of disgust.

"Hey, man. Spill!"

"Okay, but it's no big deal. It's just that sometimes I can kind of hear things other people can't. Like I said, it's no big deal. It just happens. There! Happy?"

"Extremely. Jim, did I ever tell you what the subject of my doctorate is?"

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It was June 6th and school was finally over for the year. Will had graduated the night before and all Blair had left to do was go in and turn in his grades for the semester and then he was ready to begin his year-long sabbatical. He was excited to finally be able to finish his doctorate. He'd started it three years ago and his advisor at Rainier was getting antsy about him getting it completed. Blair had originally planned on going down to Peru, to join an expedition with his old anthro instructor and write on the field work, but now he had better plans.

"Morning, gorgeous. You know, you're gonna be late if you don't get that cute little ass of yours in gear."

Jim slid past Blair in the hall on his way from the bathroom. Blair grabbed at Jim's t-shirt and pulled him back for a kiss.

"Well, if someone hadn't demanded a blowjob first thing this morning, it wouldn't be a problem, would it, tough guy?"

Jim lightly caressed Blair's face, running a thumb over his full lips.

"Who can blame me, babe? When I see that mouth of yours all I can think about is my dick sliding in and out of it."

"God, I love it when you talk dirty."

Blair's moan was lost in a hungry kiss.

"Will you two break it up!"

Both heads turned to glare as Will Ellison stumbled out of his bedroom. He wore plaid boxers and a sleeveless t-shirt. His light hair stood up in a hundred different directions and his face was still blotchy from sleep.

"I'm a fucking minor here. I shouldn't have to witness that shit this early in the morning."

Jim started to respond but Blair just smiled and put a finger over Jim's lips to silence him. He recognized the signs immediately.

"Not a morning person," Blair laughed as Will plodded past them and into the bathroom.

"You got that right," Jim growled as he turned to head in the kitchen. "You really think the three of us can live here without killing each other, Chief?"

Blair came up behind Jim and wrapped his arms around his waist.

"I think it's worth a try. Besides Jim, who you going to kick out? Me or the kid?"

Turning in his lover's embrace, Jim pulled Blair close so that his head rested against Jim's chest.

"Well ... Stephen's estate pays me to keep the kid, so I guess it's you!"

Blair gazed up into Jim's blue eyes and promptly kned him lightly in the groin.

"You think so, buddy? Well you get this straight. You're stuck with me ... for a whole year at the very least! I've rented out my house so I've got nowhere else to go!"

Jim bent down and kissed Blair, brushing the wild curls away from his beautiful face.

"Make that the rest of our lives and you've got a deal."

The two men resumed their necking only to be interrupted a second time.

"Do you two ever stop?" Will grumbled as he stomped back to his bedroom.

"Ooh, somebody's jealous," Jim teased. "Just cause you don't have a cute little guy of your own, doesn't mean you've got to take it out on everybody else. Man, there's nobody as grouchy as a horny teenager! "

"Funny, ha ha!" Will deadpanned as he took a swipe at his uncle.

Jim caught Will's arm and pulled the kid into a three-way hug.

"Oh god, now I feel just like I'm one of the Waltons," Will laughed as he pulled free. "You guys are going to be unbearable this next year, aren't you?"

"Just 'til the honeymoon wears off," Blair called as he headed up to the bedroom.

When he came back down, he was dressed and ready to go. Blair slung his backpack over his shoulder and stopped to give Jim one last kiss goodbye.

"Okay, Chief. Now you're meeting me at eleven, right? We'll go talk to Simon first, then I'll take you to lunch. Just remember, I've got him convinced that you're my cousin's kid. He's not happy about this ride-along thing, even if it is for your dissertation. So just sit there and let me do the talking. And whatever you do, don't bring up that 'thin blue line' crap."

"Yes, Jim," Blair smirked obediently. "I can't believe I get to work with you all day and sleep with you all night, too. I must have had some very good karma left over from my last life to deserve this."


"Just remember, when we're out there, you do as I say, when I say it. I like to give the illusion that I have a little control over my life so others won't know how much you've got me whipped."

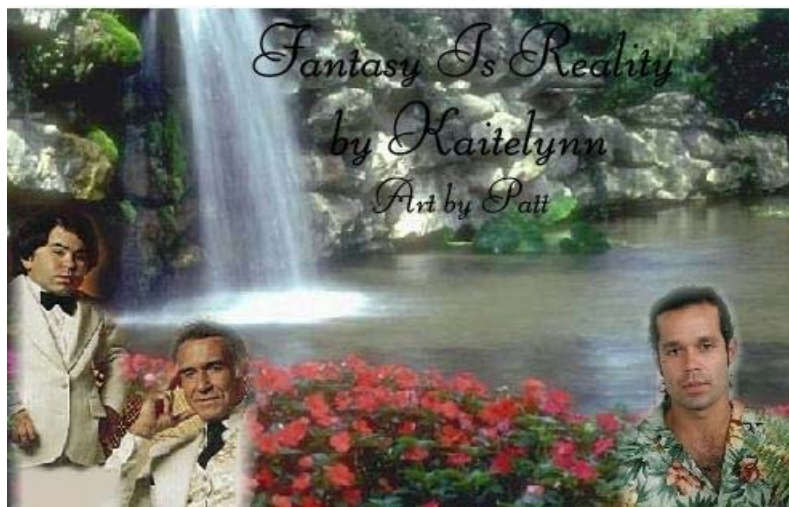
Blair grabbed the stretched out t-shirt again and whispered, "Let's save that for later."

With that he kissed Jim, waved to Will and headed out to begin his new life as police observer to Detective Jim Ellison of the Cascade Police Department.

END

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 Fantasy is Reality



Fantasy Is Reality - Kaitelynn

Jim Ellison looked out of the side window of the airplane. Below the plane he saw a waterfall that ended in a sparkling pool of water surrounding by lush greenery and colorful flowers. He shook his head as he thought again how odd it was that he was taking this trip. It wasn't something that he normally would have considered. Although the thought of spending a week on a tropical island wasn't something that he really minded, the reason for choosing this island made him wonder about his sanity. Then again, him doubting his sanity is something that he's been doing a lot lately.

Jim was a detective with the Cascade Police Department in Washington. He has worked for the Major Crimes department for the past four years. He had one of the best arrest records in the department but lately he had been questioning his sanity. Jim had discovered that his senses had been going haywire. He was seeing things that he couldn't possibly have been able to see. Hearing things from people that were nowhere near him. There were days when his clothes felt like they were burning his skin and there was no way possible for him to eat. Even some smells were enough to make him want to just lock himself away in his loft apartment. All together it made for a none too pleasant living experience. And it was for those reasons that he was on a plane, landing in the middle of a lagoon, on a tropical island. All on the suggestion of his captain and friend, Simon Banks.

Jim looked over at the other couple that he shared the plane with. They both looked so in love and happy. He had overheard that they were there as sort of a second honeymoon, but Jim detected that the woman was also there for another reason that her husband knew nothing about. Something that she was afraid to share with the man that she had devoted her life to. Jim smiled inwardly at the thought of settling down with someone. Loving someone enough to want to spend all your time with them and only them. To be loved that deeply. It was something that he had always desired, but also something that had always been denied him.

Jim watched as the door to the plane opened, allowing the couple to deplane before him. Jim waited a few minutes before following. A beautiful island girl, who placed a lei over his head and gave him a kiss on the cheek, immediately greeted him. He walked down the short walkway where he was lead towards one side and handed a drink. He saw two men; one tall and distinguished looking, the other short and looking as if he was born on the island and both dressed in white. He took a sip of his drink as the two men talked amongst themselves.

"Boss, what is his story?" The shorter man asked. He looked at Jim who was dressed in an expensive black suit that was made of all natural materials. The way the man was looking around at his surroundings, as if he was expecting something to happen even in the peaceful setting that he was in.

"Ahhh, yes. Detective James Ellison."

"Detective?" The younger man squawked. While it wasn't unusual to have a policeman on the island, there was something in his boss' voice that made him think that there was something different about this visitor. Something that marked him as having a special reason for being on the island. Something different than their normal guests.

"What's a detective doing here? Does he want to finally solve that one case that got away?"

"No, actually, the complete opposite. It seems that Detective Ellison would like nothing more than to have a normal vacation complete with fishing and camping. He is looking for a very relaxing time while he is here."

"Then why did he come here instead of going somewhere else? He can get that any where else."

"Well, it seems the young detective has the natural ability to attract trouble. He's been forced into a lot of hard situations that would make lesser men give up, and that includes the times he has taken time off. He is very good at his job and so is assigned to many of the more difficult cases. And recently he has had other problems coming up that he hasn't been able to figure out how to handle, although he hasn't said anything about those directly."

"What kind of problems?"

"Heightened senses," was the simple reply, causing the other man to gasp.

"You mean he's a Sentinel?"

"Yes. But he doesn't know that yet. All he knows is that his senses aren't normal." An island girl brought over two drinks to the men, who raised them to their guests. "I'm Mr. Roarke and I want to welcome you to Fantasy Island." Jim Ellison looked over at the two men as he took a sip of his beverage, thinking about the conversation he had just inadvertently overheard and wondered just what he had gotten himself into.

"You wanted to see me," a young man said as he entered Mr. Roarke's office.

"Yes, Blair, come in and have a seat," Roarke offered, putting down the file that he had been holding to look at the new arrival. Blair was dressed in a pair of well-worn blue jeans and a colorful print shirt. His long curly hair was pulled back with a leather tie and his sparkling blue eyes appeared to be much older and wiser than someone of his twenty- six years should be.

"I have an assignment for you."

"What do you mean, an assignment," Blair questioned.

"There's a guest I would like you to meet. I want you to show him around the island."

"Why me?" Blair looked at Roarke, trying to detect some sort of ruse on the older man's part. While he trusted Roarke with his life, he knew that there were often times that the other man kept things to himself because of some sense of right and wrong. "I've never really dealt with any of the guests. At least, not since I was a kid and new to the island and what went on here."

In fact, Roarke usually took great pains to keep Blair away from the guests when they were involved with their fantasies. It was one of the promises he had given to Blair's mother, Naomi. So instead of helping the guests as one of Roarke's assistants, Blair was giving the freedom to do whatever it was that he wanted, and the usually meant investigating the island. In fact, Blair is probably the only person who knew as much about Fantasy Island and the many secrets it held as Mr. Roarke himself.

"I know, but I still believe that you are the best person to help our guest," Roarke explained. "For what he wants, you are perfect for it."

"What exactly is going to be required?" Roarke smiled at the nervousness Blair was showing. The younger man held a special place in his heart, the reason for which only two other people knew.

"Nothing that you wouldn't be willing to do freely," he assured Blair. "In fact, I believe that its something that you've been wanting to do since you arrived here."

At this statement, Blair looked up in surprise at Roarke. "Blair, not once have I ever thought that your position here depended on your

willingness to help out with our guests. In reality, I knew that it would never make you happy. That's why I've given you so much freedom to do as you please."

Before Blair could say anymore, a knock was heard. After a brief pause, the door opened to what Blair could only describe as the perfect specimen of male.

"Ahhh, Detective Ellison, welcome," Roarke greeted the new arrival. "Thank you for coming."

"No problem, Mr. Roarke," Jim said, turning to face the other man in the room. Jim found his breath stolen from him by the beauty in front of him. The man's long curly hair made him want to run his fingers through it to see if it was as soft as it appeared. He saw the muscles in the body that was hidden by jeans and a T-shirt. And his eyes, so blue that it reminded Jim of the water's off a Caribbean island and Jim swore he could lose himself simply by looking in them. There was something about this man that made Jim become instantly fascinated by him. Jim shook his head, not sure what was going on. He had never felt that kind of connection with anyone before, let alone another male.

Blair, for his part, was equally enthralled by Jim. He could see the power in the other man. Blair had always prided himself on being able to tell quite a bit from other people, even without knowing a thing about them. His instincts never led him wrong and right now his instincts were telling him that the man that stood in front of him was not one to trust easily. As Blair looked into the pale blue orbs of Roarke's guest, he could see someone that had been betrayed before by people that he had given his trust to and now he was reluctant to do so again. Blair cursed inwardly at the fools that had hurt this man and became determined to make up for their stupidity.

Roarke smiled at the connection being made between the two men. While he never discouraged a resident of the island from becoming involved with a guest, he knew in this case that this would have to be the exception. It was something that had to be done, not only for the sanity and happiness of these two men, but also for the good of others. The time had come to fix what someone else had tried to prevent. At first he thought that it would be more difficult to get the two of them to accept each other. Blair, while a trusting soul, didn't have a whole lot of experience when dealing with outsiders. The boy, no, man Roarke corrected himself, had been on the island since the age of ten and was only used to the people that had helped raise him. And Jim tended to keep things to himself, not wanting to open himself up to the kind of hurt that could only come from letting others into his life.

"Detective Ellison, I would like you to meet Blair Sandburg, a resident of our island.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Sandburg," Jim said pleasantly, offering his hand to the younger man.

"Blair, please," he answered, taking the offered appendage. When their hands met, a shock went through both men. They stared at each other, drawn to the other man. 'Damn, what is going on here?' Blair thought to himself. 'I've never felt this drawn to anyone before. This makes no sense.'

"Jim." Roarke smiled as he noticed the connection between the two, quickly schooling his features before they noticed.

"Detective, I know that you wanted, what you considered a normal vacation, and I thought Blair would be a perfect guide for you." Blair and Jim turned to face Roarke, having almost completely forgotten that he was there.

"Guide?" Jim repeated, suspicion suddenly in his voice. He hadn't made it as far as he had just accepting things on face value. "What do you mean guide?"

"You see, Blair knows this island better than anyone," Roarke began to explain. "You said that you were interested in doing some fishing and hiking and camping and I thought Blair would be a perfect companion for you. He can show you quite a few spots here that are off the beaten bath, shall we say."

"Yeah, no problem, man," Blair replied excitedly, more than willing to spend time with the handsome stranger that had just suddenly entered his life. "There's this great place on the other side of the island where the fish line up to get caught. And the sunsets over that side are breathtaking." Blair's voice proceeded to sound more and more enthusiastic and he went on to describe the things that he could show the other man.

"Sounds great. When would you like to get started?"

"Hey, anytime is great with me. I just have to go over to my place and grab some stuff. I've even got a tent and some other camping gear we can use so that's not a big deal."

"Why don't we go get your stuff and then we can sort through what I have and then take off?"

"Cool. If we hurry we can catch the sunset tonight and there's supposed to be a meteor shower over the island tonight, too."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go." Blair and Jim turned and headed out of the office, having completely forgotten that Mr. Roarke was still there. But the older man didn't mind. In fact, he was inordinately pleased.

"Boss, wasn't that Blair I just saw leaving with Detective Ellison?" Tattoo asked as he entered Roarke's office. The older man nodded his head.

"Yes. Blair is going to show the good detective around the island."

"Is that wise? Remember what Naomi said."

"I remember exactly what Naomi said, but I think it's a very good idea for the two of them to get to know each other."

"She won't be happy about it."

"That's why she won't know about it. Besides, Naomi is currently in the outback of Australia, so she's unreachable. Anyway, I have a feeling that everything is going to work out just fine." Tattoo looked at his boss, wondering just exactly what was going on in Roarke's mind. He knew the reasons that Blair had come to be part of the island's family and was curious as to why Roarke seemed to be completely disregarding Naomi Sandburg's reasons for sending Blair to them in the first place.

"So tell me, Chief, what is it you do around here exactly?" Jim asked as he watched Blair put the things he figured he would need for a camping expedition into a well-worn backpack. The younger man's jeep was already filled with their supplies, including a two-person tent and a couple of fishing poles.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you work for Roarke or what?" Blair looked in thought for a moment before answered.

"Well, I don't really do anything," he answered truthfully. "I never had to. Mr. Roarke pretty much lets me do whatever I want. I've got a lot of freedom here. And I use it. Most of the time I just go exploring the island. No matter how many times I may go to one place, I always seem to find something new. This place holds so many secrets, it's amazing."

"How long have you been here?" Jim was curious about the younger man that stood in front of him. Jim already felt more comfortable with him than he did with anyone else he had ever known, including his ex-wife. And this was only after a few hours of knowing him.

"Since I was ten," Blair answered absently, looking around his room, making sure that he hadn't forgotten.

"Where are your parents?"

"Well, I think my mom's somewhere down in Australia or something. I'm not really sure. Naomi's kinda hard to keep track of."

"What about your dad?"

"Don't have one, at least, that I know of," Blair replied, his voice telling Jim that it didn't really bother the younger man that he didn't have a normal family.

"What do you mean?" Jim was intrigued by the puzzle that was Blair Sandburg.

"Well, Naomi, that's my mom, right, she's kinda free spirit. The total flower child hippie. She was totally into that whole free love thing in the sixties. Hell, she's probably still into it for all I know," Blair laughed, thinking back on some of the adventures his mother had told him. "According to her, she doesn't know who my father is. It could be any one of a number of guys."

"I'm sorry. No one should live their lives without knowing their parents." There was something in Jim's voice when he said that that made Blair look at the older man, making him wonder about the detective's own home life and the reason he was on the island.

"It's not really that big of a deal," Blair shrugged. "I mean, Naomi did the best that she could and I know that she loves me. And Mr. Roarke has been almost a father to me. He's taken good care of me since Naomi left me here."

"What do you mean, left you here? Didn't your mom raise you?"

"In a way. For the first ten years, it was just me and Naomi and whoever her latest boyfriend was. She took me everywhere. I was the most well traveled five-year-old in school when I finally started. But then, something happened. I'm still not sure what. We had been living in Sedona in this retreat that was owned by a couple of friends of Naomi's, when she said that we had to leave. The next thing I know, we were here and she was asking Mr. Roarke to take me in and raise me."

"Didn't she stay with you?" Jim was flabbergasted. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to leave their child in the care of someone else, certainly not this particular one. His opinion of Naomi was extremely harsh, and that was without even meeting her as of yet.

"Nah, Naomi never was one to stick around in one place so long," Blair said nonchalantly, although there was a hint of the hurt little boy that had been left behind by his mother apparent in his voice. It made Jim want to wrap Blair up in his arms and make him feel safe.

"I'm sorry," Jim told him. "I know what it's like to not have your mother around." Blair looked up from his backpack and stared at Jim for a long time, trying to figure out what the detective's comment meant. Jim noticed and continued. "My mom took off on my brother and I when I was ten."

"Oh man," Blair said, closing the pack and joining Jim on the couch. "That must have been tough."

"Yeah it was," Jim nodded, memories of that day, so long ago, coming back to him. "I never understood what happened. I mean, all I know is that one day Steven and I left for school and mom was there, and then when we got home, she was gone. Sally, our housekeeper, pretty much took care of us after that."

"What about your dad?" Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"He was there," Jim answered, his voice hard.

"That's not saying a lot," Blair joked, albeit weakly, trying to break the tension that was threatening to overwhelm the two men.

"Yeah, well, if you knew my dad, you would understand." At Blair's quiet nod to continue, Jim went on. "My dad didn't take my mom leaving well and he took it out on Steven and I. I don't mean physically," Jim was quick to point out. It was more emotional than anything else. Dad liked to pit Steven and I against each other. He would always reward one of us, all the while punishing the other."

"Oh man, that's harsh. How can anyone do that to their kids?"

"Don't know and I don't really care anymore. It was a long time ago and I learned to depend on myself from it."

"What about your brother?"

"I haven't talked to either of them in over fifteen years. Not since I left for military school my senior year while they were in Europe. Dad pretty much told me in his own way how he felt about me and my little brother did the same thing."

"But they're your family," Blair protested.

"Not anymore, Chief," Jim informed him. "I haven't needed them in my life and they've made it perfectly clear that they don't want to be a part of it anyway."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No, it doesn't," Jim agreed. "But that's life. It's not right for a father to pit his sons against each other and it isn't right for mothers to leave their boys to fend for themselves." That last comment covering both men. "But it does make us who we are." Jim took a deep breath and slapped Blair on the knee. "So, what say you show me this fantastic camping spot. I don't know about you, but I can use a good bit of nature right about now."

"Sounds like a plan, big guy. Let's go."

"You were right, Chief. This place is absolutely wonderful," Jim commented as he set down the final load of gear he and Blair had brought with them. Blair, for his part, was busy putting up the two-man tent that they were going to use. "I've never seen anyplace like it."

"Yeah, it is cool here," the younger man agreed. "It's one of my favorite places on the island. I like to come here when I want to think about things or I just want to be by myself for a bit. It's like my own little slice of Fantasy Island. You're the first person I've ever brought here with me." Jim looked at Blair, touched at the sincerity in his voice.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Blair nodded his head. "I've never really wanted anyone to know about this place. This was mine but," Blair shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. It just feels right, being here with you. And I'm sure that sounds completely stupid. I'm sorry man."

Blair turned away from Jim, focusing on finishing his task. Jim took a few deep breaths as he realized just what it was exactly the younger man was saying. 'Damn, he feels the same connection I do. He knows that there's something between us.' Jim went over and touched Blair's arm.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me." Jim watched as Blair turned a bright pink from the compliment.

"I'm sure that's not true. I bet you have a ton of people who care about you back home."

"Not really," Jim admitted. "I mean, I have friends, acquaintances, but nobody that really cares for me."

"What about your girlfriend?"

"Don't have one," Jim answered. "Had a wife once but that didn't turn out too good. We got divorced after only two years of marriage." Jim gathered some wood and began a small fire. Blair came over and joined him, the two of them moving around each other, not getting each other's way, as if they've been doing it their whole lives. "I've dated some since then, but nothing really serious. My life is too messed up and it wouldn't be fair to expect someone else to have to make sacrifices for me."

"You mean, you being a cop and all?"

"Yeah, that's part of it," Jim sighed wearily. Jim added some more fuel to the fire, wanting to make it hot enough to cook the steaks that he and Blair had brought with them. "Being a cop is all I really know. I pretty much live, breath and eat it and that means that I can't really devote the kind of time and energy to a woman that they want. At least, that's what Carolyn told me."

"She's your ex, I take it." Jim nodded.

"We met at work. She works down in Forensics," he started. "I won't say that it was love at first sight. We were friends first and thought that it could be more than that. For awhile it was, but things fell apart. I can't even say we fought. Wait, let me amend that. Carolyn fought, I just listened. Then one day I came home and she was gone. I could say it was a shock but it wasn't really. I knew she as going to go. She hated the loft and the sterility, as she called it, of what it was. We got a divorce quickly, she didn't want anything from me and I just wanted it over with. We've remained friends and I think that's all we should have ever been."

"It's a good thing that the two of you are still friends," Blair observed. "I bet it makes it easier at work. But, come on man, are you telling me that since then you haven't found someone that you wanted to risk allowing yourself to truly care about?"

"Not really," Jim answered. 'Until now,' he added silently, looking over at his partner. "Look, Chief, there are a lot of things about me that people have trouble dealing with. Hell, I have trouble dealing with them. How can I be expected to let other people in?" Blair moved closer to the detective, choosing to sit by his side, their legs brushing up against each other occasionally.

"I'd like to help you," he whispered. "I mean, that is, if you'd like me to."

"You don't even know what it is that I'm going through."

"Doesn't matter," Blair shrugged. "If it's important to you, then it's important to me." Jim looked over at the young man that he had just met a few hours ago. He felt himself wanting to tell him things that he had never told anyone. Not Carolyn. Not Simon, his best friend. There was something about Blair that just made him want to open up to him. Something that called to him.

"You mean that, don't you?"

"Of course I do, big guy," Blair replied. "Look, I know we haven't known each other that long, and you have absolutely no reason to trust me, but I like you. I feel closer to you than to anyone I've ever met, including Naomi."

"I know the feeling, Chief." Both men went about getting their dinner ready, working in tandem. Once the steaks were on the fire, Blair stood up and motioned for Jim to follow him.

"Come on," he said. "The sun's almost down and there's this great spot just a little ways down that's perfect for watching it." Blair held out his hand to help Jim stand and was pleased when the offer was accepted. He was even more pleased when the other man didn't release it immediately afterwards. Blair led Jim towards the beach that was just beyond their campsite. The two men watched in quiet solitude at Mother Nature's natural light show. "You know, man, no matter how many times I see this, it's like it's always the first time."



"It's beautiful, Blair," Jim said in a hushed voice. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"Thank you for being here to share it with." Jim and Blair turned their attention from the sunset to each other, both losing themselves in the blue eyes of their partner. Jim felt this sudden urge to kiss the younger man but squelched it, not wanting to push anything that the other man might not be ready for. Although, if he were honest with himself, Jim was pretty sure that Blair would be more than willing to give the detective whatever it was that he wanted to take. The two men continued watching the sunset before heading back to their campsite and enjoying their first dinner together and wondering just what exactly it was that fate had in store for them.

The next morning found Jim and Blair getting up early, even though they had spent quite a bit of the night before talking and getting to know each other. Jim told Blair about his time in the military, and how he retired as a Captain of the Rangers after he came back from Peru where he had been the sole survivor of a mission. Blair listened in silence as the former military man described having to bury the seven men that had been assigned to follow him and then was required to live in the jungle for eighteen months. Luckily, the local tribe there, the Chopec,

had taken him in and helped him complete his mission. He told him more about his relationship with Carolyn and why it didn't work out. Jim found himself talking more to the young man that he had just met in one night than in the two years he had been married to Carolyn.

Blair for his part described living on the island. He talked about his mom, Naomi, and what their life had been like before she had decided that he should live away from her and dropped him off in the care of Mr. Roarke. He talked about the places that he had visited before settling on the island. Blair told Jim that while he loved the island and the people that were there, he still felt that there was something more for him. Something that was missing and Blair had a feeling that to find it, he would have to leave his home. Jim was intrigued by the young man whose only real home was at the resort where his mother had left him and wondered once more how much Naomi truly cared for her son to just leave him like that. Jim thought that Naomi's leaving Blair with Roarke and Jim's own mother deserting him when he was also ten was one more thing that he had in common with Blair.

"Come on, Chief," Jim encouraged Blair as the young man finally emerged from the tent. Jim smiled as Blair made his way directly to the coffeepot that was resting on top of the remaining embers from the fire. Blair groaned as he took his first sip of caffeine before finally opening his eyes and grinning at the detective.

"Mmmmmm."

"I take it the coffee meets your approval," Jim teased.

"Oh man, I don't care what time I get up," Blair said. "I refuse to even open my eyes until I have some coffee in my system. Trust me when I say it isn't a pretty picture if I can't get some before dealing with people."

"Well, I'll keep that in mind for later." Jim chuckled as Blair began to wake even more as he continued to sip at his coffee. He loved watching the islander and couldn't seem to get enough of him. There was something about the hyperactive man that just calmed Jim. Finally, Blair noticed Jim's focus was on him and called the other man on it.'

"What? Is there some big bug crawling on my head or something?"

"Excuse me," Jim asked, shaking himself out of the zone he had felt coming on.

"I was just wondering why you were staring at me." Jim looked down at the coffee cup in his own hand, his face turning a faint pink as he realized that he had been caught.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "It's just that...."

"Come on, man, talk to me," Blair encouraged, covering Jim's hands with one of his own, the touch sending an electrical charge through both. Jim looked back up at Blair's face and couldn't help himself. He leaned over and covered Blair's lips with his own in a gentle kiss that held promises from both men. Then they finally fell apart; they couldn't say anything, only able to stare at the other. "Wow."

"Yeah, wow," Jim agreed.

"What was that for, not like I'm upset or anything. I'm just surprised." Jim chuckled again as he brushed a lock of Blair's long curly locks behind his ear.

"Probably almost as surprised as I am at doing it. I've never even felt the compulsion to kiss another man, let alone actually doing it," Jim admitted.

"Same here, but what a first kiss," Blair answered. This time, it was the younger man that leaned forward to kiss the other. This kiss was even longer and more passionate than the first. Arms wrapped around the warm body of their partners, pulling them closer until they couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Hands began to roam, charting the unfamiliar territory of someone else's body. Finally, when air was becoming an issue for both of them, they pulled apart, not completely leaving the other's personal space. Jim bent his head, leaning his forehead until it touched Blair's.

"What's happening here, Jim?" Blair questioned quietly, not wanting to disturb the silence of the forest around them, afraid that it would break whatever spell it was that was weaving its way around them. Only the sounds of nature broke through the dense foliage to their little piece of the world.

"I don't know, Chief," Jim whispered, honestly. "I've never felt anything like this before. No one has ever made me feel this way. I've told you things that I've never told anyone."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No," Jim hastened to reassure the younger man. He could see the insecurity in the islander's face and wanted to make sure that he knew that Jim didn't mean anything he said as a bad thing. "You have to understand, I've been accused of being a tight lipped son of a bitch." Blair chuckled. "Carolyn told me once she could get more out of the toaster than from me. That I wouldn't know passion if it bit me on the ass."

"Bullshit," Blair said succinctly. "I might not have a whole lot of experience with all of this, but I don't know what the hell she was talking about, you definitely don't have anything to worry about not knowing about passion. You have so got that covered." Jim placed another small kiss on Blair's lips.

"Thanks, Chief," the detective replied, accepting the compliment as it was intended.

"Anytime Jim," Blair answered.

"Roarke, how lovely it is seeing you again," a very feminine voice said as the guide met her airplane. "Thank you for meeting me."

"It was my pleasure, Naomi," he greeted the sparkling red head. "I was quite surprised to receive your message saying that you would be arriving today. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Well, its Blair's birthday tomorrow and I thought I would come and celebrate it with him." Naomi Sandburg looked around, as if trying to find someone. "So where is my son, anyway?" Tattoo looked over at his boss from his seat in his window; apprehension written all over his face but Naomi didn't see it and Roarke just ignored it.

"I believe he went camping for the week," Roarke replied noncommittally. "You know how Blair is. He loves spending time away from everyone here at the resort. I think he's happier being out in nature."

"Well, do you know where he is?" Naomi asked. "I would love to see him and I'm sure that he would want to see me. And I've waited for seventeen years for this day to come so that he can finally be free to live his life, without having to worry about him getting involved in something that would be bad for him."

"I know Naomi. I remember well why you sent Blair to live on the island with us."

"Then where is he?"

"I told you, as far as I know, he's camping. Probably somewhere on the other side of the island if I know that young man." There was something in Roarke's voice. Something that very few people would hear for what it really was and Naomi was one of those few people.

"Roarke, what is it that you aren't telling me," Naomi demanded. When the man in charge remained quiet, Naomi's voice grew louder. "Damn it, I want some answers. Blair is my son after all. I have a right to know what's going on with him."

"Yes, he is, but he is also a grown man," Roarke pointed out. "A man who is able to make his own decisions, even when they might disagree with what his mother, or anyone else, might want for him." Naomi's eyes narrowed as they looked at Roarke. She could tell that Roarke wasn't telling her anything and yet telling her everything at the same time.

"What have you done?"

"Naomi, you and I both know that what is fated will happen, whether we want it to or not." Before Roarke could go any further, the irate mother was in his face, her eyes shooting fire at him.

"Tell me you didn't. You bastard, you know how I feel about Blair becoming involved with one of them. How in the world did you let this happen?"

"I did nothing," Roarke replied calmly. "All I did was ask him to help a guest with their vacation. There is nothing unusual in that regards. I told you when you first asked me to watch over Blair and allow him to live here that I may have him interact with those that came to the island."

"What type of guest? Who is Blair with?"

"His name is Jim Ellison and he's from Cascade, Washington."

"And what exactly is he here for?"

"Just a little vacation," Roarke assured Naomi. "Just some camping, fishing and hiking. I promise you, Naomi. Blair is perfectly safe here. I would never do anything that would hurt him."

"Why is it that I don't trust you, Roarke?" Naomi questioned. "What is it about this Ellison character that you aren't telling me?" A thought suddenly came to her and she wrapped her hands around herself, as if she was trying to protect herself from something.

"Dear God, tell me he isn't a pig." When neither Roarke nor Tattoo said anything, nor would even meet her eyes, she repeated herself. "I said, tell me that Ellison isn't a pig."

"James Ellison is a detective. He works for the Major Crimes department in Cascade," Roarke explained. "He came here for a chance to just get away for a little while and I thought that Blair would be the best person to help him with what he wanted. There is no one on the island that knows it as well as Blair and Detective Ellison wanted to get away from it all."

"But I told you what I saw," Naomi whispered, fear tingeing her voice at the thought of her son involved with a police detective. "I told you what was in my vision and yet you still sent my Blair off with that pig. How could you do that? Blair's an innocent. He's lived almost his whole life on this island and even before that, when he was with me, I never let him know about the evil that was out there." Naomi's hands flew out, indicating the outside world. "And you sent him off with a detective."

"I asked him to go with Detective Ellison," Roarke corrected. "If Blair didn't feel comfortable being with him, I'm more than sure that he would have told me so." Roarke didn't mention to Naomi how he had seen the sparks that had flown almost immediately between the two men. He knew that Blair's mother wouldn't be happy to find out that her son was probably already well on his way to fulfilling his part of her vision, as was Jim. "Naomi, trust your son. Trust in his judgment."

"But I don't want him in that kind of life. It's wrong," Naomi reiterated, but her voice had lost some of the conviction that had been in it before. She didn't want to admit it, but she had always known that in some way it had been a futile hope that what she had seen would never happen.

"Naomi, he's not a little boy anymore. You can't live his life for him," Roarke told her. "Let him do what he was meant to do."

"I don't know if I can," she whispered sadly. "I don't know if I can."

"Be careful, Chief," Jim stated as he continued to climb up the side of the cliff. "There's some loose gravel up here and the footing isn't that great."

"Don't worry about me, man. I've been climbing this rock since I was a kid," Blair replied, grabbing another handhold and pulling himself up the face. He and Jim were spending the day rock climbing, using the cliffs down the beach from their campsite for that purpose. Blair had spent the past two days showing Jim around this section of the island. It was a part of the resort paradise that no one, except for some islanders, ever visited, its remoteness guaranteeing them privacy to explore both nature's gifts and their growing feelings towards each other.

The two men had discovered, after those first kisses, that they were both falling and falling hard. Both admitted that they had never been with another man, never even having considered it a possibility, but were more than willing to see what might happen between them. Yet, neither of them pressed the other to go further than their necking and groping sessions that left both of them panting and, usually, needing a change of clothes. As much as they hated it, they knew that the time that they had together was limited. That, eventually, their week would be up and that Jim would be leaving Fantasy Island to go back to Cascade, while Blair remained, bound by his mother's wishes and Roarke's promise to her to keep him safe. And, as much as they both wanted something more than what they had, Jim and Blair both knew that it would be even more difficult for them to leave each other at the end of Jim's week on the island if they allowed their relationship to progress any further than where it already was. Blair knew that Jim couldn't stay on the island just as Jim was sure that Blair wouldn't be able to leave it.



"Damn, you were right Chief, this is a wonderful view," Jim whispered in awe as he stared out at the open ocean. The two had finally reached the top of the cliff. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to go back to Cascade after seeing all of this."

"This is the reason why I always come here," Blair told the older man simply. He watched Jim's face as the detective took in his surroundings. "It's like I can see forever. Sometimes I can even see a cruise ship out there."

"You mean, like the one over there," Jim pointed towards something in the distance. Blair tried to see what the other man was looking at, but couldn't see anything other than a small dot.

"What ship?" He asked. "I can't see anything."

"It's right over there," Jim stated, indicating the area where he saw the cruise ship. Blair still couldn't see anything.

"Jim, I can't see anything." Jim stared at the man that he was finding himself falling for and saw that he wasn't teasing him. "Damn, I thought

that they had at least gone back to normal while I was here. Why couldn't they have stayed regular?" "Jim, are you okay, man?"

"I'm fine, Chief," he lied and Blair saw right through it.

"No, you're not," he answered. Blair wrapped his arms around Jim's waist, turning the larger man so that they were facing each other. "What's on that mind of yours? Come on, you can trust me." Jim shook his head. He didn't want to tell Blair about his senses, afraid that he would think that Jim was insane. Blair could see the indecision on Jim's face and cupped his palm over Jim's cheek. "Please, Jim, tell me what's bothering you." The worry and love in Blair's voice was what made the decision for Jim.

"Sometimes I can see things that other people can't. My senses have this tendency of becoming stronger than most peoples," Jim finally admitted. "I can see things that I shouldn't be able to. Hear things that people are saying even though they are nowhere near me. My taste has gotten so sensitive that I can't eat half of the food that I love. I can tell what something is just from smell alone, even if it's been days since something has been there. Even my clothes make my skin burn." Jim looked out at the ocean, watching as the distant cruise ship finally left his sight. He didn't want to look into Blair's eyes, afraid to see the disbelief on the younger man's face.

"Wow," Blair exclaimed in a soft voice. "So have you always had this kind of reaction with your senses or is it something new?" Blair knew enough about Jim to understand that Jim would be very sensitive about his senses. Jim shrugged his shoulders in answer.

"I first noticed them when I was in Peru," Jim explained. "The Shaman of the local tribe, Incacha, helped me with them as much as he could. He tried to tell me that they were a gift and I used them to help the Chopec. They said it was one of the reasons that we had been able to hold the pass and defeat the drug smugglers. Then when I got back to the States, they seemed to disappear."

"Disappear?" Jim nodded his head.

"Yeah. One day everything was too bright, too loud, too everything and the next, everything was back to normal, but the damage was already done. Between the senses and finding out that my team had been betrayed, I couldn't live with being in the army anymore. You know what happened after that."

"You went back to Cascade and joined the police force there," Blair continued. "So, what brought your senses back online like this?"

"I don't know," Jim admitted. "I was on a stake out. There was this bomber that was taunting me. I was in the woods, alone, for a week and suddenly my senses started going crazy again. I could hear the water boiling for my coffee as if it were a loud radio. It got so bad that the suspect managed to get away from me. As it was, it was by pure dumb luck that managed to get to her before she did anymore damage. But, ever since then, my senses have refused to go back to normal."

"Oh man," Blair began to mutter to himself. "Oh man oh man oh man oh man. I don't believe it. I absolutely don't believe this." Blair pulled away from Jim, and started pacing along the cliff's side, constantly muttering things that not even Jim could hear. "This is it. This is where I lose him," Jim thought. "Now Blair knows just how screwed up I am and he can't wait to get away from me. Well, at least it was good while it lasted. It just means it will be easier to leave the island at the end of the week, knowing that he thinks I'm insane." Jim prepared himself for the moment when Blair would look at him with scorn on his face.

"Jim, man, this is like so amazing," Blair finally said. "I mean, I've read about people with heightened senses, even met a few with one or two of them, but I've never seen anyone with all five. Do you have any idea of what this means."

"It means that I'm probably going crazy, is what it means." Hostility laced Jim's voice as he thought of what his senses have cost him.

"No way, man," Blair excitedly replied. "Your senses are like a gift. The things they can help you do. It's amazing just thinking about it." Blair finally stood in front of Jim once more, and saw the resigned sadness in his friend's face.

"You don't understand, Chief," Jim sighed. "You don't have any idea of what it's like for me. I can't control them. I have no idea of when they are going to act up and I can't keep working with them like this. As it is, Simon had to put me on desk duty until we could figure out a way to control them. I can't do the job I was meant to do because I can't control what my senses are telling me."

"Jim, look, I know it sounds weird, but I can tell you what I think is going on." At Jim's non-verbal agreement, Blair led the other man over to a boulder and seating him there. Blair went back to his pacing, using the time to gather his thoughts. Once he figured out what he wanted to say he began to explain his theory to Jim.

"Richard Burton, the explorer not the actor, wrote about a group of tribal watchman. They had been chosen because of a specific genetic ability. They had heightened senses. Now, these senses helped them track game, predict the weather, and protect the tribe from their enemies. In essence, they were the tribe's guardians or, as Burton called them, they were Sentinels."

"Sentinels?"

"Yup, and from everything you've just told me about your own senses, it sounds like you may be a Sentinel yourself," Blair said happily. "Even your choice in professions makes sense. First the military and then a cop. Hello, can we say protective mode there."

"But what good are my senses to other people if I can't control them?"

"Well, that can be a problem," Blair admitted. "But, if you're willing, I think I can do something to help you with that."

Blair came over and stood between Jim's legs. The detective looked into his partner's blue eyes and saw only a true desire to help him, with nothing else asked for in return. He wrapped his arms around Blair's waist and pulled him closer to him.


"Tell me what you want me to do, Chief?"

Two days later found the two men breaking their camp after having decided to spend Jim's last full day on the island back at the main resort. The past couple of days had Jim learning to control his senses, using what Blair called dials. Jim discovered that with the dials, he was able to decide how much or little he wanted a sense to work. If a smell was too bad, he would lower the dial until it became more bearable. If he wanted to see or hear something better, he would raise the dial until he was satisfied with the setting. It gave the detective hope that he would be able to function back in the real world and would enable him to continue doing the job that he loved.

Blair's excitement over the discovery of Jim's senses were contagious and the older man found himself looking forward to being able to use them in his job. He knew it would be difficult explaining to his Captain, but he would, especially since he knew that he was going to need someone to help him if he got overloaded. That was the one problem that they still hadn't been able to defeat. Sometimes, when Jim was concentrating too hard on something, he would become still, or zone as Blair put it. It had happened to him before and usually nothing could bring him out of it until he was ready to come out on his own, but with Blair, it was different. Instead of taking hours to come back, Blair was able to talk him back in only a matter of minutes. That is, if he couldn't prevent it completely in the first place.

The two men also found themselves growing incredibly closer. It was as if they had known each for years instead of just days. Both opened themselves up to feelings that they hadn't even been aware of possessing. They refused to think of the time when they would be forced to part, deciding to live in the moment, as if they were the only two people on the island. The day would find them hiking or swimming or working on Jim's senses, but at night, they would sit by the fire, holding each other as only lover's can do. Jim would wrap himself around Blair, neither having to really say anything, both content with just the feeling of the people that they held. Then, when they went to bed, they would make love, although they still would not do any actual penetration, knowing that if they did, they would never be able to leave each other and that would make things harder than they already would be when they would eventually have to.

"You know, I always hate it when I have to leave here, but today, I really despise it," Blair said as he looked around the campsite to make sure that they hadn't forgotten anything. He always made sure that the site looked the same, if not better, when he left then when he came. Jim came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his lover.

"I know the feeling, Chief," he murmured, dropping his head to place a kiss on Blair's cheek. "This place, it's like it s ours. Like this is our own little piece of paradise."

"It is," Blair agreed. "I don't think I'll ever be able to come back here and not think of you." Blair turned into Jim's embrace, resting his head against the taller man's chest, a quiet sob escaping him. "How am I supposed to come back here when you won't be here with me?"

"Oh God, Blair," Jim cried, running his hand over Blair's curls, kissing the top of his head. He knew exactly what Blair was feeling, as it was the same for him. Jim couldn't imagine going back to Cascade and trying to live his life alone, for he was sure that he had finally found his soul mate.

"I wish I could go back to Cascade with you," Blair whispered. "I don't think I can stay here without you."

"Maybe Roarke will let you leave the island," Jim answered softly. Blair shook his head against Jim's chest.

"He promised my mom that he would take care of me," Blair reminded Jim. "According to him, I'm here for a reason and, from what I got from him, I won't be allowed to leave until whatever is supposed to happen actually does."

"He can't hold you against your will, Blair."

"I know," Blair sighed, pulling back slightly so that he could look into his love's face. "But he took care of me, raised me, when Naomi either couldn't or wouldn't. I have an obligation to him to stay until whatever is supposed to happen does." Jim pulled Blair back to him.

"I know, babe," Jim bit back the tears that were threatening to fall. "I just wish there was some way that we could be together. I don't know how I'm supposed to go back to that lonely loft after knowing what having someone in my life that I love and that loves me back."

"I do love you, Jim."

"I know you do, Chief," Jim placed another kiss on the top of Blair's head. "Just like I love you. We'll figure something out. Just because I'm leaving, it doesn't mean that we can't stay in touch. We can write and I can certainly afford a high phone bill." Blair chuckled.

"Like yours would be the only one that would be high," Blair laughed. "Trust me, I'll be spending every cent that I have calling the States. You'll get so sick of hearing my voice, you'll turn off that phone of yours."

"Never, Chief. Never." The two men just stood together, reveling in the feeling of peace that was surrounding them. Neither wanted to be the first to move, knowing that to do so would mean that it was time to leave their paradise and take that first step back to reality. A reality that would force their eventual separation. Eventually, they pulled apart, albeit reluctantly. After a brief but passionate kiss, they began to make their way out of the forest that had brought them what they both had wanted without even knowing it. Love.

"Well, we're back," Blair sighed as he dumped his backpack on the couch in his home, Jim following and doing the same. It had taken them longer to get back than it had taken to reach their campsite due to the fact that they were in no real hurry to return to the resort, knowing that once they did, it would only be a reminder of how short their time was. "Home, sweet, home."

Jim glanced around the room, taking a better look at the place that Blair called home and he noticed something that seemed out of place.

"Umm, Chief, since when did you start wearing pantyhose?"

"What?" Jim pointed to the pair of pantyhose that were lying near a chair. Next to it, was a floral suitcase. "Oh man, not now."

"Chief?"

"Naomi," was the only word that Blair needed to say. Over the past five days, Blair had told Jim a lot about the woman that had given birth to him. About the things that she had tried to teach her only child. Jim had decided that, although Blair loved his mother and looked forward to seeing or hearing from her on those rare occasions when she actually remembered she had a son, Blair also dreaded those same moments. He hated knowing that, even though Naomi loves him, he wasn't her top priority. That Naomi preferred traveling and staying with various friends and lovers, then with spending time raising the son that she had brought into the world.

"What's she doing here?" Jim was curious as to why the woman who hadn't been to visit her son in five years had suddenly decided to come now.

"I would say for my birthday, but she's never been here before for it, so I can't be sure. It's not like it's a major milestone or something." Jim took Blair into his arms and placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he said lovingly, nuzzling the smaller man's neck. "I would say the day that celebrates the birth of the most wonderful man in the world is definitely something of a milestone."

"You, my love, are biased," Blair teased.

"So? Doesn't mean it isn't true," Jim pointed out. "You are a wonderful, loving man and I am so glad that I even had the privilege of meeting you, let alone having your love." Blair's eyes showed the love he felt at the tender and heartfelt words coming from his lover's mouth. No one had ever made him feel as loved as Jim did. Not even Naomi. "So, I guess with your mom here, our plans for tonight and tomorrow are kinda down the drain, huh?"

"No way, man," Blair protested. "Just because Naomi decided to show up now, for whatever reason, it doesn't mean that I don't intend on spending as much time with you as I possibly can. Trust me, we are going to spend every moment we can together."

"But Naomi's your mother, Blair," Jim reminded him. "She came here to see you. It wouldn't be right to just ignore her."

"Who said anything about ignoring her?" Blair teased. "I plan on showing off the man I love to my mother. I want her to meet the man that has stolen my heart."

"It's only fair, since you stole mine." Blair and Jim kissed again, their arms tightening around each other, pulling the other closer to them. They could feel their erections brush against each other and sighed in contentment. Neither of them could believe that anything could feel as good. Before they could make it to the bedroom, though, someone clearing their throat interrupted them. The two men broke apart, turning to face the intruder.

"Naomi," Blair called out as he saw his mother standing in the doorway to his home. Next to her was an older gentleman that he had never seen before.

"Dad," Jim said in surprise, causing Blair to turn towards him.

"Wait a minute," Blair shook his head, looking between his mother, Jim's father and Jim.

"Hello, darling," Naomi greeted Blair, coming and pulling him away from Jim. Blair allowed her to do so, although reluctantly. "How's the birthday boy?"

"Older," he answered sarcastically. "What are you doing here, Mom?"

"What, is it so unusual for a mother to come and visit her son on his birthday?" Naomi answered casually, although Blair could sense something in her voice that wasn't right. "I just wanted to see how my favorite son was doing."

"Mom, I haven't seen you in over five years," Blair pointed out. "I haven't heard from you in over six months. You've never been here for my birthdays. You show up here with Jim's dad and you just expect me to think that something isn't up? Come on, Naomi, I know you better than that."

"Blair, I'm hurt that you don't seem to trust me," Naomi pouted. "Now, is that anyway to treat your mother. Come on, why don't we go for a nice walk and talk. It's been so long."

"Mom, I would love to spend time with you, but I've made other plans." Blair returned to Jim's side. The other man, for his part, was still

standing in the same place Blair had left him, staring at his father. He turned his attention back to Blair at the first touch to his arm. "Mom, this is Jim Ellison." Blair hesitated for minute. "My lover."

"Lover?" William Ellison finally said. He looked over between the son he hadn't seen in so long and Blair. "Jim?"

"Yes, dad, my lover," Jim confirmed. "Dad, this is Blair Sandburg. Blair, my father, William Ellison."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Ellison. Welcome to Fantasy Island." Blair smiled at the other man, who found himself returning it. William had to admit there was something about Blair that just made him easy to like, even under the strange circumstances of this particular meeting.

"Thank you, Blair," William answered. "You have a lovely home here. You must have had a wonderful childhood growing up here." Blair shrugged.

"It was okay, although there were a few things that I missed." Naomi winced at the way her son pointedly looked in her direction with his statement. "So what brings you to the island?"

"Yeah, Dad," Jim joined in. "I wouldn't have figured this for your type of vacation spot."

"Actually, Stephen and I are here on business," William explained. "We were interested in building another resort on the other side of the island and came to discuss it with Mr. Roarke."

"I can just imagine his reaction to that," Blair chuckled. "You aren't the first people to come here with that agenda."

"So he told us, in no uncertain terms," the elder Ellison actually smiled. "He's a very interesting man, that Roarke. He always seems to know what you're thinking and feeling, even when you don't."

"Yeah, he has that nasty little habit," Blair stated. "It can be rather annoying at times, but sometimes, it's really nice not having to worry about explaining how you feel."

"So, Blair, how exactly did you and my son meet?" Blair looked between father and son, wondering just how much he should tell the other man and then decided to take his cue from Jim.

"Roarke asked Blair to show me around the island," Jim explained. "Apparently, Blair is the best tour guide around."

"Really? I wish we had more time on the island, maybe you could show me and Stephen around also." William seemed to make a decision. "I would very much like to get to know the young man that seems to have stolen my son's heart." Jim looked in surprise at his father. He never expected to hear his father say anything like that about anyone that Jim brought to meet him, let alone his male lover.

"Dad?" William walked over and stood in front of Jim, resting one of his hands on Jim's shoulder.

"Jim, look, I know I've made some mistakes," William began. "I'll be the first to admit that I didn't do right by you or Stephen with the way I raised you. And I can't say that I'm entirely comfortable knowing that my son appears to be in love with a man, but with that kiss that Naomi and I walked in on, I have no doubt it is love, but I also know that I've missed having you in my life. When I had heard you were dead, a big part of myself died. And then you were back and I thought I was being given a second chance, but you never contacted Stephen or I and we thought we had lost you again, but at least this time you were alive."

"Dad," Jim whispered. He allowed himself to be pulled into his father's arms in a hug that he had never thought he would get.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy," William Ellison whispered. "Forgive this old fool for the way that he treated his son. I love you, Jim, and I am willing to accept everything that you are, including the fact that you have a male lover, if it means that I get to have you back in my life."

Naomi looked on at the two men embracing and at her son smiling at them and fumed. Things were not going as well as she had planned. She had hoped that William Ellison would be horrified to learn that his son was involved with another man. When she had run into him, she had been sure that it was a sign that Jim and Blair weren't meant to be together. She figured that the elder Ellison would convince Jim to just forget about whatever might be going on between the two men, but apparently that wasn't going to happen. Not only was he accepting Jim's choice in lifestyles, but also he was even willing to welcome Blair. That would just not do.

"Blair, I'm sure Jim would understand it if you and I spent some quality time together," Naomi suggested. "In fact, he probably would like to spend time with his family also. So why don't we go for that walk now?" Blair looked over at Jim and William and then back to his mother. He didn't know what was going on with Naomi, but it had to be something important.

"Jim?"

"You go on, Chief," Jim said, kissing his lover, not caring who was in the room. "You go have some fun with your mom. We've still got all day tomorrow to get together."

"Are you sure?" As much as he wanted to talk to his mother and find out what was going on with her, Blair didn't want to waste any of the precious time he had left with Jim. "We had plans."

"I know, babe, but we'll just put them off until later. Call me tonight and we'll get together, okay?"

"Yeah." Another gentle kiss between the men sealed that promise. "I will talk to you later." Jim smiled and nodded, leading his father away from Blair and Naomi. Once they were alone, Blair turned on his mother. "Okay, Naomi, what is going on?"

"Blair, I think it would be best if you didn't have anymore contact with your friend, Jim," Naomi started as she and her son walked along the deserted beach. The two of them had just enjoyed a rather strained dinner. Naomi was working hard at reestablishing the mother/son bond with Blair, while he just wanted to know what was going on with her. She kept telling him that it was nothing, but he never believed her and now, three hours later; she was finally ready to let him in on whatever it was that was bothering her. And what she was saying made Blair turn to her in disbelief.

"What?"

"I said, I think it would be better if you didn't see Jim anymore," Naomi repeated, knowing that Blair wouldn't like her suggestion at first, but she knew that he would understand and respect her wishes. After all, Blair knew that she was only telling him what was best for him.

"And just why would I want to stop seeing Jim?" Blair questioned.

"Because, Blair, he isn't right for you," Naomi sighed. "There are so many things going against you and him. So many, I don't even want to think about them."

"I know things won't exactly be easy for Jim and I, but we want to at least try and make them work," Blair patiently tried to explain.

"And how exactly are you suppose to do that, Blair," Naomi asked. "Jim is going back to Cascade in a couple of days and you're staying on the island. I can tell you from personal experience that long distance relationships don't work out."

"Naomi, no relationship works out when it involves you," Blair spat, causing Naomi to gasp.

"Blair Jacob Sandburg, what a horrid thing to say to your mother." Blair had the grace to at least look apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Mom, but just because you've had trouble making relationships work, that doesn't necessarily mean that they can't," Blair began again. "And I have to at least try to make this work. We know it won't be easy but I've already made arrangements to talk with Mr. Roarke about working off whatever debt he feels I owe him so that I can be free to leave the island."



"And then what are you going to do? Go to Cascade and try and be with your detective? What makes you think he would even want you there with him?" Naomi spat out, hating the anger in her voice but unable to control it. She could see the hurt she was causing her son in his eyes and wished she could take back the hurtful words, but she knew that she had to say them if it meant that Blair would be safe.

"Jim has already said that he wants me in Cascade with him," Blair told her, fighting back the tears that were threatening to fall at his mother's harmful words. "As for what I would do, I was thinking that I would like to go to school. Rainer's supposed to be an excellent university and I should have no problem getting in. Maybe study Anthropology or something. And, before you ask, yes, Mom, I would be living with Jim. He has made it clear that he welcomes me there."

"Sure he does, now when he knows that it's not even a possibility for you to leave the island," she continued her ranting. "But, trust me, Blair, that will change if you went there with him." Blair shook his head, refusing to believe in what his mother was saying.

"No, Mom, you're wrong," he denied. "Jim loves me and I love him. There's a connection between us. I don't know how to explain it, but it's there and it binds us together. It's like we've known each for years instead of only days."

"Oh, honey, that's just your emotions talking," Naomi reasoned. "You're infatuated with him, that's all it is. Trust me, once the two of you spend some time apart, you'll see that I'm right. Besides, just what kind of life could he give you? He's a detective. A Pig. I raised you to know better than to trust anything that one of them says."

"Mom, isn't it possible that there are some good cops out there," Blair asked. "Not all of them can be as bad as you seem to want them to be."

Jim certainly isn't."

"How do you know that," Naomi insisted. "Because he told you so? Blair, he's here on vacation. He was probably just looking for someone to have a good time with and you fit the bill. Please, baby, don't fool yourself into thinking that it could possibly be more than that. You'll only end up getting hurt."

"No, Mom," Blair denied. "You're wrong. Jim does care for me. Just like I care for him. And maybe, if you're willing to spend some time with him and get to know him, you'll see it, too."

"Baby, I don't want to spend any time with him."

"In that case, I'll see you in two days," Blair informed Naomi. "Because I plan on spending every minute I can with Jim until he has to leave." And with that, Blair walked away from his mother.

"Oh, baby," Naomi whispered, watching her son walk away, sadness coursing through her. "I'm only doing what I have to in order to make sure you're safe. You'll see I'm right and that your Jim isn't the right man for you. I'll make you see that."

Jim arrived at the restaurant, wondering once again why he had agreed to meet his father and brother. It had been so long since the three of them had been in the same place and, back then, it had never exactly been of the pleasant. After Jim's mother had left her family, said family began to break down. His father preferred spending time at his job to his sons. Then, when he did pay attention to them, he would make it so that they would be going against each other. It had finally driven Jim from his home, first to military school, then the Army. But now, here he was, getting ready to see his family once more. And the knowledge that his father walked in on him and Blair making out in the younger man's home just made Jim wonder what exactly would be happening with this evening's meal.

'Damn, why couldn't Blair and I just be able to spend the night together. Was that too much to ask? We have so little time together, as it is, why do we have to waste it being apart.' Jim was so lost in his thoughts he didn't hear his brother come up behind him until Stephen tapped him on his shoulder. Jim jumped and spun to face his brother.

"Stephen," Jim said.

"Lost in thought, Jimmy," Stephen grinned. "What was it that had your attention? Or should I say, who?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Dad told me about your young man," Stephen explained. Jim searched his brother's face and body language for any hostility towards Blair, but found only open happiness. "I'm not going to lie and say I'm not a little weirded out by the fact that my, seemingly straight brother is apparently in love with another man, but I'm happy that you've found someone that makes you happy."

"Yeah, Blair definitely makes me happy," Jim agreed. The two men stood there for a few minutes, neither saying anything. Finally, Jim decided to give in and pulled Stephen into a hug. "Damn, it's good to see you, little brother."

"Same here, Jimmy. Come on, the old man's waiting for us at our table." The two brothers walked towards a table and Jim saw his father already sitting there. The eldest Ellison smiled when he saw his two sons together for the first time in over fifteen years. He never thought he would live to see the day when his family would be together again. "Jimmy, I'm so glad you could make it," William greeted, standing to greet his sons. "I wasn't sure if you would come."

"I said I would, didn't I," Jim challenged, instantly regretting the harsh tone in his voice. He didn't want to start off the dinner angry. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to come out the way it did." William waved Jim's apology aside.

"Don't worry," he told him. "I understand. I know that I haven't exactly been the best parent, but I did do the best I could under the circumstances. I'm sorry that it wasn't good enough. I never meant for you to leave home. Then when we heard that you were missing and presumed dead, I thought I had lost all chance of making it up to you."

"Then why didn't you try and contact me when I got back from Peru?" Jim questioned the buried anger he felt at his family's distance still in him. "Sally was the only one who contacted me. I didn't get so much as a phone call or letter from either of you." Stephen and William looked away from Jim's accusing face, unable to look into the blue eyes of Jim, ashamed for the way that they had treated him.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy," William apologized again. "I know I should have contacted you. There's no excuse for the fact that I didn't. First, I was so shocked that you were alive and back with us. Then I began to question whether or not you even would want to hear from me."

"Same here," Stephen added. "And considering the way that we parted, and the fact that you never bothered to contact us after you left for school while we were in Europe, I thought that you would be just as happy if you never heard from us. I never meant to hurt you anymore than I already had."

"Jim, I know neither of us have any reason to ask, considering our past, but do you think it would be possible for you to ever forgive us," William finished. Jim looked between the two men, truly seeing them, maybe for the first time since his mother had left. He saw the people that had hurt them with their willing absence from his life, but he also saw two men that weren't perfect and were now willing to admit it.

'Who am I to be judgmental? Its not like I went out of my way to stay in touch with them.'

"Only if you can forgive me," Jim said. All three men smiled tentatively at each other. They broke off from their conversation when a waiter arrived to take their orders. Conversation was awkward at first, but they began to talk about the changes that had taken place in all of their lives. William told Jim about his retirement plans, that Jim wasn't surprised to discover included Sally, who was now his father's lover and well as caregiver. Stephen talked about his job and the woman that he was seeing. Jim was happy to hear that his brother was thinking of asking her to marry him and looked forward to meeting her once they all returned to Cascade.

Jim, for his part, discussed his time in the military, and even talked about Peru. He told them about how, when he left the Army, he had decided to come back home, to Cascade, even if he didn't have any contact with his family. He explained how he had come to be a detective, first about his time in Vice and now in Major Crimes. William told him that he had a scrapbook full of articles on his son, everything from his more high profile cases to his wedding announcement to Carolyn. Jim never mentioned his senses once.

"And that's been pretty much my life in a nutshell," Jim finished, taking a sip of the coffee that was in front of him. He was surprised to find that he had actually enjoyed spending time with his brother and father. Not once did either of them denigrate him or make him feel as if they looked down their noses at him because he chose to become a detective instead of going into some other kind of business where he could have made more money. He found that he enjoyed their company, but kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, having had that happen all too often in his life.

"So, Jim," Stephen began, "tell us about Blair." Jim looked up quickly at his brother and then over at his father. 'Here it is,' he thought. 'Here's where they start to dictate to me how I should live my life.'

"What would you like to know?" Jim was proud of the fact that he managed to keep his voice neutral.

"Well, how about how you two met?"

"Mr. Roarke introduced us," Jim explained. "I came to the island to get away from the city, maybe do some hiking, fishing, that kind of thing. Roarke figured that Blair would be a good tour guide for me as he spends most of his time here exploring the island. When I met him, it was like there was this instant connection between the two of us." Jim couldn't help but smile as he thought back to the moment he realized that there was indeed something special between himself and the younger man.

"Love at first sight?" William asked. "Sounds as if you got extremely lucky." Jim watched his father, looking for any sign of disgust but like before at Blair's, his father appeared to be happy for his son.

"I did," Jim agreed. "Blair is someone special and I'm glad that I got to know him. I just hate knowing that I have to leave in two days and that he isn't going with me."

"Why not?" Stephen wanted to know, wondering why his brother seemed so willing to leave the man he loved behind. "Why doesn't Blair come back to Cascade with you? It sounds like you wouldn't mind it if he did."

"I wouldn't and I've told him so," Jim admitted. "And, eventually, Blair plans on coming back to the States, but Blair wants to repay whatever debt he feels he owes Roarke for taking care of him. He doesn't think he can leave until he does so."

"It sounds almost like Blair's a prisoner here." Jim shook his head.

"No, not a prisoner. Just someone who takes his promises very seriously. Blair sees himself staying as a way to pay back Roarke for taking him in when Naomi didn't want him anymore." The disgust that Jim felt towards his lover's mother was evident in his voice. He made no attempt to hide it.

"Naomi did seem a bit flighty when I met her," William mentioned. "I couldn't understand half of what she was saying."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked. "And how exactly did you met her anyway?"

"I was at this little cafe near the beach and she came over and asked if I was William Ellison," he explained. "When I said I was, she told me who she was and informed me that you and Blair were friends and that she thought that we should get to know each other. She kept asking me about you, though, like she was trying to find out what kind of person her son was involved with. Then she started dropping hints that maybe it would be better for everyone if you and Blair didn't see each other anymore." Jim groaned at that, wondering if Naomi was going to try and convince Blair to leave him. Jim didn't know if he could handle that. In just the short time that he had with him, Jim already knew that his life would never be complete if Blair wasn't in it.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that you were a grown man, as was Blair, and that if the two of you wanted to be together, I wouldn't do anything to stop it." Jim looked gratefully at his father.

William saw it and smiled at his eldest child. "Jim, I know I've never been one to say it, but I do love you and want you to be happy. If Blair makes you happy, then the two of you should be together. I'll support whatever decision that you make."

"Thanks, Dad."

"That's what families are for." And for the first time, that's what Jim thought he was a part of. A family.



Jim sighed as he made his way back to his suite. He was surprised to find that he had actually enjoyed spending the time with his family. He was even more surprised that both his father and brother told him that they would like to get to know Blair better, but would wait until the younger man could join Jim in Cascade, knowing that Jim and Blair would probably prefer to spend their remaining time on the island together and alone. Jim started to unlock his door when the sound of a heartbeat coming from inside came to him. He instantly recognized it as his lover's, having grown accustomed to listening to it when they were camping, and he quickly entered the dark room.

It took only a moment for his eyes to adjust and for him to locate Blair, who was curled up on Jim's bed, looking as if he were sleeping. Jim walked over to his lover, taking in his appearance and noticed the puffy eyes that made it obvious that Blair had been crying over something. And, remembering his conversation with his father and the elder Ellison's comment about how Naomi seemed to want Jim and Blair to separate, it didn't take Jim long to realize that she was responsible for Blair's distress. He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over and placing a gentle kiss on the other man's lips. Blair moaned at the contact, slowly waking up.

"Jim?"

"Who else, Chief?" Jim grinned. Jim brushed a strand of Blair's hair around his ear, brushing his thumb over the tear stained cheek of his lover. "What happened, Blair?"

"It was Naomi," Blair stated flatly. Jim nodded his head, having already suspected.

"What did she have to say?" Blair threw himself into Jim's arms, which instinctively wrapped themselves around the smaller man. Jim listened as Blair broke into sobs as he remembered what his mother had said to him about his relationship to Jim.

"She thinks it would be better if you and I don't see each other anymore," Blair cried, burrowing into Jim's chest, as if he were seeking the only source of safety afforded to him. Jim pressed him closer, his heart breaking as the words left Blair's mouth. He knew how much Blair cared for his mother and fully expected the younger man to abide by what she said.

"Did she say why?"

"She said she doesn't want me to become involved with a cop. She hates them all and swears that you'll only hurt me." Jim held Blair closer to him, trying to comfort the upset young man.

"I would never do that, you know that, don't you?" Blair nodded his head into Jim's chest.

"I know you wouldn't. I trust you," Blair confirmed. "It was just so hard hearing my mother tell me that you were only using me because I was here. Then she told me that you were just saying that you wanted me to go home with you because you wanted to get in my pants. She kept saying that you didn't really care about me."

"Oh God, Blair," Jim's heart broke at the pain that was in Blair's voice. He cursed Naomi Sandburg for doing this to her son and became grateful at the easy way that his own family seemed to accept that he wanted Blair in his life.

"You do want me to go with you, don't you, Jim?" Blair pulled away from Jim a bit, needing to look into his blue eyes. "You weren't just saying those things because you thought they were what I wanted to hear, were you?"

"Of course not, babe." Jim cupped Blair's face with his hands. "I love you, Blair Jacob Sandburg. I love you with everything that I am and I can't wait until the day that you can come home to me. To Cascade. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you exactly how special you are to me. You are the only person for me. I never thought I would feel this way for anyone, let alone another man, but I do. You make me feel special. As if what I do matters to people. As if I matter."

"You do, Jim. You matter so much," Blair said. "I love you, too. You're all that I want. I never thought that I would find someone to care for me the way you do and now that I have, I don't know how I will be able to stay here after you're gone. All I can keep thinking about is how lonely my life will be with you not in it."

Jim pulled Blair back to him; the two of them finding comfort in each other. They sat there holding each other, for awhile, not saying anything and yet saying everything at the same time. Blair kept thinking back to the things his mother had said to him, wondering what it was that had made her so angry towards Jim that she didn't even want to spend time with so that she could get to know him. Jim, for his part, was concerned that Naomi would do something to try and separate him from Blair and vowed to not let that happen. Even if it meant that he came back to the island to live if Blair couldn't come to Cascade. Finally, Blair seemed to calm down and pulled back from Jim, wiping the remaining tears away from his face. He smiled up at the taller man, remembering that he wasn't the only one who had had a run in with a parent.

"So, how did your dinner with your dad go?" Jim was surprised at the change of topics, but allowed it, grateful suddenly that at least one of their parents was supportive of them.

"Believe it or not, it actually went pretty good," Jim told him. "The three of us had a good time. I think we might actually be able to become a family again."

"Did he...did he say anything about us?" Blair stammered.

"Yes," Jim drawled, knowing exactly what was going through Blair's head. "Both he and Stephen asked about you. They wanted to know how we met and how serious it was between us."

"What did you tell them?"

"What else could I tell them? I told them the truth. That I loved you and wanted you in my life for as long as you could stand being in it. That I wanted you to come back to Cascade with me as soon as you can and that I planned on spending the rest of my life showing you just how important you are to me." Blair threw himself back into Jim's arms again, showering Jim's face with kisses. Jim laughed as he caught his lover, glad to see a smile on the younger man's face.

"God, Jim, I love you so much," Blair repeated over and over again, between kisses. "You have no idea how much. I don't know what I'm going to do when you leave. You are the most important person in the world to me. I can't wait until we can be together forever. I know we'll get through anything that people decide to throw our way."

"But what about Naomi, Chief?" No matter what Blair said, Jim knew how hard it must have been for Blair to listen as his mother ranted against his lover. He didn't know everything that had happened between the two of them, but he knew enough that it must not have been pretty.

"What about her?"

"Blair, babe, no matter what else might have happened, Naomi's your mother. I know how much she means to you."

"Jim, yes, Naomi is my mom and I love her. I always will. But it's you who I'm in love with. It's you who I want to spend the rest of my life with," Blair insisted. "Hopefully, given time, Naomi will accept the fact that you are a part of my life, but even if she doesn't, that's not going to change how I feel. There is no way that I am going to allow her to break us apart." Jim's heart nearly burst at Blair's admission and their lips met in a passionate kiss that spoke of love and promises of things to come.

The next evening found Jim and Blair walking along the beach, enjoying their last night together on the island. Their last night together until Blair could get away and come to Cascade to join Jim. Or for Jim to return to the island. Blair had been surprised by the detective's offer to move to the island. No one had ever been willing to give up so much for him and it touched him deeply.

The two men had spent the day just enjoying each other and doing the things that would make their last day together memorable. Blair had even insisted on meeting Stephen and William and Jim was pleased that they had gone out of their way to make Blair feel welcome. Both William and Stephen told Blair that they looked forward to him coming to Cascade so that they would have a better chance to get to know the young man that had stolen Jim's heart. Then they said that they would leave Jim and Blair alone, as they understood how it could be between new lovers.

Jim had asked Tattoo for help in arranging a special picnic lunch for Blair that included all of his favorite foods, which they enjoyed after a pleasant horseback ride. Jim had never felt more content in his life. For the first time, he felt totally at peace with himself and he knew it had everything to do with the young man by his side. The only downside to the entire day was the ever-looming presence of Naomi Sandburg. Even though neither man had brought up her name, she was still in both of their thoughts. Blair's because she was his mother and he hated doing anything that would upset her. And Jim's because he knew how much Blair loved Naomi and he didn't want his lover hurt because of her refusal to accept Jim in his life.

"Penny for them, big guy," Blair teased as he noticed his lover's silence. Jim smiled over at Blair, once again surprised that someone so unlike himself could make him so happy.

"I was just thinking."

"So I noticed. About anything in particular?" Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"I was just wondering what I would do with myself when I get back to Cascade," Jim answered. "Even though I've only known you a few days, it feels like it's been years. You've managed to find a place in me that I didn't even know existed and taken a piece of my heart that I don't think I'll be able to survive without." Blair felt tears come to his eyes at the heartfelt words coming from the older man's mouth. They were so close to his own feelings that it surprised him.

"I know what you mean," he said, allowing Jim to pull him against his chest so that they could sit and watch the sun set. "I don't think I've ever been this happy. I mean, I always suspected that there was someone out there for me, but I didn't think I would ever find them. Especially not with living on the island. But then you came and now everything seems right. It's like it was meant to be. I just wish..." Blair's voice trailed off and Jim was instantly aware that he was thinking of Naomi.

"You just wish your mother could understand that," Jim finished. Blair nodded his head. "She will, Blair. You just have to give her time. You're her son and she's just worried about you. I'd be more upset if she didn't worry for you."

"I know," Blair admitted. "It's just that I wish she would be more willing to listen to me instead of just trying to dictate to me how she thinks I should live my life. It's like I'm still ten years old instead of twenty seven."

"Blair, you're her child," Jim gently said. "Her baby. It's only natural that she wants to protect you."

"But that's just it," Blair protested. "I don't know if that's what she wants to do. It's more like," Blair searched for just the right word, trying to say what he was feeling. "It's like she wants me to remain a child forever. That she wants me to stay here and never have a life of my own. To never let me experience everything that the world has to offer me. Does that make any sense?"

"Perfect," Jim replied. "You think that Naomi doesn't see you as someone who has the right to decide for himself how he should be allowed to live his life." Blair nodded his head.

"Exactly. Naomi wants me to live my life for her, not for myself, and I just don't think I can do that."

"No one is expecting you to, Blair. You have to live your life, no one else's. Not mine, not your mother's, no one but yourself."

"You're right," Blair agreed. "It's just so sad. I love Naomi and all, but I can't just willingly sit by and let you leave me without doing my damndest to be by your side. You're too important to me."

"Same here, babe. Besides, even if you wanted to get rid of me, don't think I would be too willing to go. As it is, I don't even want to get on that plane tomorrow, knowing what it is I'll be leaving here."

"And what would that be," Blair fished, turning his head to face Jim.

"My heart." Jim kissed Blair gently, allowing his love for the smaller man to come through it. Jim knew he was a man of action and not words, and he vowed to make sure that he always let Blair know how he felt.

"Well, in that case, it's only fair since you've had mine since I met you." Jim and Blair kissed again, this time longer and deeper as they felt the passion in them grow. They made quiet love on the beach that night under the sun, giving themselves to the other, knowing that it would have to sustain them on those long and lonely nights until they could be together again.

Jim looked around him once more, hoping to see the one face that he wanted, no needed, to see. Unfortunately, Blair was nowhere to be seen. Jim hadn't expected anything else, although he had been hoping that Blair would ignore the discussion from that morning where it had been decided that he wouldn't see Jim's plane off. They had said their good byes after spending the night together in Blair's home, making love and promises for the future.

The same couple that had been on the plane when he arrived were over by Mr. Roarke and Tattoo, smiling and shaking their hands. Whatever it was that had brought them to the island, obviously went well for them. Jim felt a sharp pain in his chest, wishing that it were he and Blair holding hands and exchanging loving looks. The detective was tempted to just go and tell Roarke that he wanted to stay on the island until Blair was free to leave with him, too, but he promised Blair that he would go back to Cascade and wait for him. Finally the couple left the two men and Jim approached them. Roarke smiled when he saw Jim and held out his hand to the departing guest.

"Ahhh, Detective Ellison, I hope that your visit here was everything that you had hoped it would be," Roarke commented.

"It was, and more," Jim said. "I'm almost tempted to stay."

"But our young Mr. Sandburg wouldn't appreciate you giving up your life for him," Roarke finished. "Yes, he can be a bit persuasive when he wants to be. He gets it from his mother, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, from what he's told me, Naomi does tend to be persistent. She certainly has tried her hardest to make sure Blair and I get separated."

"Her heart is in the right place," Roarke acknowledged. "But not everyone agrees with her. Not your family and certainly not anyone that knows Blair. He's a very special young man and we'll miss him when he goes. He's told us that he has every intention of joining you in Cascade once he pays off his debt to me." Jim nodded his head. Roarke could tell that Jim was thrilled at the notion that Blair would be with him one day.

"I just hope we don't have to wait too long for that to happen. But I'm willing to wait for him. He's worth it."

"That he is," Roarke agreed. "Detective, I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you."

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, there's a young man here. He was raised on the island, and he was recently accepted at a university in the States. He's never really traveled alone and I was wondering if you would be willing to make sure he got to his destination okay." Jim thought about it, not sure if he liked the idea of being responsible for someone who was able to leave the island when his Blair had to stay, but ultimately, he agreed.

"Thank you." Roarke looked over Jim's shoulder and smiled at something there. "Ahh, there he is now." Jim turned to see his charge and his face broke into a huge grin.

Standing in front of the plane stood Blair, back pack slung over his shoulder and looking over at Jim, joy written all over his face. Jim turned back to face Roarke.

"There was never any debt for him to pay off. We took him in because we loved him. And that's why we're letting him go with you, because of the love between the two of you."

"Thank you." Jim shook Roarke's and Tattoo's hands once more and then almost ran to Blair, picking him up and kissing him. They stood together, smiling at each other before turning once and waving to the two men remaining behind and then going into the plane.

"Naomi won't be happy that you let Blair leave with the detective," Tattoo began. "She assumed that you would be more than willing to keep Blair here. That's why she sent him here in the first place."

"Naomi sent him here because she was trying to prevent fate from happening," Roarke countered. "She should have known better than that. Blair and Detective Ellison were meant to be together. Naomi had no reason to try and dictate otherwise."

"Do you think she'll accept the two of them together?"

"I don't know, but I hope for her sake, she does. Blair won't allow her to come between himself and the man he loves." Tattoo looked over at the place where the two men had just been.

"Boss, do you think Blair will come back to the island?" Tattoo asked.

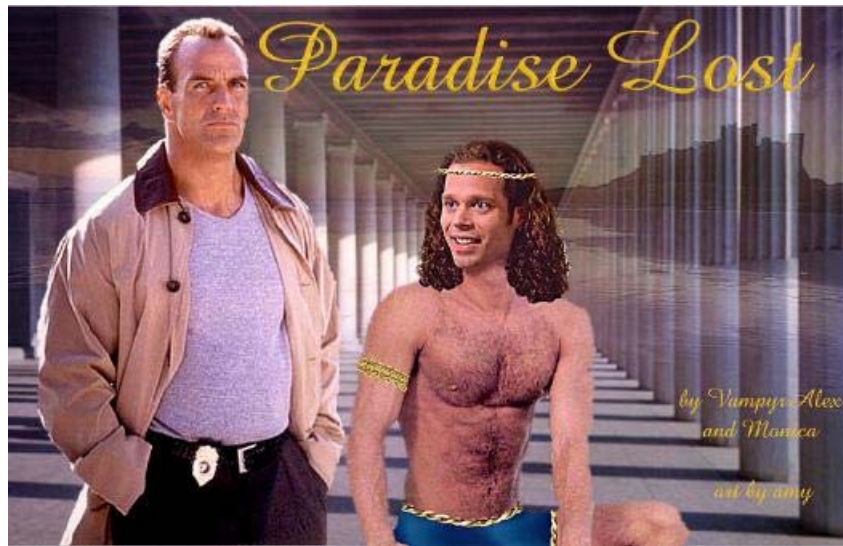
"Of course he will."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because, it's his destiny to take over for his father and run the family business." Roarke and Tattoo waved once more at the occupants of the plane. The one couple smiled and waved back, but another only had eyes for each other.

The End.

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Paradise Lost - Monica & VampyrAlex

Les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus"

--Marcel Proust

The true paradises are the lost paradises.

It was really dark, one of those nights where the full moon makes everything look tinted in blue.

Jim was walking silently through a dense forest, dressed in his camouflage gear, looking carefully around him, watching for any signs of danger. He heard something coming in his direction and turned to see a wolf running towards a strange-looking statue. Sensing the danger surrounding him, he tensed his body in preparation for an attack, just before the statue suddenly came to life.

He couldn't tell if it was man or woman, but it definitely took a human shape, and was armed with a crossbow. Just as the wolf neared it, the shadow brought up the bow, nocking an arrow and aiming at the beautiful creature. It released the arrow and the wolf was hit.

The wolf whimpered and, as the shadow turned back into the statue, Jim slowly approached the dying animal. He stood above the wolf, watching as it morphed into a beautiful young man, the light of the moon caressing the naked body lying on the ground. Long curly hair framed the handsome face; wide blue eyes were open but no longer seeing.



Jim woke up startled and sat up in bed, breathing hard. This was the third night in a row he'd had that same dream. But what did it mean? Why was he having it? And who was the young man?

He sighed wearily and looked around. It was morning already. He could hear Simon and Henri arguing above decks about who'd prepare the fish they might catch that morning. It was hard to believe they were actually on vacation and doing something he and Simon had been talking about for years. Renting a small yacht in Fort Lauderdale and just sailing to the Bahamas. Have a nice, quiet vacation, do a little fishing, just relax for a while.

And after the Switchman case, he could sure use the rest. The stress of that case had nearly finished him off. There was something wrong with him -- ever since those four days on stakeout in the woods, his senses had been going crazy. He'd smelled gas in the old lumber mill when he shouldn't have been able to, and he'd thought he could hear Saris' motorcycle long before she escaped. There were other things as well, like wonky vision and normal food tasting fine one minute, but awful the next. He hoped he was just a little burned out, because the alternative was too scary to think about.

After seeing how worse-for-wear Jim really was, Simon had agreed with his request for a leave of absence but had made it a vacation instead. The captain had presented this trip to him and informed him that he would have company for some much-deserved rest, namely him and Henri. Jim suspected that Simon planned to keep an eye on him at the same time. And so there they were.

Deciding that it was time to get up, Jim got dressed and went to join the others on deck. He watched the calm sea and the clear blue sky and shuddered. There was something strange in the air, an electric or static feeling of some kind, like a storm brewing. And once again, his senses were feeling out of control. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath; things seemed to go back to normal, at least for the moment. He was never sure when another weird episode would occur. He sighed and Simon turned at the sound.

"There you are! Good morning! Ready for some fishing?" Simon greeted with a grin.

"Why not? But I'm not preparing the fish! I did it yesterday, so it's between the two of you today."

Henri snorted, then grinned. "You mean it's up to me! Okay, fine. Just make sure you actually catch something!"

They spent most of the morning fishing, the easy banter between them making the time go by faster. Henri did the honors with the fish they caught, making a delicious lunch that left them in high spirits. They spent the afternoon just enjoying themselves and relaxing under the warm sun.

However, as the night drew closer the weather began to change. Threatening gray clouds replaced the clear sky, and the static Jim had felt that morning seemed to increase, to the point of giving him a terrible headache.

The storm didn't hit until the early hours of the morning -- catching the three men in their sleep. The first splattering drops of rain rapidly turned into heavy rain. The wind picked up and the waves began to swell, rocking the yacht violently.

"Jesus!" Henri yelled, as they met outside of their cabins. "Where the hell did this storm come from?"

"I don't know!" Simon yelled back, trying to make himself heard over the roar of the storm.

"I'm going to secure the helm," Jim told them, trying to stay on his feet, but the growing waves were threatening to turn the yacht at any minute.

"Be careful!" Simon replied, as he began searching for life jackets and the first aid kit.

Jim went to the bridge to secure the helm, the thunder and lightning booming around him, terrifying. The sudden blinding light and loud noise drove Jim to his knees with a moan, his hands trying ineffectively to block the painful noise.

In the cabin below decks, Simon and H shared a concerned look. "Jim's taking too long, Brown. I'm going to join him and see what I can do," Simon told his companion.

"Okay."

Simon left the security of the cabin and fought to get to the bridge through the fierce wind and rain sweeping over the yacht. Lightning slashed through the sky, illuminating his way; thunder rumbled overhead, and the small boat seemed to vibrate in its wake, making walking a difficult task. When he saw his friend curled into a fetal position on the floor of the bridge, he ran to him.

"Jim! What the hell? Jim!"

The younger man didn't respond. All Simon could hear over the violence of the storm were a few painful whimpers -- there was no other sign that Jim was even aware of what was going on around him. Simon noticed that the compass was going crazy, spinning wildly, and shook his head. The motor seemed to have stopped as well. He reached for the key to start it again when suddenly lightning hit the navigational system, short-circuiting it and throwing him hard against a railing. He hit his head on the metal bars and fell to the floor unconscious.

Down in the cabin, Henri was starting to get worried. Both of his friends had been on deck for a long time now, and the storm was getting worse. Just as he got up to find them, a big wave nearly capsized the boat. He lost his balance and hit a cabinet, bruising his torso painfully in the process. He collapsed to the floor, panting to catch his breath.

"Oh, shit!" he moaned. Just before he closed his eyes and surrendered to his pain, he muttered, "this is **not** the way I figured I'd die!"

~~*~*~*~*

Simon woke to the sound of seagulls and the warmth of the sun on his skin. *Seagulls? Sun?* he thought to himself. *That means two things. First, that I'm alive, second, that we're close to land.*

He opened his eyes and saw Jim's still-unconscious form next to him. He crawled to his friend and carefully shook him. "Jim! Jim, wake up!" The other man moaned and moved slightly. "That's it! Come on, Jim!"

Finally the clear blue eyes opened, blinking against the morning light, and settled on him. "What happened?" Jim rasped out.

"I don't know exactly, I was knocked out during the storm. I have no idea what happened to you -- when I got here you were on the floor

moaning, hands over your ears."

"Oh, God!" Jim moaned softly. "It happened again, Simon. It felt like my senses were going crazy. The noise was just so loud, and the lightning..." He took a shuddering breath. "Where's H?"

"Haven't checked on him yet. I just woke up myself. Can you get up?"

"Yeah, I think so." With a little effort, both men got to their feet. "Let's go see what's up with H," Jim prodded.

They went down to the cabin, finding their friend trying to get up from the floor.

"Henri!" Simon exclaimed as they rushed over to him.

They carefully helped him to his feet and Jim checked if Henri was okay. "Nothing broken, H. Just a few painful bruises," he quipped.

Henri chuckled. "I could've told you that myself, Ellison. So, where are we? We obviously aren't moving, so what's the deal?"

"Let's find out," Simon replied, and the three men made their way to the upper deck.

The first thing they noticed was they were anchored offshore of an island; the yacht having drifted into a natural cove. By some miracle the anchor had caught on something, preventing the boat from being beached.

"Well, at least it's land! I'll go get the maps so we can figure out exactly where we are," Henri said, matching words to action.

Once he returned with the maps, Jim tried to find their location. "I don't get it," he said. "If I'm looking at this damn map right, we should be out in open sea, not this close to land. I can't find any reference to an island remotely close to where we were."

"Maybe the storm set us off course," H suggested.

"Ummm, maybe, but I don't think so. Not with the prevailing currents in this area. And even taking that in consideration, there still shouldn't be any land for miles."

Simon frowned. "So what are you saying? That we found an uncharted island of some kind?"

"Could be," Jim nodded.

"Hey, we were in the Bermuda Triangle when the storm hit us," H said with a smirk. "Maybe it took us to a parallel dimension of some kind."

Jim scowled at his friend. "You have to stop watching the Sci-Fi Channel, H. Come on, let's get our guns and go search the island. Maybe we can find someone who can tell us where we are."

The water surrounding the yacht was barely fifteen feet deep, and quickly shallowed out. As Henri was too bruised swim and hold his gun out of the water at the same time, Simon carried both of their guns until they were close enough to wade the rest of the way in.

Once there they got a good look around. They came ashore on a beautiful beach, surrounded by a dense forest that reached beyond their vision. A few softly rolling mountains were barely visible above the trees. They could hear a multitude of birds singing, as well as the calls of other animals they didn't recognize. Jim felt suddenly like he was in a dream. He took a long, deep breath and closed his eyes. The storm's end had brought with it the tangy fragrance of the tropics -- coconuts, sweetly-scented flowers, and salt.

"White sandy beaches with exotic shells, a cool breeze from the ocean at your skin, and water so blue and green that you think you're in paradise... I could get used to this!" Simon grinned at the others.

H nodded. "So could I. Maybe we can stay here for a while. I mean, we're suppose to be on vacation, right?"

"Maybe later," Simon said. "Right now, we need to find out where the hell we are. I have no intention of being the next Robinson Crusoe with you as Friday. Come on!"

Jim and Henri shrugged and followed Simon, soon leaving the beach behind and getting deeper into the forest. They had been climbing steadily for several hours when Jim started to hear a strange kind of roar. He tilted his head, trying to decipher the sound. It was still some distance away, but it sounded constant, unmoving. It reminded him of...

"A waterfall!" he exclaimed.

The other two stopped dead in their tracks.

"What?" Henri frowned in confusion.

"I can hear a waterfall."

Simon stayed silent for a moment. "I don't hear anything, Jim. Maybe --"

"I am **not** crazy!" Jim interrupted, annoyance coloring his voice. "Come on, it's this way."

He lengthened his stride and increased his speed, forcing the others to do the same. Not long after that, they too could hear the roar. Soon, the roar was close to deafening, especially to Jim. The waterfall was hidden behind thick forest and rock ledges, and was such a breathtaking sight that the three men remained silent in awe, just enjoying one of nature's gifts to mankind.

Henri was about to say something when Simon whispered, "Oh, my God! Look at that!"

He was pointing to a young man standing on a rock close to the falls, the spraying waters bathing him gently. Even from their hidden place in the trees, they could see he was an exquisite creature, with long, curly hair and wide blue eyes. Jim felt a painful pang in his heart as he recognized the beautiful face that had been haunting his dreams for the last few nights.

His 'dream' was dressed all in white, with simple tight pants and a long-sleeved, buttonless shirt. The fabric of his clothes was light enough for a shadow of dark chest hair to be seen beneath it. In its currently water-soaked condition, it was all but transparent. It clung to the young man's body like a second skin, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Jim felt like he was under a magic spell; it was impossible to move, to look away from that amazing vision. His breath caught in his throat as the young man pulled the shirt loose in a careless move, water running in rivulets from his long hair and down his naked chest. He threw his head back, arching, tossing the dripping hair from his face and his eyes, and Jim moaned hungrily. God, what the hell was wrong with him?!

Just as he thought it couldn't get any worse, the young man dropped his pants, showing he had nothing on underneath. Their eyes were able to roam freely over his sturdy, compact body until he jumped gracefully into the deep pool created by the waterfall.



"My God!" Simon breathed. "Who **was** that?!"

Henri turned huge, dazed eyes to his captain. "I didn't imagine him, then? Thought I was having a vision there for a minute."

"Well, if you did, it's contagious, because I saw him too," Simon told him.

Ignoring the others' babbling, Jim took several steps forward without even realizing it. He was stopped when Simon grabbed his arm.

"Jim! What the hell are you doing?" he hissed.

"It's... okay," Jim answered vacantly, his eyes not leaving the person below. "He... needs me," he said, and shook off Simon's grip.

"What?" Henri asked perplexed, staring after Jim.

Jim made his way down to the pool, still partially hidden by the trees. Simon and Henri followed cautiously, uncertain of what was happening with their friend. Jim paused again when he was closer and took a better look. The young man was swimming happily, splashing like a child in the water. He dove a few times, coming up with rocks that he seemed to be studying. Some were tossed onto the shore, others dropped back into the water.

He was breathtaking. There was no other word for it. The water made his hair look even darker and it curled riotously over his shoulders. He pushed it back impatiently when he came up from another dive, and afforded Jim a good look at the muscular chest. The 'vision' was shorter than he was, but far from frail. Long, smooth muscles, like a swimmer's, formed a perfect body.

Jim was unaware of moving, but suddenly he was out from the cover of the trees, standing beside the pool. The young man had his back

turned and didn't notice him for a few minutes. Then, as if sensing he was being watched, he slowly turned, and their gazes locked.

God, his eyes are so blue, Jim thought absurdly. It was an odd thought, but confirmed beyond a doubt that this was the man he had dreamed about. Eyes that intense were not easily forgotten.

For a long moment they simply stared at each other. Jim became aware that he was hearing a heartbeat. Somehow, he was sure it belonged to the young man. His breathing was also audible, and he began cataloguing the signs, the sounds. He knew he'd be able to pick this man out from any crowd.

The man finally made the first move. He stepped out of the pool unselfconsciously, apparently uncaring of the fact that he was naked. Jim could hear the heartbeat increase slightly though, and realized he was nervous. Calm, but uncertain. The young man approached Jim carefully, pushing his hair back again in an apparent gesture of habit. He stopped a few steps away from Jim and took a deep breath.

"Welcome to Atlantis," he said quietly. "I've been waiting for you."

"Atlantis? And what the hell do you mean, you've been waiting for him?" Simon asked roughly, he and Henri coming to stand behind Jim.

The young man looked at them and smiled. "I'm sorry, maybe I should've explained where you are first. Let me get my clothes back, and then we'll talk."

Without another word, the strange young man dove back into the water and swam until he reached the rocks where he'd discarded his garments earlier. He dressed quickly and walked back to them, this time by crossing a narrow pathway around the small pool.

"Please, sit down." The four of them sat down on the luscious green grass, and the young man looked at the three Americans. "Where should I start?"

"How about your name?" Jim suggested, his strange daze gone now. He wasn't exactly sure about what had happened, but his senses were still focused on the stranger, and thankfully seemed under control.

"My name's Blair."

"I'm Simon, this is Jim, and that's Henri. Now, where are we?"

"You are in Atlantis."

Henri shook his head. "How is that possible? Don't get me wrong, but Atlantis is a legend, a myth, a lost civilization if you will. It doesn't exist anymore."

Blair smiled softly. "It's okay, I understand your reaction. Let me try to explain. I was told from others stranded here that story of Atlantis is well known; how natural disasters caused our continent to sink into the sea. Well, not all Atlanteans died during those disasters -- some migrated to other continents like Africa, founding what is known nowadays as ancient Egypt. Others preferred to stay close to our original homeland and found a small island to build a new Atlantis on."

"How come we've never heard of it?" Simon asked suspiciously.

"Simple. An energy crystal powers this island. The crystal is also responsible for a magnetic shield that makes us invisible to the outside world. Sounds like magic to you, but to our ancestors it was the proverbial 'piece of cake'. The technology back then would make even today's scientists cry with delight. Unfortunately, most of that information and technology has been lost to us over time. The crystal is a little unstable, and we don't know how to correct it. Sometimes it becomes too unstable and it causes a storm like the one last night."

"The one that caught us," Henri nodded, not knowing exactly why he believed this strange man, but drinking in every word. "And that's why we couldn't find this island on any map?"

"Exactly! We're also responsible for what the outside world calls the Bermuda Triangle or, if you prefer, Limbo of the Lost, The Twilight Zone, Hoodoo Sea, or The Devil's Triangle."

"Are you saying that all of the disappearances over the years have been caused by your shield?" Jim asked, incredulous.

"Yes, they were all caught by the storms. All the survivors are among us, most of them are prominent members of our community."

"And the ones that chose not to stay? Why didn't they mention this place to anyone?" Jim wanted to know.

Blair's expression turned somewhat sad. "We don't have many rules here, but there is one that is law. Whoever stumbles upon Atlantis can never leave. You're free to stay and do as you please, find work that pleases you, a mate, discover our ways... But you are never to leave here. If you try it and get caught, you'll be imprisoned. Anyway, it's impossible to escape. The magnetic shield acts as a barrier between the island and the outside world. I wish I could explain it better, but if you tried to cross it, you'd hit something resembling a brick wall."

"But we got through, and so did all those other people," Simon remarked, confused.

"Yes. Sometimes when the crystal gets too unbalanced and causes a big storm, the shield weakens in places and allows solid forms to cross

through, but it's a rare thing. And it's been happening less over the centuries; the last breakthrough was fifteen years ago," Blair explained ruefully.

"But it is possible to escape the island during one of those storms?" Simon asked, his mind already trying to find a way out of a situation that promised to be heartbreaking. If he were to be stuck there, he'd never see his son again, or any of his family and friends.

Blair sighed. "First, you'd have to find the weakness in the shield, and usually those storms are tremendous, which in itself is risky enough. Plus, you'd have to steal a boat, and our harbor is heavily guarded. If you're thinking about escaping, forget it. Life in the dungeons isn't exactly a breeze."

"I take it you don't approve of this rule?" Henri remarked, as he watched the young man grimace.

"Not really. I think people should be free to decide, plus the younger generation isn't too fond of staying in one place forever, especially one that has nothing new to offer them. Only a chosen few are allowed to see the outside world, to bring back news of what's happening out there. It's always the way it has been with our rulers, although not everyone agrees with that. It doesn't help that our queen is so strict."

"Has anyone ever tried to revolt?" Jim questioned curiously.

Blair shrugged. "A few have, but nothing really serious. Those who have tried to oppose the current queen are either dead or imprisoned. This is a small island, not that heavily populated. All efforts were easily crushed. And people are afraid of Maya; she's rather ruthless."

"Maya?" Jim echoed.

"Yes, she's our queen, and my stepmother."

"So, your father is the king -- you're a prince?" Henri asked, startled.

Blair laughed at the surprise on H's face. "That is my title, yes. My father was the king, but he died a few years ago. As his wife, Maya took his place. I am the natural successor, but by law, a monarch can only rule after reaching thirty."

"And you aren't yet?"

"Not yet," Blair answered Simon with a grin. "But I will be in a few weeks!"

"You know, I always read that the people of Atlantis were into peace and mystic stuff," H remarked.

Blair grinned. "I thought you didn't believe Atlantis existed."

Brown shrugged. "Doesn't mean I didn't read about it."

The young prince nodded. "It used to be that way. There's always been peace here, and although people have never been allowed to leave before, they weren't sent to the dungeons, or made to suffer like they do now. Maya changed all that. Fifteen years ago, she was the only survivor of a shipwreck from some country in South America, I think. My father fell in love with her and they got married. After that things began to change. My father changed as well, but it wasn't until he died that things became the way they are now. I guess you could say we now live in a dictatorship. Once I'm King though, a lot of things will change around here. Unfortunately, until then I owe obedience to Queen Maya. As I said, the ones that spoke against her are either dead or imprisoned, and I wish no such fate for myself. I'd rather wait and bide my time."

"What did you mean when you said you've been waiting for Jim?" Simon asked, feeling a huge headache coming on. The entire ludicrous story was making him ill. What was worse, somehow he believed it.

"Well, to answer that I will have to ask you to keep an open mind. But from your reactions to what I've been telling you so far, that shouldn't be too hard," the young man stated, his grin widening.

Simon groaned mentally, his headache getting worse. He almost feared what was coming.

"Okay, so what did you mean?" Henri asked curiously.

"Incacha came to me in a dream a few nights ago. In that dream he told me a sentinel was coming to Atlantis and that I was suppose to guide him, to help him understand what was happening to him. After he told me what I had to do, I saw Jim's face smiling at me."

"Who's Incacha?"

"Incacha was my grandfather. He was the last guide Atlantis had. Together with my grandmother, a sentinel, they helped protect the island. Since they died a few years ago, we've been without a sentinel/guide pair."

"So, you're saying that Jim is a sentinel?" Henri tried to understand what the young man was telling them.

"Yes, that's right."

"And what is that, exactly?" Simon asked.

"Someone with heightened senses, a kind of watchman if you will. In the old days, a sentinel was used to watch for approaching enemies, changes in the weather, the movement of game. That sort of thing."

"So -- I'm not going crazy? These episodes I've been having..." Jim began hopefully.

"Your senses are coming awake, in a way. I can help you control them."

"Oh, man! This is --" Simon took a deep breath, "too much at once!"

Blair smiled. "It's okay. How about you think about all I've told you on the way to the city?"

The three dazed men nodded and slowly rose to follow Blair through the forest.

"There's one thing I still don't understand though," H stated as they began to move.

"What?"

"Well, when Jim saw you he said you needed him. What did he mean by that?"

Jim cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Uh... Well, I think I can answer that. I've been dreaming about Blair for a while now. In the dreams, he's killed right in front of me."

"What, are sentinels psychic too? Are you in any kind of danger, Blair?" H asked.

The young man seemed to hesitate, then nodded. "Maybe not psychic, but they seem to have a sixth sense, especially when it comes to protecting guides. And I think I am in danger, yes. I've been having a lot of strange accidents lately. A large rock fell from a building and nearly crushed me, a runaway wagon passed just as I was crossing a street, that sort of thing. Separate incidents, but too many to be a coincidence. And someone tried to kidnap me two days ago, only Rafe stopped it from happening."

"Rafe?" Jim echoed.

"Yes. He's the Captain of the Royal Guard, and my best friend. You'll meet him soon enough. Since we don't know who's behind my 'accidents', we decided to keep it between us. No one else knows about it. And, of course, we want to keep it that way. We have our suspicions, though," Blair responded, then stopped abruptly. "And here it is, the city of Atlantis!"

They were on top of a mountain looking down on the whole island. In a valley before them lay a magnificent city. From where they were standing, they could see wide curving boulevards with smaller avenues branching out like spokes in a wheel. Shining domes and rectangular buildings fronted by large columns could be seen throughout the city. Then there were the gigantic statues, majestic temples and pyramids. To the far south was a small harbor with colorful boats moored at the docks. Surrounding the city to the north were mountains that seemed to soar to the sky. Lakes, rivers, and meadows dotted the mountains, finishing the heavenly scenery.

"My God..." Simon whispered in awe. "This place is -- is --"

Blair laughed. "Most people get lost for words when they see Atlantis from here. Quite a sight, isn't it? Let's go down."

They descended the mountain slowly, taking their time, watching as the fabulous city grew closer to them.

"What's that big building in the center of the city?" Simon asked.

"It's a temple. It was built to honor Poseidon and houses a giant gold statue of him riding a chariot pulled by winged horses. It's where our rulers come to discuss laws, pass judgments, and make any important decisions concerning the island. The main room is where the crystal I told you about is kept. It controls our climate and surrounds the island with the force field. With the exception of the disturbances I mentioned earlier, nobody can get off of the island unless the crystal is disabled. Only Megan can do that, and then only by Royal decree."

"Megan?" Simon echoed.

"Our High Priestess. She protects and works with the crystal," Blair responded. "She's also Rafe's sister. She's away right now, visiting another temple on the outside world. She'll be back in time for my coronation, though."

They were walking along the beautiful city streets now, and were greeted with smiles and waves by most of the Atlanteans that happened to cross their path. Their way of dressing was very uniform; nearly everyone was wearing the same style, only differing in the color. The women wore long, see-through dresses, crossed at the front and tied at the waist with gold leaf belts. Most of them had long hair, interwoven with gold braiding, much like what the Americans had seen in movies or books about the Greek times. The men were dressed as Blair was, with the same see-through material. All in all, they looked beautiful and contributed to the unearthly atmosphere of the whole island.

Blair turned to them and smiled slightly. "It's time for you to meet Queen Maya. All foreigners must be presented to her. One word of advice -- if you're planning on trying to escape from here, keep it to yourselves. Go along with whatever she tells you. If she likes you and thinks you're honest, she'll welcome you to Atlantis. But if she suspects anything, she'll have someone breathing down your necks twenty-four

hours a day."

""*"*"*

Jim sighed as he looked around the rooms they had been given. Each had a spacious bedroom and bath in their suite. The windows overlooked a courtyard and they could see the temple. They were surrounded by pale colors, and the furniture was scarce, but comfortable. Like everything they'd seen so far, the rooms seemed to have been designed to give their inhabitants a sense of peace and well-being. It wasn't working. The meeting with Queen Maya had been somewhat unnerving, to say the least. He thanked God that Blair had warned them; they had been able to pass the 'interview' with her.

She was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, and clearly very shrewd. She had looked Jim, Simon and Henri over thoroughly as Blair gave her a shortened version of their meeting. He had carefully omitted any references to Jim being a sentinel. It was clear that he didn't trust his queen very much.

As Blair had thought, Maya let them go, apparently satisfied with their story and believing that they were willing to stay freely. It was Rafe who actually seemed to doubt them more.

The Captain of the Royal Guard had looked relieved when they had entered the temple and he had spotted Blair with them. He had given Blair a thorough scolding for evading his guard and taking off into the jungle by himself. Blair just rolled his eyes, having obviously heard the lecture before. Rafe had also examined the new arrivals far more carefully than the queen had, and had seemed immediately suspicious of them.

Despite his irritation at Rafe's mistrust, Jim admitted that he could understand it. He couldn't help the thought that if Blair was his responsibility, he would certainly not want him to wander away either. He was just too trusting -- and too beautiful -- to be on his own, especially if someone was trying to kidnap him.

The only problem had occurred when they were forced to leave their weapons in Rafe's care. Apparently, it was against the law to carry any kind of weapon. Even most of the native residents didn't have any weapons; only the guards and a few higher Ministers or members of the Council were allowed to use them. Losing their weapons didn't sit well with the police officers, and they'd tried to protest, but it had been in vain. Afraid to create any complications during their forced stay, they had decided to relent. For the moment.

Jim was brought back to the present by Simon's voice as he came back into the main room after enjoying a leisurely bath. "I have to admit that that bathroom is about the nicest I've ever seen."

"And the food isn't bad, either," H agreed.

"A gilded cage, but still a cage," Simon observed darkly.

Jim nodded, his gaze going back to the tall windows. He finally loaded a plate with a selection of fruits from the table and joined the others on the couch in the main room. After Maya had welcomed them, they had been shown to a large suite of rooms in what looked to be a huge palace. Blair had explained that all newcomers were housed there until they'd had a chance to settle in. No doubt it also made it easier to keep an eye on suspicious individuals.

Simon looked over at Jim as he finally seemed to relax a bit. He was worried about his friend. Blair had been ordered by Maya to stay with her while they were shown to their rooms, claiming she needed to talk with him. Simon had noticed the clenching of Jim's jaw as he was separated from the young man. In only a few hours, the prince seemed to have broken through Jim's walls in a way no one had before.

Maybe it was the 'sentinel' thing. He hadn't been sure what to think about it at all. He had known that Jim was having problems but had never attributed them to something as vital as his senses going haywire. He had thought them due to stress and tension that Jim seemed to draw to him. But if Blair was correct, the cause was something entirely different.

Jim suddenly lifted his head sharply, his eyes darting to the door. He rose and quickly moved to open it. Standing in the hall were Blair and Rafe. Rafe looked even more suspicious at having the door swung open before they could knock but Blair seemed unfazed. They entered and Jim shut the door firmly behind them.

"Are you getting settled in?" Blair asked them.

"Pretty well," Simon answered. H nodded agreement. "How did things go with Maya?"

Blair grinned. "She doesn't suspect anything that I can tell. It's normal procedure for you to be watched for a while, so expect that, but otherwise I think no one will doubt you. You're the first new foreigners in several years, so you'll probably get a lot of questions about the state of the outside world, but other than that, things should be fine."

"Must be hard for people, having to leave everything behind and be expected to just start a new life," Henri commented.

A sad look crossed Blair's face. "Yes, it is. That's one reason new people are watched for a time. So many at first think they can handle it, but then want to return home after they realize how much they miss it."

"It's our law," Rafe interjected. He cast a suspicious look over at Jim, who returned the glare.

Jim and Rafe had not hit it off. Both were intent on protecting Blair and both felt that they had the right; Rafe, by years of growing up with Blair and being his guard, and Jim, by the dreams and the immediate connection he had felt to Blair. They were bound to clash sooner or later.

Simon preferred to make it later. Things were happening far too rapidly and the lack of control was getting harder to take. "Why don't we sit down and plan what we are going to do now," he suggested, his eyes turning to Blair. "Will you help us?"

"Yes. Like I said, I don't agree with what Maya is doing. Maybe it's time to start fighting and the three of you are just the ones to give us a hand."

"Great! What can we do, then?" Henri grinned.

"There's nothing you **can** do!" Rafe nearly growled. "You are here and here you must stay."

"Rafe!" Blair hissed angrily.

Henri watched the handsome young man turn to his Prince. "What? What are you going to do? Help them escape? Haven't you got enough problems without joining these outsiders' schemes? Do you have any idea what will happen if the queen finds out?"

"She's not going to find out unless you tell her."

Rafe turned a deep shade of red, his anger clear to everyone in the room. "I'm trying to protect you, damnit! I'd never betray you like that, you know that!"

"Then help us out," Blair interjected.

The Captain of the Royal Guard looked at him for a long time, the silence stretching heavily between them. "I can't. I must do my duty," he finally said softly, turning and leaving without another word.

"Damn," Blair whispered sadly.

Henri rose and patted the young man's shoulder slightly. "I'll talk to him," he offered. Without waiting for an answer, he went after Rafe.

~~*~*~*

"Rafe! Rafe, wait up!"

The young captain stopped abruptly and turned with an annoyed expression. "What?!" he asked sharply, glaring at the outsider he knew was called Henri.

"I want to talk to you," Henri replied.

"We have nothing to talk about." He turned and began to move away, but a hand on his arm stopped him.

"Wait! Please..."

Something in the other man's voice made him look up. Henri was looking at him somewhat sadly. "Why?"

"We don't want to cause you or Blair any problems, Rafe, I swear to God. Put yourself in our place, man. We land on this island, miles away from home, and we're told that we have to settle down and enjoy it; that going home is not an option. How would you feel?"

Rafe sighed. "Look, I understand, really I do. But things are very tense here. Atlantis is not the paradise it used to be. We're sitting on a barrel of powder and the slightest thing will make it go off. Maya is dangerous. If she finds out..."

"She won't, I promise. We'll be careful. Please, help us out."

The young man looked deep into the beautiful warm eyes of the handsome black man in front of him and felt his resolve slipping. "You will, though, you know?" he said, softly.

Henri shook his head and frowned, confused. "Will what?"

"Causes us problems. I told you, Maya is dangerous. She... Strange things have been happening to Blair. I --"

"The 'accidents' and the kidnapping?" Henri interrupted. "Yes, he told us. What about it?"

"We think she's the one behind it all. That's why we've kept it to ourselves."

"Why would she do that? Isn't she his stepmother?"

"Yes. But she's also the Queen, and she wants to keep it that way. She enjoys the power she has over her 'subjects'." Rafe's voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Blair will be thirty in a few weeks and she will have to step down and give him the throne. If something were to

happen to him before that..."

"She would get to keep her place as ruler," H understood. "Damn! We have to keep an eye on him then."

The younger man looked at him in surprise. "You'd do that?"

H grinned. "Of course! I like Blair. He helped us when we got here and wants to help us get back home. The least we can do is stick around until he becomes king. I'll talk with the others, but I'm sure they won't mind. Jim seems head over heels with your young Prince," he smirked. "It's quite a sight, let me tell you."

They shared a knowing smile, Rafe finally relaxing his guard a little. He was startled when Henri extended a hand to him.

"Help us?"

Something made Rafe accept the offered hand. "I don't have much choice," he said ruefully, shaking H's hand. "Blair is my Prince and I swore to protect him. If he's on your side. Then so am I."

"Thank you, man."

Rafe smiled, and Henri caught his breath. "Wow..." he finally exhaled.

"What?" Rafe asked, confused.

"You're gorgeous, especially when you smile!" H said, grinning as he saw Rafe blush slightly.

"Thanks, I think..." Rafe said, somewhat shyly.

Henri felt his smile widening. Rafe was a very good-looking man, and he was looking forward to getting to know him better. As they'd been walking through the streets earlier, he'd noticed several same-sex couples walking hand in hand, so he knew Rafe would probably not be offended by his advances. Time would tell, but maybe his stay in Atlantis wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Still holding Rafe's hand, H pulled him slightly. "Come on, let's go back to the others. I need to talk to my friends about staying here until Blair is crowned King."

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Over two weeks later, Jim found himself following Blair as they made their way deep into the forest around the palace. The stay in Atlantis had been going surprisingly well. Blair had stayed clear of any further 'accidents', and the detectives were actually enjoying the deceptive peace surrounding them. Jim knew it wouldn't last, but for the moment he was determined to just relax and enjoy it.

Behind him, Henri and Rafe followed at a discrete distance. Although there had been no further threats to the prince's life, Rafe had refused to leave Blair's side, even when he was with others. He obviously still didn't completely trust them, taking his guard duties very seriously. He had vowed that his childhood friend would take his rightful place as king -- no matter what it took to do it.

Henri subtly managed to increase the distance between the two pairs of men, happy that Simon had decided to stay behind and search for possible escape routes. Even with Blair's and Rafe's help, they would need to know the area well.

Having Simon around would have made his plans more difficult. Although he knew his friend and superior was bisexual, he wouldn't feel comfortable trying to seduce Rafe under Simon's ever-seeing eyes. It would have definitely ruined the mood.

He made sure they were close enough to keep the others in clear sight -- but far enough to allow some privacy. He was still getting to know the handsome guard captain and was eager for some time at least partially alone. And, he reflected with a grin, he was certain that Jim would welcome some time alone with the beautiful Blair.

After a long walk, they came to a clearing by a stream. Henri took Rafe's hand and tugged him down to sit on the ground, allowing the other pair to move a bit away. Blair threw the outsider a grateful look and a grin. He'd had a feeling about his friend and the newcomer. The feeling was confirmed when Rafe actually turned his attention away from him and focused on Henri.

Blair and Jim settled down under a shady tree near the stream. The older man glanced at his companion as he leaned against the tree. A sigh reached his ears.

"Tired?"

"A little," Blair admitted. He reached up to push back a few locks of his long curly hair that the wind had blown free of the tie. "Preparing for the ceremony is getting kind of exhausting."

Blair had been spending nearly every morning and afternoon with the Ministers and Council, preparing for his coronation. In turn, Jim, Simon and Henri were staying close to the palace with Rafe, keeping watch on him. So far they had only the evenings to be alone and plan for the escape. The enforced separation was beginning to bother Jim, for reasons that he knew were not logical. He had no claim to Blair, but he *felt* as if he did, and he nearly growled every time Blair had to leave his side.

Unbidden, his hand reached out and gently took hold of the tie keeping Blair's hair back. The young prince looked at him uncertainly, but didn't move away from his touch. Jim carefully released the tie and finger-combed the hair free.

"It looks good this way," he said quietly.

"I usually keep it loose," Blair admitted. "But for formal state occasions I pull it back. I should try to look like a king, even though I don't feel like one." There was a note of sadness in his voice.

"What's wrong?" Jim asked.

"I don't know. I suppose... just frustration with everything. There's so much I want to do as King, but there are also so many duties and obligations. I remember how well my father handled it all and it just amazes me."

"You miss him." It was not a question.

"Yeah. I mean, I didn't know him all that well, he wasn't the friendliest person, but I did love him. It was really my grandfather that I spent most of my time with."

A soft sound from the other pair in the clearing drew Jim's attention for a moment. Rafe was actually smiling and he and Henri were deep in conversation.

"What are they saying?"

The question surprised Jim. "How would I know?" he asked mildly.

Blair was grinning now and he sat up more. "You could hear them, if you tried. You're a sentinel."

Jim shook his head. "I know what you told me about that, about enhanced senses and all, but it seems pretty unreal."

"Try it. Then you'll believe."

The older man frowned a bit, but he had never been one to turn down a challenge. He looked at Rafe and Henri as if just seeing them would miraculously allow him to hear them. After a moment, he shook his head. "Nothing."

"Come on, try harder. Concentrate on them, like you would concentrate on a conversation in a crowded room. Just let it happen."

Blair's soft voice drew Jim in and he turned his attention to his friend and the guard. Blair was continuing to talk and Jim let his tone guide him as his hearing suddenly extended.

"... and what about you? Anyone special?" It was Henri's voice.

"No. There's never been time, really."

"I understand. But sometimes, you have to *make* the time."

"Well... "

Jim's concentration broke off when Blair touched his arm. "Anything?" the young man asked eagerly.

"Um, yeah." He looked back at Blair. "Henri is making his move."

"His move?" Blair frowned. "What's that?"

Jim shook his head. It was times like this, when Blair didn't understand some expression, that it was brought home to him that he was in a foreign land.

"Er -- He likes Rafe. A lot. 'Making a move' means he's trying to date him."

"Oh!" Blair's face brightened. "That would be great! Rafe has always been devoted to his job -- that's me, basically. I keep telling him to find someone, that I can take care of myself, but he says he doesn't have time. And that's really sort of true." He looked over at his best friend, a proud expression on his face. "Rafe is the youngest Captain of the Royal Guard in history. He's pretty ambitious, but he forgets that he needs people too." He looked back at Jim, and saw an odd expression on his face. "What?"

"What about you, Blair? Don't you need someone?"

Blair stood up and moved slightly away from Jim, his back to the other man, arms folded defensively across his chest. Finally, he sighed and turned around, his dark ocean eyes locking on Jim's clear sky ones.

"Sometimes. Sometimes the weight of what I'm about to become gets too heavy, and I wish I had someone I trusted besides Rafe to talk to, to be with me, to share the load."

"That's not exactly what I meant," Jim remarked.

The younger man nodded. "I know, but that's out of my hands. Once I'm King, the Council will choose someone for me to marry. I'll have no choice in the matter."

Jim looked shocked. "But that's -- that's --"

"Old-fashioned where you come from? Wrong? Stupid? Maybe, that and more. But it's the way it's done in Atlantis. We have to keep going, make new life to continue where we left off. It's the way of our world."

"And you'll go along with that?!"

"Like I said, I have no choice."

Jim shook his head, his heart beating painfully in his chest. "But I thought we..."

Blair looked deep into his eyes, somehow understanding what he was trying to say. "I feel it too, Jim. But maybe it's not meant to be. I'll help you get control of your senses, show you what an amazing gift they are. And you know I'll be happy to have you here for as long as you want to stay. But this isn't the kind of life for a man like you. You want action, an active life, and this place is too quiet, too calm. You'd want to leave after only a short time. And of course, there's the matter of your friends. They don't want to stay. That's why you're planning to escape after all, isn't it?"

"Damn!" Jim whispered softly, his gaze missing the beauty of the haven surrounding them. "It's not fair."

Blair shrugged. "Life's not fair."

Jim saw the resignation in the expressive face in front of him, and made his decision. He would convince Blair to escape with them somehow. It would take time, but maybe there was a way. He didn't know what kind of relationship they were creating, or would have in the future, but he knew he couldn't leave Atlantis without the younger man. It would be like leaving a part of himself behind.

He would stay for as long as possible, using his senses to keep Blair close. There was no denying that he needed the help, so it wouldn't exactly be a lie. It was a relief to know he wasn't going crazy, that he was perfectly normal, even if he didn't understand why he'd been chosen for such a gift, as Blair had called it.

"Okay," he finally nodded. "Help me with this sentinel thing then. The rest will work itself out."

Blair didn't look convinced, but smiled slightly. "Very well, Sentinel. In that case, and while your friend is still 'making his move' on Rafe, why don't we start with a few exercises to help you control those enhanced senses of yours?"

"Sure. What do I have to do?"

For the next three hours, the two worked hard, doing exercises and tests, anything that would help Jim. After a while, Jim was able to focus his senses with much more control. He had been able to extend them farther than ever before and Blair had shown him how to numb them to a normal human's level. It was impressive and Jim couldn't help beaming.

"Once they're under control it becomes a totally different story. I wish I'd known about this before!"

"There's a time for everything, Jim," Blair said enigmatically. "And right now, it's time to head back. Your friend must be worried about the two of you."

Jim chuckled. "Yeah. Hey, H! Rafe! Let's head back. Simon must be climbing the walls by now."

Both H and Rafe started at the shout, guilty expressions crossing their faces. They'd been so lost in each other that they had forgotten all about the other two. Rafe flushed deeply and got up, muttering angrily. That was not the way to guard the future king. Next time he would have to be more careful, instead of falling for the foreigner's charms so quickly.

Everyone stood up and got ready to leave. Blair was about to tease Rafe mercilessly about having a new boyfriend, when beside him Jim suddenly stopped moving and looked around. His head was tilted slightly and the young man instinctively knew he was listening for something. Without any conscious thought, his hand moved to the sentinel's shoulder, grounding him and keeping him from zoning.

Later, everyone would say it all happened too fast to explain in detail. With an unexpected warning shout, Jim jumped in front of Blair, shielding him, and getting shot with an arrow clearly meant for the young prince.

"Jim!" Blair felt the impact of the arrow into the body against his own, but was unable to hold the bigger man. The both fell to the ground, Jim unmoving on top of the prince. "Jim! Jim, are you okay?! Jim!"

"Blair, shut up! You'll just draw attention to your position!" Rafe hissed from a few feet away. They were sitting ducks in the clearing, unable to do more than to try to protect themselves. Both he and Henri were also on the ground, waiting for the killer to make another try.

"God, I wish I had my gun," Henri whispered, shooting Rafe a glare he usually reserved for the worst of criminals.

"Hey, don't look at me," the young captain scowled back. "It's not my fault no one is allowed to carry guns. I didn't make the rules."

H snorted, but refrained from answering. The last thing he wanted was to blow his chances with the hazel-eyed Atlantean, but he was scared shitless for his friend. Jim was clearly unconscious, the arrow visible in his shoulder. God, it was too close to the heart! What if Jim was dead?

As if understanding what the detective was feeling, Blair turned his head towards them, and whispered for their ears only, "He's alive! I can feel his heartbeat. Please..." he begged Rafe, his eyes beginning to mist.

Rafe nodded in understanding. He stood up swiftly, hoping that whoever it was had gone, and sighed in relief when no arrow came flying in his direction. Feeling Henri stand up and follow him, Rafe quickly searched the surrounding woods and found no one, only footprints showing where the bastard had been.

"When we find who did this..." H growled angrily beside him.

Rafe nodded and turned back to Henri. "Come on, let's see how your friend is doing and get him back to the city. Our medicine people will take good care of him."

"Rafe..." Henri whispered, a forlorn expression crossing his face.

"I know, H, I know. He's going to be okay, you'll see. Everything's going to be okay. Come on, I don't want to leave them alone for too long."

They made their way back to their friends and carefully removed Blair from under Jim. Keeping their movements as slow and gentle as possible, they secured the injured man safely between them and returned to the city.

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Two hours later, the Atlantean's medicine people were taking care of Jim. Blair was in the room with him, while outside, Rafe and Henri sat side by side, anxiously waiting to hear something about Jim's condition.

"God, this is all my fault!" Rafe whispered softly, his eyes never leaving his hands.

"Why is it your fault? There was no way you could've stopped that arrow."

"No, but I should be the one in that room. It was my duty to protect my Prince, and I failed."

"Man! I love Jim; he's one of my best friends. We've been through thick and thin and if he dies..." He nearly choked on that thought. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he waited until his emotions were under control before turning his attention back to his new friend. "Rafe, your taking that arrow wouldn't have been the solution either. Whoever did this got away. If you were dead or hurt, who would've protected Blair? Whoever did this is going to keep trying. You need to be alert and able to do your job. And... I'll help you."

"You will?"

Henri smiled slightly. "Don't look so surprised. Like I said before, I like Blair a lot, and, well... I want to catch the bastard that did this to Jim. Will you let me help you, Rafe?"

"Yes. Thank you, Henri. For everything."

"Everything?" Henri echoed, his head tilted in confusion.

Rafe nodded. "For being here, for helping out, for... caring."

Nearing footsteps silenced whatever answer Brown might have given.

"Hey, Brown!" Simon nearly ran to them. "I was just told. What happened? Is Jim all right? What's going on?"

"He was shot by an arrow meant for Blair. We didn't catch who did it, and we're still waiting to know his condition."

"Damn!" Simon huffed. "I guess the person that doesn't want Blair as king has changed their mind about kidnapping him. This is serious business, Rafe. What will happen if we find out who's behind this?"

"He or she will be killed. The manner of death will depend on the Ministers and the Council. But it will be difficult."

"Why?" Simon asked.

Rafe looked around to make sure they were alone. "I still think Queen Maya is responsible. She's the one who stands to lose the most if Blair becomes King. But to make sure she's convicted, we need to catch whoever she paid to hurt Blair. Without that there's no way of proving my suspicion."

The other two remained silent, but the determination on their faces was clear. Their jurisdiction or not, they were not about to let something like this go unpunished. Nobody messed with the Major Crime unit, or their loved ones. The sound of an opening door caught their attention and the three men turned to see Blair walking wearily towards them.

"Well?" Simon questioned apprehensively.

"He's going to be okay. He was very lucky. The arrow missed the vital organs and didn't chip any bone, so... A few days rest and he'll be able to move around again. Tomorrow morning they'll take him back to your suite and you guys will have to make sure he stays put."

H grimaced. "That will be like a trip to the dentist. He's the worst patient I've ever seen in my life!"

"You okay?" Rafe asked, not liking the sad look on Blair's face.

"Yeah..." Blair exhaled softly. "It's just that -- I guess I finally realized that someone really wants me dead."

"Hey, it's okay," Rafe soothed, hugging his childhood friend tightly. "Nothing like this will ever happen again. We'll be watching now, I'll be more careful. I promise."

"All of us will be protecting you, Blair," Simon interjected. "You'll be safe."

The young prince smiled weakly. "Thanks. And I'm sorry for Jim."

H shook his head. "There's nothing to feel sorry about. And I have a feeling he'd do it again in a heartbeat."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Blair muttered. "That's what I'm afraid of..."

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Jim grumbled under his breath as he fidgeted with the blankets. The bandages itched, and he moved one hand up a bit, preparing to scratch.

"Don't." The word, mild and calm, came from the figure in the chair at the side of his bed.

"Don't what?" Jim asked, acting innocent.

Blair sighed as he looked up from his book. "Don't mess with the bandages. You know they need to stay undisturbed." He reached over and moved Jim's hand away from the wrappings in question. "Try to leave them alone for more than five minutes, all right?"

Jim glared. "I'll try," he answered. Blair smiled, and it lit up the entire room. It gave Jim something to look at and think about other than his wound. The prince had been at his side every minute since the assassination attempt, three days earlier. He actually felt guilty about Jim being injured.

"Jim? I want to say thank you again. You saved my life out there. And it's my fault that you were hurt."

Now it was Jim's turn to sigh. "Blair, someone tried to kill you. That's hardly your fault."

"You know what I mean." Blair stood up and began to pace a bit, nervous energy practically crackling off him. "It's just unbelievable that this happened. It's hard to have to accept that someone hates you so much that they want you dead."

Jim nodded. As a cop, he knew that the intended victims always had difficulty accepting such a harsh reality. Unfortunately, as a cop he saw far too many harsh realities.

"It's never easy to accept that, Blair, and it takes time to face it. But you're not alone." He reached out with his good arm and lightly grasped the prince's hand as he walked past. "You know that I'm not leaving you by yourself. And neither are Simon, Henri, or Rafe."

Blair managed a smile at that. He had stayed beside Jim since his release from the hospital and Rafe had practically glued himself to his best friend. Rafe was the only one who felt more guilt than Blair about the shooting. He was convinced that he had let Blair down and was now insisting on protective measures that made even Jim wince.

Blair was allowed only in rooms that met Rafe's security approval, and that was apparently restricted to their new suite. When Jim had been released from the hospital, he had expected to go back to the rooms he, Simon, and Henri had been in. However, after realizing that Blair intended to stay with him, Rafe had arranged to move Jim to a new set of rooms. The story he gave others was that they were closer to the hospital. In reality, they were very secure indeed.

The windows were very small and had gilded bars over the larger ones. There were no outside doors others than the main one to the corridor. Rafe had personally inspected each room to ensure that there were no hidden passageways. No less lavish than the rest of the palace, they were nonetheless similar to a prison. A perfect place to keep the prince safe.

Guards handpicked by Rafe stood outside the door, and Rafe himself stayed in the suite. Blair was not allowed outside at all. Things from his rooms were brought to him, but he could not go past the main door. Everyone was concerned about the attempted assassination and, thus far, no one had tried to interfere with Rafe's security measures. No one other than Blair, that is.

"It's necessary, Blair," Rafe had argued when Blair complained, "and it's not just me who's concerned." He paused, recalling the looks that had passed between Jim and the prince. He hadn't been completely distracted by Henri in the clearing and was sure that he had noticed some attraction between the other men. Maybe playing on that would help keep Blair where he was safe.

"You want to be with Jim, don't you?" At Blair's nod, he continued. "Whoever was trying to kill you will probably come after him as well since he prevented their plans. You're both safer here. The healers won't let Jim move around much now anyway."

That ploy had worked, and Blair had accepted the security without further argument. Now he sat down again beside Jim's bed.

"I'm sorry. You're right, and so is Rafe. I just don't like to admit it because then it makes it all so real that someone wants me dead."

"That's understandable. It's a lot to have to accept. But just know that you're safe here."

"I know." Blair played with one of the books again. "I feel like I should study this some more, but I think I have it nearly all memorized."

"What is it?"

Blair held up the large book. "My homework," he said ruefully. "Information on the coronation, things I have to say, the order of the ceremony." He restlessly flipped a few pages. "This doesn't seem real, either, and I've prepared for this my whole life."

Jim studied the young man beside him. It was hard to believe that he would soon be King. The depth of the responsibility was beginning to weigh on him. And knowing that someone was willing to kill him to prevent his coronation was a harsh addition to the stress.

"Sometimes, things don't seem real until they're actually happening. You picture it, think about it, but it doesn't click until it's right in front of you. It's normal for it to seem like a dream."

The younger man looked at him. "You sound like you're speaking from experience," he ventured.

Jim smiled. "Yeah, I guess I am." He shifted a bit to get more comfortable on the pillows. "Blair, everyone goes through things that they think won't really ever happen. You think you know what your reaction will be, but then when it actually happens, you feel like you're not ready for it. You'll get through this fine."

"I suppose," Blair toyed with the book for a minute, then put it aside. "But I still can't stop shaking at times. I feel weak. How am I supposed to lead Atlantis if I'm this worried about just the coronation?"

Ellison shook his head. "It's not *just* the coronation, Blair, and you know that. There's also the fact that someone wants you dead." He saw Blair wince a bit at that, but he had to be frank. "Don't kid yourself. That's hard to take. Add in the little fact that you're about to become the King, and well, let's just say that nerves are perfectly acceptable. I certainly don't think less of you."

Blair blushed a little and looked down. "Thank you. Again. I guess I needed to hear that from someone I trust. Rafe has always said that, but it's nice to hear it again from someone else."

"I'm glad you trust me, Blair," Jim said simply. For a long minute, there was a comfortable silence between the two men, both lost in private thoughts.

Blair seemed about to speak when angry voices rose from outside. Before either man could move, the door burst open and men swarmed into the room.

"What going on?" Blair demanded, as he watched Rafe arguing with the captain of Maya's personal guard.

"You are NOT taking him, you understand? I am the Captain of the Royal Guard. You have no authority over me."

The other man ignored the young captain and turned to Blair. "Your Highness," he began, bowing respectfully. "Queen Maya has ordered that you be placed under the protection of her personal guard and taken to rooms elsewhere."

"What?" Jim shouted, trying to get up. Simon and Henri had joined them and were arguing as well.

Blair finally managed to speak over the din. "I prefer the protection of my own guard, Captain," he said carefully.

The man shook his head. "Queen Maya has ordered this, Your Highness. I must insist that you come with me."

"No!" Rafe pushed his way between Blair and the other man. "I am the prince's official guard. The queen's personal guard has no business protecting him. I'm the one responsible for him and I have the final say."

"You are certainly free to plead your case to the queen, Captain," the other man shrugged. "But only *after* the prince has been taken to safety."

"Safety?" Simon repeated. "He is safe here. There's no need to move him now."

Whatever the man would have answered went unsaid when one of the officers began to pull out his sword, apparently unwilling to put up

with arguments from the newcomers. Rafe instantly drew his own weapon, still standing protectively in front of Blair.

"Not even you are allowed to draw your weapon around the prince unless he is in immediate danger, Captain! Have your man put his weapon away!" he said angrily.

"We are his guard now," the other Captain answered smoothly. "And we have authority to use force, if necessary."

"That won't be necessary." It was Blair, speaking quietly. Everyone quieted to hear him. "I will come with you, Captain, of course, since my Queen has ordered it." He waved off potential arguments from Jim, Rafe, Simon, and Henri. "However, I need a moment to say goodbye to my friends."

He turned to shake Jim's hand, as if he had just been visiting a casual friend. "I wish you well, Jim," he said calmly. "I'm sure that I will see you at the coronation. And again, I must thank you for your help to me earlier." He then turned to Simon and Henri and said much the same.

Jim was stunned. What was happening? Why was Blair so meekly going with them? Then he noticed Blair casually touch his ear and pull it slightly. He did it again while he spoke with Simon. Then realization hit him -- hearing! Blair was telling him to turn up his hearing and listen for something. He focused on Blair's voice, filtering to hear what Blair was mumbling under his breath.

Jim, I have to go with them. It will look too suspicious if I don't. And I really don't have any grounds not to go. Listen for me. You can hear me anywhere. Listen for my voice and you can hear everything that is happening. I'll keep talking to you.

Blair looked at Jim, hoping that he had picked up on the cue, and Jim nodded. Relief flooded the younger man's body. At least Jim would be listening to anything that happened to him. He would not be completely alone.

"Your Highness, I must insist we leave now," the Captain was saying.

"Yes, of course." He turned to leave and the strange guards surrounded him, looking menacing, rather than protecting. Without another word, he was gone.

Rafe nearly growled as he watched his Prince and best friend walk out the door. "No, no, no!" he muttered, his boots making loud grating noises on the marble floor as he paced frantically.

"Rafe, calm down," Henri tried soothingly.

"Calm down?! Calm down?! How can I calm down?! If Queen Maya is behind the kidnapping and the murder attempts, then Blair is a sitting duck right now. There's no way that Chapel will let me get close enough to protect him."

"Chapel?" Simon echoed.

"Warren Chapel, the bastard that took Blair away just now. I've never liked the man. His devotion to Queen Maya borders on obsession. Most people think they're sleeping together. I wouldn't put it past him to be the one responsible for the attempts. He's a dangerous man."

Something about the young captain's frantic expression made Jim relent a little. Things hadn't been good between the two of them since his arrival on Atlantis. He knew most of it was his own fault, due to his almost immediate need to protect Blair. He could hardly blame Rafe for being in the position he hungered for.

"Rafe," he began gently. "How much did Blair tell you about me?"

The young captain whirled around and faced him. "What do you mean?" he asked impatiently.

"Did he tell you anything at all about me?"

Rafe just shook his head, his confusion plain to see.

"I'm a sentinel," Jim stated firmly. Blair had told him about how highly the Atlanteans regarded their watchers and protectors, about how having heightened senses was not such an unusual thing on the island.

Rafe blinked, and then a slow, wide smile began to light up his handsome face. "You're listening to him!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. If he's in any kind of danger, I'll know. Nothing will happen to Blair," Jim vowed fiercely.

"Um. Can I stay here with you guys, then?" Rafe asked, almost shyly. "I want to join whatever action might take place."

"You're more than welcome," Jim smiled. "The four of us are Blair's only hope of becoming the king; it's up to us to stick together and pull him through." He extended his hand towards Rafe. "We got off to a bad start, Rafe. It's time to change that. I'm sorry about the way I've been acting."

Rafe shook his hand and nodded. "I'm sorry too, Jim. It's kind of late, but welcome to Atlantis."

The four men smiled ruefully at each other.

"Geez, why do I suddenly feel like one of the three musketeers?" Henri chuckled.

"There are four of us, Henri," Rafe said, looking at H in confusion.

"Actually, that's the title of a book by Alexandre Dumas. You know, now that you mention it, it should've been called the 'Four musketeers.' I never quite got that," Simon started to explain. Realizing he was confusing the other man further, he shook his head and chuckled. "Never mind, Rafe. We'll tell you all about it later."



"Amazing how you can become so attached to someone in so little time," Henri muttered suddenly, not really knowing if he meant Blair, the hazel-eyed captain in front of him, or both.

But, either way, he knew that he would do anything to keep them both safe, or die trying. He'd never planned for something so unbelievable as ending up on the time-forgotten island of Atlantis, but now that they were there, he'd make sure that everything was fine before trying to leave. He saw the same determination on his friends' faces.

""*"*"*

Blair sighed wearily as he gazed up at the starred sky. The day had been surprisingly quiet; Captain Chapel had taken him to some rooms close to the queen's and left him alone there after placing two of his own men at the door.

The queen herself had come to visit, explaining that she'd heard rumors about an assassination plot on the prince's life; that was why he had been moved. It was for his own safety. Blair didn't believe a word, but refrained from saying so, not wanting her to suspect that he thought she was behind what had been happening to him lately.

The only good thing about the long day was his 'conversations' with Jim. Blair knew in his heart that the other man had understood his message and was listening to him, so he kept talking and talking, taking comfort in knowing that the sentinel would come running should Blair ever need him. The young prince watched as a shooting star crossed the dark sky and sighed again.

You know, Jim, it feels good to know that you're close, listening to me. I can almost feel your presence around me... He paused to gather his troubled thoughts. There's something going on between us, isn't there? God, this is so wrong, but I can't seem to help it. This island is my home, where I belong. You can't wait to leave here. We're as different as the sun and the moon. And yet... I feel drawn to you, like I've known you all of my life. How is that possible? How do I fight it?

Some distance away, in his own room, Jim took a deep breath. He'd spent the whole day in bed recuperating from his injury and listening to the young prince, watching over him in a way, making sure he was safe. Blair's last words had struck deep because they spoke of every emotion he was feeling inside. Everything around them pointed to the fact that a relationship between them was doomed to failure. But still, they seemed to grow closer and closer together, unable to prevent what was coming their way.

"God, what a mess," he whispered brokenly.

He continued to listen until Blair finally settled down to sleep. He was starting to drift off himself when voices from outside of Blair's room caught his attention and brought him wide awake. After listening for a few seconds, Jim got up as fast as his wounded body allowed and woke up the others.

"What's up?" Henri asked sleepily.

"There's going to be trouble. I just heard the guards outside Blair's room say that it was time to leave so Chapel could do it. I'm assuming that the 'it' they're referring to is trying to kill Blair."

"Shit!" Simon growled, as he rose swiftly from his bed.

The four men had been waiting for something like this to happen, and had decided to sleep with their clothes on to save time. With grim nods to each other, they left the safety of their own rooms and went to the prince's rescue.

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Blair wasn't sure what brought his consciousness to full alert, only that one minute he was fast asleep and the next he was wide awake. Heart beating wildly, but trying to look as if he were still in deep slumber, he listened carefully to his surroundings, trying to pinpoint what had disturbed him.

At first, he thought his imagination was playing tricks on him but when the little hairs on the back of his neck stood up, he jumped up from the bed, just in time to miss the sharp knife coming in his direction.

"Who are you?" he demanded, staring at black-clad figure standing before him.

The man simply smirked from behind the dark hood covering his face and began to advance on the prince, knife held high, watching with cold, laughing eyes as the young man backed away from the deadly threat.

Blair watched his attacker carefully, desperately trying to remember the fighting techniques that Rafe had taught him. The captain had insisted that Blair learn some basic self-defense, although both had certainly hoped that it would never become necessary to use. Now, it seemed that Rafe's overprotection was going to be Blair's only chance.

The man lunged again and Blair managed to side step, narrowly missing the knife. He scrambled over the bed to get out of the corner the man was backing him into. He would have a better chance out in the open.

Frantically, he scanned the room for any type of weapon he could use to defend himself. Nothing. It seemed that all had been arranged to make sure he was helpless. There was nothing sturdier than the pillows for protection. He seized the only thing nearby -- his shoe -- and threw it. The attacker dodged it easily and laughed again, a low, purely evil sound. "It's no use, little Prince," he mocked, advancing on his prey. "Time to be done with this game."

Blair felt anger boil up inside him. "Who sent you?" he shouted. "Who are you working for?"

The man just chuckled. "Someone who needs you out of the way," he answered.

"Maya," Blair breathed. "She was behind it all, wasn't she?"

"Time to quit stalling," was his only answer. The attacker moved quickly, trapping his prey against a wall.

Blair almost made it away, but the man anticipated his move and met him with the knife, sinking it into his side. He staggered away, still trying desperately to get free. "Jim!" he gasped, praying that the sentinel would hear him.

The attacker hesitated at the name of the outsider, puzzled that the prince would cry out for him. How could he help? The man mentally shrugged, not concerned that anyone would hear the outcry. The guards outside the door had been conveniently removed and the outsiders were far on the other side of the castle. He raised the knife, and prepared to move in for the kill. However, his momentary distraction had just saved Blair's life.

A force like a wild animal hit him.

Jim had thrown himself at the attacker with a shout. They slammed to the floor, the knife flying away. Rafe was immediately on top of both of them, helping the sentinel punch and kick at the man until he was unconscious. Jim was enraged beyond all thought, completely ignoring the pain in his shoulder. His mate was in danger from this man -- he had hurt Blair. His hands moved to the attacker's throat and tightened.

Rafe was not inclined to prevent Jim from killing the man, and was still throwing in his own punches. Finally, it was Simon who pulled him away. "Jim!" Simon bellowed, trying to also pull his friend off the stranger. "Don't kill him! We need to find out who hired him!"

The words sank into Rafe's mind, and he knew the American captain was right. He joined in the effort to loosen Jim's hands. "It's true, Jim," he said reluctantly. He wanted to kill the attacker himself, but they needed him alive, at least for the time being.

Their only answer was a snarl. Jim didn't blink, didn't lose his focus on squeezing the life out of the man beneath him. Then a faint sound cut into his mind. "J-Jim?" Jim's head shot up. It sounded like Blair. "P-please."

Jim gave the man one last snarl, then looked at his captain and at Rafe. "We've got him," Simon assured his friend. "Go to Blair, he needs you."

Jim scrambled over to where Blair was sprawled on the floor. Henri was kneeling over him, holding a blanket to his side. "Jim, hold this," Henri said. "I'm going to go get help." He ran out of the room as Jim took over beside the prince.

"Blair?" Jim fought back tears. They had run as fast as they could, but they had still arrived too late. Blair was hurt and, judging from the blood that was soaking through the blanket, it was bad.

"Jim," Blair breathed. "You... you alright?"

"Hey, don't worry about me," Jim said thickly. "I've got you. You're safe now." Blair managed a faint smile, then slipped into unconsciousness. Jim looked up as Henri returned with several guards.

"Healers are on their way," Henri said.

"Tell them to hurry!" Jim urged.

"They are, Jim, they are." Henri knelt beside him again, helping to staunch the flow of blood.

Jim risked looking away from Blair long enough to see Rafe pull the hood off the attacker's face. "My Gods!" Rafe gasped.

"You know him?" Simon asked. The young captain nodded.

"Officer of Chapel's. No doubt now, Chapel himself was behind this, and that means Maya was behind it." He gave into rage and gave the unconscious man another punch. "Bastard!"

"We'll get her," Henri vowed, and Simon nodded. Just then, the healers arrived and rushed to Blair's side.

"How is Blair?" Rafe asked, as men he trusted began to tie up the attacker.

"I don't know," Henri answered, moving away to let the healers work. "Just one cut, I think, but it looks pretty deep."

Simon touched Rafe's shoulder and gestured to the corner where Blair lay. "He has to live. Because if he doesn't, I doubt that Jim will either."

Jim had moved only slightly out of the way, holding Blair's head in his lap, giving the healers access to the wound. Unshed tears were visible in his eyes as he watched over his mate. When it was time to move Blair, he was the one to lift the limp body and lay it on the stretcher. He then walked out beside it, still holding Blair's hand.

""*"*"*

Jim paced nervously outside the room where the healers were working on Blair. His hearing was fully tuned to the sounds coming from the treatment room, ignoring the conversations in the room he was in. And that was a considerable effort.

Maya had arrived soon after Blair had been sequestered, making all the proper noises of concern. Jim knew from her heartbeat that it was an act. Rafe had left briefly to arrange the arrests, taking Simon and Henri with him. He had returned just as Maya made her entrance. Now they were arguing loudly. Rafe was all but accusing her of murder, and Maya was threatening to relieve him of his duties as Captain of the Royal Guard. They stopped only when the elder healer emerged.

Jim had heard the comments from inside the room, and looked relieved. Rafe, knowing that Jim was monitoring the healing, took this as a good sign. "Is Blair alright?" he asked the healer.

"He will recover," the man assured them. "The wound will take some weeks to heal properly, but there will be no lasting damage."

"Oh, I'm so glad," Maya said, a fake smile gracing her face.

It was all Rafe could take. "You tried to kill him," he snapped.

Maya drew herself up. "Captain, you have just overstepped your bounds," she replied. "You are relieved of your duties."

"My duty is to protect the prince," Rafe answered angrily. "There is no question that Chapel attempted to kill Blair and no doubt that it was on your orders."

"I cannot argue that Chapel, for whatever reason, did try to harm Blair," Maya said smoothly. "And I am as appalled as anyone. But you have no right to blame me for his sick actions." It was obvious that she was willing to throw her lover to the wolves to protect herself.

"I have every right," Rafe said. "As Captain of the Royal Guard, I can arrest people who have tried to harm the prince."

"You cannot arrest me," Maya snapped, obvious smugness in her voice.

"No, but I can." A new voice interrupted the din.

Jim turned to see a lovely woman in the doorway. She was tall and slim, dressed in an elegant green gown that highlighted her reddish-brown hair. Behind her stood a number of guards, their uniforms also in green, as well as several other men and women. Rafe sighed in relief and quickly went to her.

"Megan," he breathed, hugging her.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, brother," Megan smiled, returning the hug. "It's horrible what happened to Blair, but now I can finally act."

Jim looked at her curiously. He remembered Blair saying that Megan was the High Priestess, and that she was visiting another temple on the outside world. Now that she had returned, he wondered what she could do. He didn't need to wait long.

The priestess walked up to the queen. "Maya," she said icily. "The Temple Court has found you guilty of attempting to murder our Prince. You are to be taken into custody immediately. Your punishment will be carried out at the first opportunity."

"What?" Maya practically shrieked. "You have no right!"

"I have every right," Megan answered. "The High Priestess is the only one who can pass judgment upon the ruler and I have found you guilty."

"Even you cannot overrule the process," Maya said. "There has been no trial and you have no proof."

One of the men behind Megan answered. "Actually, we have proof in the form of several confessions. Including Chapel's. He confessed to his attempts to murder Prince Blair by your orders, and to all that he knew of your plans. And it did not take long to hold the trial."

Maya visibly paled. "No," she breathed. "Chapel would not --"

"He did indeed confess all, and he was supported by the confessions of others that he named." Megan looked at Maya scornfully. "You showed poor judgment in selecting your accomplices."

"Squealed like pigs," Simon confirmed. Jim saw his captain appear from behind the temple guards, Henri beside him. "I've never seen a bunch so eager to confess."

"They would say anything to save themselves," Maya tried to argue.

"Enough!" Megan ended the discussion. "We have decided there is enough proof and that is all that is necessary in such a case." The priestess gestured to the temple guards. "Get her out of here."

The former queen's dignity fled. Shrieking, Maya had to be practically dragged away.

Jim was almost afraid to hope. "What just happened?" he asked.

Megan smiled at him. "You must be Jim," she said. There was no trace of the angry and powerful High Priestess now, just a friendly young woman. "One of the advantages of my position," she grinned.

"The High Priestess is the only person who can pass judgment on royalty," Simon explained. "When she heard what Chapel and the others had to say, it was a pretty easy decision."

"Yes, Captain Simon and Henri were most helpful with the..." Megan paused, turning to Simon. "Interrogation, I believe you called it?"

"Good cop, bad cop," Henri answered with a grin. "Works like a charm here."

"That, and a truth spell," Megan added.

Jim frowned. "Spell?"

The priestess smiled. "I'm sorry, I cannot reveal much. Just know that the Council members and I are convinced of Maya's guilt. She will pay for her crimes." Then she changed the subject, turning to the healers. "How is Prince Blair?"

"He was seriously wounded, Madam," the healer answered respectfully. "If not for the intervention of the Sentinel, he would have died."

"Sentinel?" Megan looked at Jim in unconcealed delight. "You are a sentinel?" At Jim's nod, her smile widened. "Marvelous! And interesting," she mused aloud.

Jim was about to ask what she meant when a sound reached his ears. "Blair is waking up," he said. He immediately went into the next room; no one tried to block his way.

The prince was indeed stirring, moving uneasily. The healer beside him smiled at Jim. "Talk to him, please," she urged. "It may help him wake up." Jim nodded and took Blair's hand.

"Blair," he said quietly. "Time to wake up, Love. You're safe now, it's okay."

"J-Jim?" Blair murmured.

"Yeah, it's me. Come on, open your eyes for me."

The blue eyes opened weakly, and focused with difficulty. "What... happened?"

"We caught him, baby," Jim said, not noticing the endearment that slipped past his lips. And if he had noticed, he wouldn't have cared. "It's all over. Maya has been arrested -- she's not going to be able to hurt you again."

Blair frowned. "The man with the knife... He was working for Maya."

"Yeah. He confessed everything."

The Prince smiled sleepily. "Good. About time," he added with a teasing tone.

"Don't waste your energy talking, Chief. You must rest."

"Uh-huh," Blair yawned. "Tired."

Strong fingers pushed his hair away from his face. "Go back to sleep for a while. You're going to be fine. I'll be here when you wake up again." He leaned close to whisper in his ear. "And you have a coronation to get ready for, remember?" Blair smiled, and slipped back into a healing sleep, feeling truly safe for the first time in months.

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Rafe sighed in exasperation, wondering why his mind refused to shut down and allow him some much-needed rest. He should've been asleep hours ago, but he kept thinking about Atlantis' very uncertain future.

Three weeks had gone by since Queen Maya had been caught red-handed, so to speak, trying to get rid of Blair in a desperate, final attempt to keep the throne. During those weeks, the prince had slowly regained his health under his sentinel's ever-watchful and loving eye. The two men had spent most of each day together, even after Blair felt strong enough to continue preparations for his coronation.

Peace had settled back on the island, everyone waiting anxiously for what Blair's first rulings would be. For the moment, and until the coronation, Megan was acting as Blair's Regent.

With his charge fiercely guarded by the sentinel, and with no more plots to overthrow the existing rulers, Captain Rafe found himself with nothing much to do all day. That is, until Henri had begun to almost stalk him. He had finally agreed to spend his time with the American cop.

And the three weeks had flown by with amazing speed. Rafe found that he could no longer deny how he felt about Henri. He'd fallen in love with the charismatic black man.

"What a hopeless situation," he whispered to himself, gazing up at the ceiling.

A soft chime from the door told him he had a visitor. Frowning at the hour, Rafe rose from the bed and, after donning a robe, went to answer the door.

"Hi," his visitor greeted him, somewhat awkwardly.

"Henri! What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I needed to talk to you," H replied. "Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure."

They moved to the living room and sat down. After a prolonged silence, Rafe finally cleared his throat. "Well? What did you want to talk about?"

"Us."

"Us?" he echoed, raising an eyebrow in puzzlement.

"Yes. Look, I think -- No, I **know** there's something going on between us. We've been attracted to each other since day one. If that was all it was, I wouldn't push it, but... Over the time we've been here, the attraction has changed into something else, something deeper. At least for me." H hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Am I alone in this?"

Rafe gazed down at his hands, "No," he admitted with a small shake of his head. "But..."

"But what?"

"I talked with Blair yesterday. One of the first things he'll do is change our law to allow anyone who so chooses to leave the island."

"Is that wise?" H asked with a frown. "I mean, I understand the why. I don't want to stay here forever either, but what will happen when the people who leave begin to talk about Atlantis to the outside world?"

"I think most will respect our wish to remain secret. And I believe that, even if they were to talk, few people would be ready to accept that a civilization thought lost for thousands of years still exists; its descendents occupying a small island concealed from the world by a 'magic' shield."

"I see your point. But someone will believe."

Rafe nodded. "No doubt about it. But the shield does protect us from view and radar. I guess we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, as you say. The point is that you'll be free to go and, as you said yourself, you don't want to stay here."

"I said I didn't want to stay forever. Doesn't mean I have to go now."

Rafe shook his head. "It doesn't work that way, Henri. I can't allow myself to surrender to this feeling, just to soon have you decide you've had enough and want to leave. I don't need a broken heart." He refrained from mentioning that it was already too late, that his heart would indeed break when Henri left Atlantis.

"The only people that get their hearts broken are people in love. Are you saying you love me?"

Their eyes locked, hazel on brown, their so-far unspoken emotions shinning through. "Yes," came the whispered reply, and Henri felt his heart miss a beat. He knelt down in front of the young captain.

"I love you, too. Take a chance on us, Rafe. Trust me not to hurt you."

Later, neither would be able to remember who made the first move, only that they suddenly found themselves locked in a fiercely passionate kiss, trying to be as close as humanly possible as they made their way to Rafe's large bed.

Clothes quickly pushed out of the way, they tumbled into the soft white bedding. Henri landed on top and leaned down slowly to brush his lips gently against Rafe's. They kissed hungrily, devouring each other with their mouths, tongues battling wantonly in discovery. Only when the need for air became too strong did they break apart, both flushed and panting hard.

Henri's hands began to explore the strong body beneath him, fingers brushing over Rafe's flanks, feather-like touches moving across the strong, muscled chest, meant to arouse beyond thought. A naughty digit stopped the downward journey to rub a pebbled nipple before sliding down the firm stomach on the way to Rafe's hard shaft. Henri started when his wrists were caught up in a light grip.

"Have you ever done this before, Henri?"

The black man grinned and nodded. "Yes, Rafe, don't worry. You?"

"Yes."

"Good," he purred in delight.

He returned to his former activity, using his lips, fingers, and tongue to drive the beautiful man underneath him wild with need. He sucked an earlobe between his lips, licked hard cinnamon nipples, nibbled and caressed pecs, abs, the taut stomach, every part of his lover he could reach.

When Rafe was nearly out of his mind with want, Henri suddenly grinned wickedly. In one swift move, he engulfed his lover's thick cock with his mouth. He began a gentle sucking motion, his tongue probing the tiny slit while one of his hands pumped the base. As Rafe began to moan continuously on his way to climax, Henri increased the rhythm of his movements, sucking harder and holding the young man's hips firmly to keep him from moving.

Finally having mercy on his lover, Henri deep-throated the hard erection and watched as Rafe threw his head back and groaned loudly, his body bucking before coming with a shouted "Henri!" into the warm, moist mouth pleasuring him.

A few minutes later, still breathless from his orgasm, Rafe looked up at him lovingly. "Your turn..." he whispered softly with a smile. He handed Henri a small jar of some kind of oily lotion.

Henri slid between Rafe's parted legs, then brushed a moist digit across the puckered opening of his ass. The finger slid in easily and he moved it gently around, stretching the passage for what was to come. Another finger joined the first, then a third, as Rafe groaned and writhed under his ministrations. Coating his rock-hard erection, H finally lifted his lover's legs over his shoulders and placed the tip of his shaft at the entrance to the tight ring of muscle. He pushed forward gently, Rafe thrusting back against him until he was fully inside his lover.

Capturing the delicious mouth anew, Henri kissed Rafe as he began to thrust into the willing body -- deep, slow strokes that increased in speed as the kiss got more intense. He felt his orgasm slowly building, his balls tightening up against his body, and began thrusting harder, faster, feeling Rafe rise up to meet him stroke for stroke.

He grasped his lover's thickening shaft, beginning to pump in time to their now frantic rhythm. With a wordless shout, Rafe climaxed, his seed coating their chests and Henri's hand. Feeling his lover's body contracting around his cock broke his control, and Henri thrust one last time before coming deeply inside Rafe's body. He collapsed exhaustedly on top of the other man, happy and sated. When he finally had the strength to move, he rolled them both until they were side-by-side and snuggled together. And thus they fell asleep.

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"Stop that."

Blair looked up, eyes innocent. "Stop what?" he asked.

"Stop fidgeting with the bandages," Jim answered, a smile crossing his face as he remembered the same conversation taking place weeks earlier. Only back then their roles had been reversed -- he'd been the one injured. His large hand closed over Blair's and drew it away from the area in question. "I know it itches, but scratching won't let it heal."

"Have you been talking to the healers again?"

The older man shook his head. "Common sense. Something that **you** seem to lack," he added teasingly.

Blair returned the smile and the teasing. "I should have you thrown in the dungeons for insulting me like that," he countered, mock indignation on his face. "Fine thing when the ruler doesn't get any respect."

"Yeah, yeah. Just stop fidgeting."

Blair sighed as he settled back on the pillows of his bed, secretly loving the attention he was receiving from his sentinel. It had certainly gotten him through the past weeks. Realizing just how close he had come to being killed had been very traumatic. He remembered the pain, collapsing under the attack, certain that he was going to die.

Then, Jim had been with him, and he had known, somehow, that everything was going to be alright. Jim had scarcely left his side during his recovery, clearly protective. Blair chuckled to himself, thinking that poor Rafe felt almost unnecessary. But it had given him time to be with Henri, so no doubt Rafe felt some advantage.

Jim had proved to be equally protective after Blair recovered enough to spend some time each day on 'work' -- preparing for his coronation. With Megan as Regent, Blair had already issued some new laws, the most important of which was that people would be allowed to leave. The older members of the Council had been shocked, but everyone else had cheered the pronouncement.

So far, no one had formally requested permission to leave. Most people seemed to be thinking it over carefully, weighing the consequences of leaving their peaceful life behind. It was a decision that no one would make lightly or quickly.

Except maybe the man beside him.

Blair knew that Jim, Simon, and Henri all wanted to leave, and he understood, he really did. They hadn't formed deep ties to Atlantis. Well, maybe Henri had, with Rafe, and Blair knew it would be difficult for his friend when Henri left. But he was still happy that his friend had found someone, even if it was just for a short time.

But Jim... Blair knew his heart would break when Jim left.

"What are you thinking?" The question drew him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, just -- Worrying about the coronation," Blair lied. "You know, the whole ceremony, and nerves."

A warm hand covered his. "I think it's more than that."

He looked at the hand covering his for a long moment, feeling a myriad of such different emotions clashing inside him. He didn't know which was stronger -- love, fear, desperation, loss, hope. Each battled for control, but only one seemed to be winning. Loss. Because he knew he would lose Jim soon. Trying to tie the other man to him would surely kill the sentinel.

"Blair?" came the soft whisper, a whole question left unspoken but understood in that one word.

"I... No, you're right. It's more than just the coronation. You'll be leaving soon."

Jim seemed startled by the sudden honesty. "Uh, yes. I..."

Blair gave him a weak smile. "It's okay, Jim, I understand. You don't belong here any more than I would belong in your world. I knew that from the start, but --"

"It's hard to resist," Jim finished, his clear blue eyes reflecting the same pain Blair was feeling. "I know. I wish I could sta --"

The prince hushed him by placing gentle fingers upon his lips. "Don't. We both know the time will come for you to go. Let's enjoy the time we have together... Please? Stay for the coronation. It's only a week from now anyway."

Jim nodded, brushing his lips against Blair's fingers in a gentle caress. "We'll stay, I promise."

"Thank you. I --" Before Blair could add another word, Jim captured his lips in a long, slow kiss that left them both gasping for breath when they finally broke apart.

"Shit!" Jim cursed softly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. It's not fair to you. This is hard enough as it is."

Blair looked out the window, staring down at his future subjects and wishing he could be down there with them, carefree and happy, without the pressure of having to become the king, or of having to rule over them, or having to stay and do what he'd been born to do. But his heart wouldn't allow him to leave, no matter how much he might wish it at the moment. He belonged to Atlantis and to his people, just as Jim

belonged to his world.

And just as he couldn't force himself to go, he couldn't force Jim to stay, to stop being what he had been born to be -- a sentinel and a cop, the guardian of his city, Cascade. So he would let Jim go. Because he knew that even if Jim agreed to stay, as the king he'd be expected to marry and have heirs and it wouldn't be right to allow Jim to stand back and watch while he was with someone else.

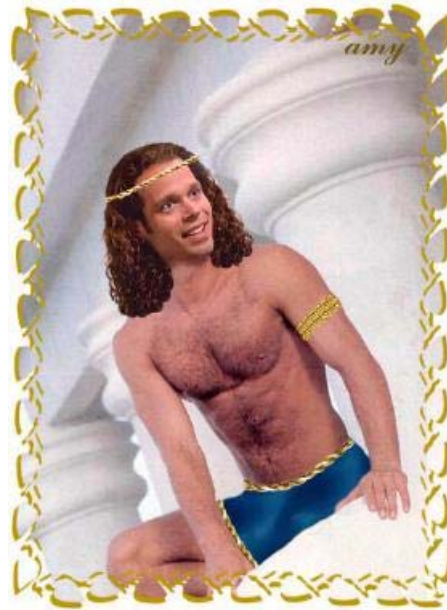
"Sometimes love isn't enough," Blair whispered brokenly.

"What?" Jim asked, a frown marring his chiseled features.

"Something I heard once. I love this island, Jim, it's my heart and soul, my life. I can never leave, I don't want to. You... You love being a cop, all that action, being able to help people. Protecting others. You'd wither and die in Atlantis and I cannot allow that to happen. I love you. No matter how hard it will be when you leave, I'm not sorry we met, or that I fell in love with you."

Jim smiled sadly, understanding shinning in his eyes. "I feel the same, Love," he said, then wrapped his arms around the smaller man's shoulders in a tight embrace, both feeling caught up in a situation they had no control over. "It'll be okay, Blair, it'll be okay." He didn't know who he was trying to convince, Blair or himself.

""*"*"*



A week later, Jim stood beside Simon and Henri as Blair was crowned King of Atlantis.

The ceremony lasted all day, with a procession to the temple for the coronation, then a parade back to the palace. Even with sentinel sight, Jim caught only glimpses of Blair in the crowd as the people pressed in around him, cheering and throwing flowers. Blair smiled steadily and seemed to have become years older the moment the crown was placed on his head. Jim felt a fierce sense of pride in the young man, but at the same time his heart twisted in pain and confusion.

As the coronation had come closer, he and Blair had kept their relationship, such as it was, all to themselves, trying to keep the physical contact to a minimum. It wasn't easy; both men used touch as a sign of affection. They knew they loved each other, but there were too many unanswered questions and seemingly insurmountable odds to allow them to take the relationship any further. The closer they were, the harder it was for both.

Then there were other concerns -- Blair, especially, was worried about his new responsibilities as a ruler, and Jim still didn't know whether he was going to stay or leave.

Blair assumed that Jim would want to return to Cascade, and Jim had thought so too, until recently. More and more, he had thoughts of staying in Atlantis. His mind was telling him to go, but his heart was telling him to stay, and he had no idea which would rule in the end. Blair had said something about Jim's sentinel instincts demanding that he return to protect his 'tribe' in Cascade, but oddly, Jim felt little, if any, pull for that.

Instead, his instincts seemed to tell him to stay with Blair. When Jim dreamed at night, it was of walking with Blair along the forests and beaches of Atlantis, not of chasing the bad guys down the streets of Cascade. It was as if some strong urge was telling him that Atlantis was the place to stay.

But how could he stay? As the king, Blair was expected to marry and have children. They'd talked about it before; it was expected of him. Jim didn't know if he could stand by and watch his love marry some woman and have a family. And it wouldn't be fair to the chosen wife to learn that she was really only a womb for the required heirs. Either way, there seemed to be only hurt in the future if he remained on the

island.

He broke out of his musings as they arrived at the huge banquet hall in the palace. The last scheduled event for the day was a banquet and dance celebrating the coronation. Jim saw Henri and Rafe slip off together outside on to the balcony, and he envied them that freedom. He didn't know if Henri had decided to stay or not, but at least he was free to love while they were still in Atlantis.

Jim watched Blair smile as he stood in the reception line, people paying their respects to him, men bowing and the women curtsying. He saw Blair glance in his direction, and immediately turned his hearing to the younger man, relishing the sound of the steady heartbeat. If it was all he would have, he would be content with it.

As the evening wore on, Blair danced with a number of the women. Even Jim allowed himself to be led onto the dance floor for several dances. News of him being a sentinel had spread among the palace insiders, and all were curious to know if he planned to stay or leave. Trying to hide his growing annoyance, Jim would only smile politely and say that he did not know.

He watched Henri and Rafe dance, and again felt his heart twist a little in envy at their open display of love. There were a number of same-sex couples dancing, a reflection of Atlantis' open feelings about such things. In that respect, Atlanteans were far more open-minded than the rest of the world. He envied all the couples he saw, wishing that he were free to show his love for Blair. It was ironic -- in a place where he could show his love for a man, where it would be freely accepted, the man he loved was the King, with other obligations to fulfill.

The night wore on and while many people eventually left, tired by the day-long celebration, there were still a number remaining. Jim was focusing so hard on Blair that he nearly jumped when he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you, Jim," Megan said with a smile. She looked almost as tired as Blair, having had a long day herself. As the High Priestess, it had been her duty to crown Blair and to see that all protocol was followed. Still, she looked beautiful in her long, elaborate green gown. "I wish to speak with you," she told him softly.

"Certainly." Jim stood until she had seated herself beside him on the couch. He had retreated to a corner of the ballroom where he was partially hidden by flowers and plants, but could still see the dancers. With a glance back to ensure that Blair was still in sight, he sat back down beside her.

Megan smiled at him. "You love Blair," she stated simply.

Jim was startled, but only for a moment. In the short time that he had known Megan, he had learned that she was unusually perceptive, perhaps in a way a sentinel herself. She had been intensely curious about Jim, and more than once, had cornered him and questioned him about his life. She had never quite come out and asked if he was planning to stay, but she had certainly hinted that she wanted him to.

"Yes, I do," Jim said heavily. "For all the good it does."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it make things too complicated, Megan, and you know that. I don't know if I can stay and watch him get married and be with someone else, yet I don't know if I can stand to be away from him."

"You need him, Jim," Megan said seriously. In the past week Jim had 'zoned out', as Blair and Megan called it, quite a few times. Each time, Blair had been the only one able to bring him out of his daze.

"But he doesn't need me," Jim replied. His tone was not pitying or bitter, just matter-of-fact.

"Yes, he does." Megan gestured to the crowd that remained in the ballroom. "Do you think that Blair really knows how to handle all his responsibilities yet? He's young, Jim. He has spent most of his life alone, the burden of eventually becoming a king heavy, even at an early age. He needs to find his way as ruler, and he needs the people who love him to help him succeed."

Jim sighed, running a hand down his face. "I know that," he said. "I don't **want** to leave, but --"

"You don't?" Megan immediately pounced on his words, her eyes gleaming as her smile grew wider.

The sentinel paused, realizing what he had just said. It was the first time he had said that aloud, or even really allowed himself to think it. But it was true, he reflected; his heart was speaking and overruling his mind once and for all.

"Yes, I want to stay. I love Blair," he finally said slowly. "But how can it work out between us?"

"Answer me this, Jim." Megan had taken hold of his hands and was looking at him intently. "If you could be with Blair, would you stay here?"

Jim didn't need to think about his answer. "Yes."

"You would be willing to stay as Atlantis' Sentinel? Do you not feel a pull toward your home and family?"

"I haven't thought of myself as having a family for a long time," Jim confessed. "I haven't seen my father or my brother in years. They probably believe me dead by now, lost at sea, and who knows if they even care. And as for being Atlantis' Sentinel, I don't really understand

what you mean by that."

Megan nodded. "Sentinels have an instinct to protect their... tribe, I guess you could call it," she said. "Their territory. Do you feel that pull towards Cascade?"

Jim thought hard for a moment. "No," he said finally, truthfully. "Cascade is not really... home. It was just somewhere to live, somewhere to work." He shook his head in puzzlement. "Megan, why all the questions? You've been pestering me for weeks now and I still haven't got a clue." He smiled to take the sting out of the words.

"Because until tonight you never came out and directly told me that you would stay with Blair if you could. Blair is convinced you're leaving," Megan answered gently. "We could not force you to stay, or even to admit that you wished to remain with us, with Blair. You had to decide for yourself." She caressed the larger hands holding hers. "It's about time you allowed your heart to speak. I was beginning to lose hope."

"Hope for what? Megan, yes, I would stay with Blair, God knows I love him. But I don't know if -- if I can stand by and watch him marry and --" he was silenced as Megan stood and pulled on his hands to make him rise as well. "What?"

"Just be quiet and follow me," Megan said. She was smiling brightly, practically jumping in excitement. "Come on, there's no sense in wasting any more time!"

She pulled Jim out onto the dance floor, where they found Blair speaking with an older woman from the Council. Megan used all her influence and command as High Priestess; before Jim quite knew what had happened, he was in a small side room with Blair and Megan.

Blair looked as startled as Jim. "Megan?" he said, taking the opportunity to sit on a chair and rest after his long day. "What's going on?" He glanced nervously over at Jim, and the older man couldn't resist the urge to stand beside him, his hand caressing Blair lightly on the shoulder. Megan knew they loved each other; there was no need to hide from her. This might be one of the few stolen moments they had left.

"Wonderful news, that's what," Megan said happily. She pulled a chair up and sat in front of them. She shook her head at them. "Men!" she huffed ruefully. "If either one of you had just spoken to me plainly, all this mess would have ended long ago."

"Ended how? Spoken what exactly?" Jim was confused and more than a bit irritated by now. Megan seemed to be just as hyper as Blair could be at times and he was sick of all the mystery.

"Listen to me, you two." Megan was beaming as she reached out and took hold of their hands and linked them together. "Blair, Jim told me that he loves you. Do you love him?"

Blair glanced nervously at her, but lifted his chin defiantly. "Yes," he said firmly.

"And Jim," Megan turned her attention to him. "You are willing to stay here in Atlantis, with Blair?"

"Yes."

The new king looked started at that. "You -- you are?" he stammered, looking at Jim.

Jim reached out a hand and cupped Blair's face. "Yes," he answered sincerely. "I just realized that. Cascade is not home to me, not really. Home is where... you are." He looked back to Megan. "But I still don't understand --"

"Hush." Megan chided, although her eyes were lit with amusement. "If you love each other, and Jim is willing to stay and be the Sentinel for Atlantis, then there is no obstacle to your being together. If only you'd spoken to me instead of creating all this drama!" She saw the confused looks on both men's faces. "Blair, I know you probably didn't have time to study or memorize all our laws because of Maya's interference. One of them states that the ruler can choose whoever they want as their consort, and can choose whoever they want as their heir. The successor does not **have** to be the child of the ruler."

Blair blinked in shock. "I didn't know that," he whispered.

"Obviously!" Megan grinned. "It hasn't happened in many, many years, but often our rulers and their consort were of the same sex. They were allowed to reign together just as long as the king -- or queen -- named a successor. Since there hasn't been such a couple on the throne for so long, this rule has been largely forgotten... but it does exist."

It took a moment for her words to register with the two men. "You mean --" Jim began hesitantly.

"We can be together," Blair finished. "Not just because it's accepted in Atlantis society, but because I don't **have** to have an heir of my blood?"

"Right." Megan smiled at them. "Blair, you have some distant cousins from your mother's family, you can pick any one of them to be named as your successor. Jim can be crowned as your consort with no problem whatsoever." She squeezed their hands tightly. "In other words, you can be together as a couple, completely and totally, married, everything. The only question is whether Jim will stay as Atlantis' Sentinel. Now see all the angst you could have saved yourselves from if you'd only talked to me?"

Blair looked over to Jim, hardly able to believe the turn of events. It was more than he had dared to dream of. But... "Jim, your home --"

"Is with you," Jim said firmly. "Blair, I've been having dreams, visions I guess, about staying here with you. There is no pull for me to return to Cascade. In fact, all my instincts are telling me to stay here, with you."

"It's the connection between the sentinel and the guide," Megan said softly. "Blair, you **are** Jim's guide. The sentinel stays with the guide. There is nothing now standing between the two of you. You can stay together, Jim can be the new Sentinel for Atlantis, and we will see to the matter of your successor. You do need to name one soon," the priestess said. "But when you announce Jim as your consort, it will only be expected that one of your cousins will be named heir. There is really no problem other than you two being too stubborn to admit your love until now."

"I didn't know about naming an heir," Blair told Jim almost apologetically. "I thought I had to marry a woman and have children and it wouldn't be fair to expect you to stand by and watch that. Plus, I thought you had to return to Cascade."

Jim pulled him in for a tight hug. "I know, it's alright," he whispered, rocking Blair against him. They were really going to be fine. A moment later, he heard the soft click of the door, and realized that Megan had left them in privacy. "I love you, Blair."

"And I love you, Jim," Blair whispered back. "Are you sure about staying in Atlantis? I thought --"

"My place is with you," Jim said firmly. "I've known that in my heart for weeks, but I couldn't make myself admit it. I want to stay; I **need** to stay with you, Blair."

Blair reached up to touch his face tenderly. "It's like a dream," he whispered. "Everything... Everything will work out."

Jim nodded. "It will," he vowed. "I guess it was meant to be," he grinned, then claimed Blair's lips for a long, passionate kiss, finally allowing himself to show Blair just how much he loved him.

Long minutes later, Jim finally forced himself away. Blair's eyes were bright with unshed tears, and Jim wiped at them with the edge of his sleeve. "There," he whispered with a rueful smile. "I don't think the king is supposed to cry on the day of his coronation, Chief."

Blair chuckled. "Sorry. It's just I'm finally getting my heart's desire. I feel like I could burst from joy," he smiled. "Jim, if you're willing, I think I'd like to make my first announcement as king. That I have a consort, and that Atlantis finally has a new Sentinel."

Jim thought about going out into the ballroom, surrounded by people, and having them all know that he was going to stay with Blair and become his consort. It was unimaginable in the outer world, but here in Atlantis, it would be greeted with joy. "I think most people may already have an idea," he said, remembering all the looks and whispers he had overheard. Most of the palace knew that the young king was in love with him and they were merely waiting for an announcement. "Let's go tell them," he said.

Blair smiled and wrapped his arm around Jim as together they walked out into the ballroom.

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Jim and Blair sat wearily at the table where Henri, Rafe, and Simon were still talking about the day's events. They were the only ones left in the ballroom; everyone else had long since gone.

Blair's first announcement as king had gone extremely well, with the crowd cheering the new union and their new sentinel. Even the Ministers and members of the Council had seemed happy with the news.

"Gods, I'm exhausted!" Blair moaned. "I can hardly stand anymore."

Henri grinned wickedly. "I'm sure Jim won't mind giving you a hand back to your room."

The others chuckled, and Blair leered at Jim. "I'm sure he won't!"

"So. You're really staying?" Simon asked Jim, his expression suddenly serious.

"Yes. I belong here, Simon," Jim replied, unable to prevent the happiness from showing in his smile. "I found my way home. And you?"

Simon shook his head. "I'm leaving, I have to. I have Daryl to think about. Not to mention my soon to be ex-wife," he said ruefully, making the others chuckle. "But I will miss this place. And all of you."

"You may return any time you wish, Simon," Blair assured him. "Megan and I spent this whole week trying to come up with a solution to our residents' problem."

"What problem?" Jim asked, curiously.

"Well, now that the fruit isn't forbidden anymore, most people have lost interest in the apple," the new king chuckled.

"Meaning?" Simon frowned at the strange answer.

"Meaning that now that I'm allowing people to leave, they don't want to. Most of my subjects have suddenly realized what a great life they have here and how hard it would be to start anew somewhere else. So, some of them asked if they could go, maybe see the world for a

while, then return. So... I decided that once a week, always at the same hour, Megan will disable a portion of the shield for a few hours. Those who want to return will be able to do so."

"Won't that be dangerous? Other boats or planes might see you then," Simon remarked.

Blair shrugged. "We'll have to take the risk. It's the only way to allow people to return. If they tried with the shield on, they might die in a storm or just be unable to find the island."

Simon nodded. "In that case, remember to give me the day and hour the shield will be down and I'll be sure to come and visit sometime. Can I bring Daryl?"

"Of course you can!" Blair smiled. "He'd be more than welcome."

Simon turned his attention to his other detective. "Henri, what are about you? Are you staying or going?" he asked, although he thought he already knew the answer by the way Brown was looking at the Atlantean captain.

"Staying," H replied with a smile. "I've found my home as well. It's here with Rafe. He's already got me a place in the guards, so a job won't be a problem, and I'll be living with him. And we've already decided to go to Cascade on vacation, so you'll be seeing us in no time."

"Okay. Since that's settled, you gentlemen will have to excuse me, but I'm going to bed. This is way past my bedtime," Simon remarked as he rose.

"I think I'll join you," Rafe agreed, then flushed when he noticed everyone looking at him. When he realized what he'd said, he stammered. "I didn't mean it that way, dammit! I meant I'm going to bed as well. You people have such dirty minds! You coming?" he mock-glared at Henri.

Henri leered. "Not yet, but I will soon."

Rafe rolled his eyes. "Please! Grow up, Henri! Goodnight, guys."

"Goodnight." Jim chuckled as he watched the three men leave the ballroom. Then he turned his attention to his guide. "My King, what is it that you wish me to do?"

"Escort me to my room, my Sentinel," Blair grinned.

"With pleasure, your Majesty," Jim smiled back.

They made their way to the royal rooms at a leisurely pace, walking hand in hand through the palace corridors and enjoying the pre-dawn silence surrounding them. They were finally together and free to fully enjoy what was to come. Be it good or bad, they would face it as one, and that knowledge gave them a sense of peace that had been missing from their lives for a long time.

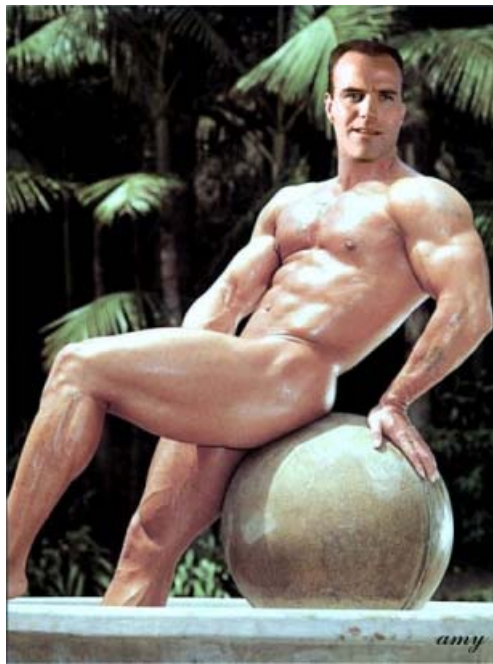
"What now?" Jim asked, once they were inside Blair's room.

"Hmmm..." Blair purred, finger tapping on his lower lip as he regarded the man standing in front of him. "I wish you to take your clothes off. And then mine as well."

Jim gave him a mock bow. "Your wish is my command, my Lord."

Deciding to tease the younger man a little, he began to sway gently to an internal beat only he could hear. His hands moved to his shirt buttons, undoing each one slowly, caressing his chest as more skin became visible. He toed off his shoes, then moved to his pants, flipping open the button and unzipping them slowly, enjoying Blair's moan as he realized that Jim was not wearing underwear.

He began to slide his pants off, bending forward to remove them, taking advantage of being close to Blair's body to blow a breath of warm air into the young man's cloth-covered groin. Chuckling at the gulp he heard, Jim straightened and tossed the pants aside, standing completely naked in front of his guide.



"Your turn, my King," he whispered, brushing his aroused body over Blair's as he freed the young man from his royal garments. "Much better!" he purred, as he gazed hungrily at the beautiful naked body before him. He couldn't resist running his fingers through Blair's chest hair, his senses allowing him to feel each individual hair.

Blair smiled up at him and, taking him by the hand, moved them to the bed. "My last wish for the night. Make love with me," he ordered in a soft voice, as he lay down on the bed. His smile widened as Jim began crawling languidly over him, blanketing him with his larger body.

"Definitely my pleasure, my Lord," Jim whispered, smiling down at the smoky blue eyes watching him with such open affection, then slowly leaned down to capture Blair's lips in a gentle kiss.

They rapidly grew more passionate and kissed avidly, tongues dancing sensually together, each taking everything the other had to offer. When the need to breathe finally registered, Jim broke the kiss with a final brush of lips as a promise of more to come.

"First time?" Jim asked suddenly.

Realizing what Jim was talking about, Blair shook his head. "No. This is Atlantis, Jim. We have no taboos regarding sex," he explained with a grin. "You?"

"No," Jim agreed, diving for his lover's mouth and nibbling on the full lower lip, his tongue caressing it tenderly.

Deciding to pay homage to the amazing young man rubbing so wantonly against him, Jim began leaving a trail of light kisses down Blair's throat, stopping only to nibble on an earlobe. Proceeding with his journey south, he used his tongue to tease twin nipples until they stood firm, then nipped every bit of creamy skin available to him.

He caressed the hairy chest and the firm stomach, enjoying the feel of muscles quivering under his touch, the whimpers he wrought from his helpless victim. He suckled at the insides of Blair's thighs while his hands kneaded his ass gently, then skimmed a finger between the clenched cheeks to tease the puckered opening of the young man's ass.

"Jim, please..."

"I need something --"

"Nightstand, top drawer. It's an oily lotion, especially for this. We make it from several plants that grow in the valley," Blair explained with an impish grin.

Jim rolled his eyes at his lover's mini-lecture and reached for the small jar. He nearly growled as Blair drew his knees up, allowing him better access to the hidden passage. He opened the jar, coating his fingers with the ointment, and began to prepare his partner. His first finger slid in easily, and he moved it gently to stretch the tight channel. Soon, two more digits joined the first and Blair began to tremble and moan continuously.

Finally certain that Blair was ready to welcome him, Jim coated his straining erection and placed the tip at Blair's entrance. Locking his eyes with his lover's, he thrust forward gently until he was completely engulfed, both men moaning as they became one.

Jim remained frozen, enjoying the connection between them for a moment, before beginning to thrust in slowly. Deep, long thrusts that had Blair moaning with every stroke.

"Harder!" Blair groaned as he pushed back against Jim frantically.

Jim obeyed, thrusting faster and harder as he gripped Blair's cock and began stroking him in time with their lovemaking. He kept pumping into the younger man until suddenly Blair cried out his name, his orgasm taking them both by surprise as he spilled his seed into Jim's hand. Blair's inner muscles contracted around Jim's cock and he was helpless to stop his own release, thrusting one last time into his lover before coming deep inside Blair's body.

He collapsed heavily against Blair, trying to catch his breath, happy for the strong arms that caught him and held on. Eventually, his cock slipped out of his lover's body and he moved to lie on his back. He gathered the smaller man against his side, and they stayed silent in each other's arms, enjoying the post-coital laziness that always came after mind-blowing sex.

"Love you, Chief," Jim whispered.

He felt Blair's smile as the younger man nuzzled his chest. "Love you too, Jim."

"Anything important you have to do today?" Jim asked, remembering that it would soon be morning.

"No. We can stay in bed for the whole day," Blair replied, snuggling closer to his warm body.

"Good," Jim breathed, cuddling his lover to him and allowing tiredness and sleep to overtake him.

~~*~*~*

Three days after Blair's coronation, Simon was preparing to leave the Atlantis. There were only two other people leaving with him, Atlantean natives who wished to see something of the outside world. They had promised to see Simon safely to the mainland. From there, he would head back to Cascade. He had stories prepared to explain their disappearance, along with Jim and Henri's temporary absence. He was looking forward to getting back to his son, but he knew that he would soon return to Atlantis.

He hugged Jim tightly. "Six months," he promised. "I'll try to be back in about six months."

"Sounds great." Jim returned the hug. "You know when and where the shield will be down. We'll be looking for you."

"Are you sure about what you want me to tell your family?" Simon's voice was quiet.

"Yeah," Jim nodded. "I don't want them to think I'm dead, because I would like to come back to Cascade someday and show Blair the city. Just say something about a top-secret government mission, I'll be touch, etc. They won't think anything of it."

Henri grinned. "In a way, you are on a government mission," he observed. "Protecting the king sounds like a government job to me."

The sentinel snorted. "But with far less paperwork!" he retorted.

"And better benefits," Henri leered a little. He accepted the slap to his shoulder with good humor and enjoyed seeing the light blush on Blair's face. The young king took the ribbing with good humor.

"We'll see," he said. "Jim still has a lot of work to do learning to control his senses. I have all sorts of experiments planned. Being Atlantis' Sentinel will be a lot of work."

Jim wrapped an arm around his new lover. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he said firmly.

"I think it's time to go," Rafe said. "Megan will disable the shield when your boat has left the harbor."

"Okay." Another round of fierce hugs and Simon finally made himself pull away and step into the boat. "Jim, you take care of Blair. Henri, take care of Rafe. And all of you, take care of this place. I want to come back and hear nothing but good news."

"We'll do our best," Blair promised.

They stood on the dock and waved until the boat was out of sight for everyone except Jim. He continued to follow them until he saw a flicker and then the boat disappeared. They had gone through the shield and were now back in the outside world.

"They're gone," he said, a bit quietly.

The four men were silent for a few moments, each thinking about how much they would miss Simon, but knowing that they had each made the right choices. Henri was the first to break the quiet by slipping an arm around Rafe.

"Well, come on," he said. "It's time the Captain of the Royal Guard put me to work!" Rafe laughed and they walked back up the path to the palace.

Blair took one of Jim's hands in his own. "Are you alright?" he asked softly, seeing Jim still staring at the place where Simon's boat had vanished.

Jim turned to face his lover. "I'm fine," he assured him, pulling him in for a hug. "Lots of changes, but all good ones."

"Jim, I don't know how to say this. But I'm so glad that you decided to stay. I just can't believe it!"

The older man held him tightly. "Believe it. Now come on," he said brightly. "You have an island to run and I suppose I have to put up with another crazy experiment for my senses."


"It's the only way," Blair started to argue. "You have to learn control, and we need to know how strong your senses are, and --" His words were stifled by a kiss to his lips.

"Looking forward to it," Jim said as he moved back. He smiled down at the young king; his heart suddenly freer and happier than he could ever remember it being, perhaps, in his entire life. "Looking forward to all of it with you."

Another kiss, and the two men began walking back to their new lives in the lost civilization of Atlantis.

The End

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 Keeping Brilliant



Keeping Brilliant - Fire Frog.

Keeping it brilliant, that's what tattooists say when they don't want lines to run on their work. Jim knew his lines had bled awhile ago, but he still had hope of saving the bleed, or at least making himself a new picture. Getting it brilliant. With Sandburg. Today was the day he was going to make it happen.

The buff detective's most recent case, involving a street hustler named Jocklan, had become a little complex with the introduction of a fifth player, the man's father - a high court judge. Responding to the need for more information, namely - was Jocklan still in close contact with his father, or did he hang exclusively with his 'street' family? - Simon Banks had sent his best detective to contact Cascade's most informed informant.

Note the word, informant. Not snitch. Definitely informant. Blair Sandburg was far more intelligent than the average snout, and too well liked by the crime squad to be referred to as just a snitch.

Blair owned and operated Acquiescence, a tattoo parlor run from the back of his twenty-four hour caf[☩] - Speakeasy. The caf[☩] was fully licensed, it served both alcohol and coffee, while offering several walls full of books to browse through as you quietly sipped your poison of choice.

Out of the way, secure and full of interesting little nooks and corners, it was the clandestine meeting place of choice for everybody from scheming civic leaders to well known drug lords. So long as they all kept the peace, Sandburg let them come.

Neutral territory was hard to find in Cascade, the so called 'most dangerous city' in America. Thanks to connections made through his father, a crime lord in his own right, the Caf[☩] cum tattoo parlor was off limits to criminal activity, and so about the safest place in Cascade. Many of his father's friends still came here to catch up with 'the kid' and gossip.

Maintaining the place was easy, the Speakeasy was staffed by convoys of college students eager to make a buck. Their youthful energy kept the place hip and the presence of gangsters and the like made it seem dangerous and alluring. A great combination. Blair relied on his staff to look after the bar/café, while he kept to his back room, working and listening. Always listening.

From his den he could keep a weather eye on the city's many doings. Thanks to his eves dropping, gossiping and general thirst for knowledge, Blair was the proverbial font of information.

Information that he had been requested to share with Ellison's former partner, Jack. It had been a minor case involving arranged dog fights, and Jack had been eager to shut it down. Sandburg hated the blood sport and had the goods to take it down, due to the involvement of a family member; his father.

Blair's dad 'Doc' Marco Ramstien was a lead player in almost every form of gambling in town. But that wasn't good enough for him, he wanted to expand. It was his drive to reach out into new avenues that had caused the split between he and his only son.

Blair was the product of a wild fling in Marco's youth with a beautiful but foot loose traveler. Introduced by her bookie brother at a race meeting, sparks had flown between them and Blair had been the result. Doc Marco had claimed the boy, brought him up to be a reflection of his own image, but something in Blair had rebelled.

Blair had taken his mother's last name shortly after the split with his old man. They had never been a close father son team, Sandburg being disinclined to participate in the family trades less savory pursuits.

Then Blair had lost what little respect he had had for the man that had sired him when he began organizing gambling based on blood sports. He'd given Jack what he could, enough to close down the dog fights, not enough to convict Marco. Doc Ramstien covered his tracks far too well.

After that initial contact Blair had willingly joined in the information game, delighting in being able to help solve crimes. In fact, he'd often rock up to let the station know things they hadn't asked about. It always paid to listen and be patient with the guy because Blair had an uncanny habit of taking two dissimilar rumors, a slip of evidence and some local background knowledge, and turning it into a solved case.

As the area Jim worked in was 'Major' Crimes, he couldn't afford to let someone like Blair Sandburg go to waste. Major Crimes had certainly been keeping the kid busy since Jack recruited him two years ago. Jack had retired now, gone to sell surfboards in Surfers Paradise, so the contact had fallen to his partner, one Jim Ellison. And Jim Ellison had then fallen for Blair.

Don't be fooled, it hadn't happened over night. Blair Sandburg was cute, Jim had admitted as much even after their first meeting. Now, after knowing him for two years, Jim could admit the guy was unconventional, but hot. Very hot.

Blair was short, stocky, and always dressed in faded black denim and buckle-demented biker boots. His hair was long, curly and the color would be called auburn by nine out of ten romance novelists. The other one would just call it brown with red highlights. Philistines were every where.

To Jim's private amusement and continuing fascination, Blair tended to wear a lot of tribal jewelry, bright necklaces and hair fetishes that added to his exotic looks. One item he always wore was a white bone American Indian choker with a silver bullet centerpiece.

It had given him his nickname, Chief, which Jim rather liked. Blair's face was exotic even without the tribal gew-gaws. A blend of masculine and feminine; defined cheekbones, strong jaw and full mouth somewhat overshadowed by the biggest eyes Jim had seen on an adult male, ever. They were huge and brilliantly blue, a depth of color hidden in them comparable to a well cut sapphire.

But Jim wasn't in the habit of chasing somebody just because they were cute, or even 'hot'. It had taken time and shared experience to point out to his subconscious that - 'Hey, that guy Sandburg. Might just be the one.'

Not surprisingly, the detective had resisted the implication. Besides having a shadowy past, Blair was ten years his junior, and a massive flake. He liked incense and meditation and herbal medicine and crap like that. So, okay, that stuff didn't seem so weird when Blair was explaining it all, but still..

Things wouldn't have gone any further if it weren't for Simon. Jim's boss had been round a time or two, and he could put clues together fairly well, what with being head detective and all. He had seen his best investigator growing antsy around Blair, seen the significant looks and then their previous closeness break down to a stilted attentiveness.

He had also witnessed Jim's courtship of Caroline Plummer, his now ex-wife. There were certain similarities to his behavior then and now. Simon could well imagine too, the difficulty Jim would now have expressing himself should he fall in love again. Caroline, well, it had not ended on a good note. And then there was the other matter.

Simon Banks had struggled briefly with his conscience. He could help Jim out, but it would require he break someone else's trust. Naomi Sandburg was one sassy lady, and he didn't like to cross her. Despite being railroaded from her son's life at an early age, she'd kept an eye on him. Enough that when he'd left his father and started a life of his own, she'd seen danger there. Doc had contacts that could make his son's break away from him very difficult indeed.

Naomi had known enough to come to Simon, a former lover, for help. It wasn't a coincidence Jack had turned up on Blair's doorstep when he had. Nor was it entirely Doc Marco Ramstien's influence that kept the Speakeasy the neutral meeting ground that it was. Naomi had

talked a lot about her son to Simon, and she had shared with him several of his secrets. One of them could ease Jim's fears and open the way for him to make his move. But would that be best for both Jim and Blair?

He had thought on the matter, then cornered his friend for a talk. And an interesting talk it had been, Ellison had had quite the revelation. He'd always felt Blair had a secret. Now he knew it was the same as his and the worst he could do by pressing his suit was to get laughed at for thinking an aging cop could float Sandburg's far more youthful boat. And at best...

Simon had come to the conclusion they would make the perfect match, so had risked the necessary information and had then gently prodded his detective in the right direction. Hence this visit.

"Hey, man, how you going?" Jim turned towards the voice, scanning the Speakeasy's late afternoon patrons and two harried waitresses before zeroing in on Blair. The younger man was coming from behind the bar, a tall mug of Irish coffee in one hand, impish laughter in his eyes.

"I'm going good, Chief." The cop assured him, thinking he felt nearly as good as Blair looked but reining the words in automatically. No need to show his hand just yet.

"Step into my parlor." Blair grinned, wiggling his eyebrows as he headed over to his workroom. Jim followed, admiring the view.

Putting his drink down on a bench half hidden under dog-eared tattoo books, Blair turned to face his friend, casually leaning one hip against his dentist like work chair. He flicked his hair back, revealing an ear loaded down with silver jewelry. The other was equally arrayed, and Jim guessed at a few different body parts as well, though he hadn't had the nerve to ask.

Despite his line of work and a natural inclination to adorn himself the only tattoos Blair had were the Celtic armband on his left bicep, a tribal eye on one palm and a stylized wolf's head Jim had glimpsed on Sandburg's ankle.

Ellison broke off his reverie on Sandburg's jewelry habits, ink art works and possible piercings with the realization that Blair was trying to get his attention.

"Earth to Jim, you in there, guy? The lights are on..." From the twinkle in his eyes he'd guessed the taller man had been lost in contemplation of his chest. But the small grin and subtle hand at the bottom of Blair's shirt pulling the material taut over the suggestion of defined muscles and peaked nipples invited the look, and maybe something more. Reacting to the invite Jim couldn't help but flex subtly back at him, earning himself a wider grin.

"Ah, you are home. I was beginning to wonder."

Jim smiled, something of a rare event for the often-stoic cop, and leaned next to the tattooist, copying Blair's pose. He hoped it looked as sexy to Sandburg as he felt the Chief's stance was. Jeez, those hips...

"So, you come in for a tatt or what?" Blair asked lightly, but a frown of puzzlement shadowed his face. Unless he was mistaken, Jim was totally checking him out, something he'd never done so openly before.

Sure, they'd flirted, almost from day one. Nothing ever came of it, though Jim did tend to let him into his space, like now as they leaned on the chair. The detective usually kept a wide perimeter, nobody got closer than a foot or more unless he was preparing to take them down, except Blair. He wondered what had happened to make Jim show his interest, especially as the cop had been so standoffish lately. "You finally gonna let me use that canvas for the ultimate dedication to Major Crimes?"

It was an old joke and Jim shook his head in exasperation. "Tempting Offer, Chief, but I'm afraid it's 'or what' again. Simon sent me to find out if you had anything more on Jocklan."

"Boss works you hard, man." Blair slipped his thumbs through the loops on his belt, fascinated to see Jim's eyes follow the movement and linger.

"Yeah, Simon's a real live dragon. Blows smoke and everything. He'd love to sort you out if you ever agreed to come work for the unit." He reached over and tweaked a lock of Blair's hair playfully, thinking how the long hair would irk Banks no end. And that Sandburg would get away with having it long any way.

Jim trailed his fingers down the lock of hair he'd caught to tweak, watching it curl round them as he pulled. Odd how he always ended up touching Blair every time they met. He just seemed to need the physical contact. It didn't phase Blair, who kept on talking as if some big cop weren't standing right next to him, playing with his hair. He was used to it.

"Not that again. Jack already tried to talk me into becoming 'Detective Blair Sandburg', huh, I don't know why you guys bother. I won't go armed, Jim. Never carry a gun, man, ergo, I'll never carry a badge."

"We could protect you better. You wouldn't have to carry a gun, not all the time. Just get the training." Jim murmured, distracted. "How is your arm, anyway?"

Blair regarded his right arm thoughtfully, holding it out a little for inspection. "Not bad, just a little achy. But guy, I am 'so' not pushing you out the way of an explosion again. For one thing, you weigh a ton."

"I'm a lean mean fighting machine, we don't come light." The twist of hair left his fingers and Jim straitened a little, becoming more focused. "And don't risk your life like that again, Sandburg. It saved my ass but it's not your job." He gave the other man his best 'I mean it this time, pal' scowl and crossed his arms. He had nothing to lose, he'd been told he looked sexy when he scowled, and you never know, Blair might just listen to him this time. *Yeah, right.*

"So if I became a detective you'd let me, right? Then it would be my job." Blair side stepped Jim's flirtatious comment and went with the more important issue first. He also mirrored Jim's move of crossing his arms, raising one eyebrow in enquiry.

"Ah..." Shit, caught. No - Jim wouldn't want Blair taking the lumps for him, even if it was his job. This last incident had been bad enough.

Blair had taken him to meet a reluctant eyewitness called Donna Sprinks. She was a friend of his from school, they had similar connections. One of those connections had just murdered another one, and Donna had seen it all. She was caught in the middle of a nasty web of family deceit and criminal activity and needed help to extract herself and turn the murderer in as well.

Blair had arranged the meet at Ramsbottem's alehouse, a place easy for Donna to get to. Ramsbottem's boasted a real English beer garden surrounded by a high hedge, with live musicians playing at one end and a game of skittles going at the other. A more relaxed place couldn't be found, and Donna had needed to relax, she was wound tighter than a bowstring.

Their meeting went well, and Donna had agreed to testify in return for inclusion in a witness protection plan. Jim got up to stretch his legs and incidentally check up on some suspicious activity in the corner of the garden, he suspected Donna had been tailed.

He was correct, but unnoticed by Jim one of the group had moved away to the tall hedge along the beer gardens perimeter. From there he took aim with his gun, hoping to wing the cop and scare Sprinks into keeping her mouth shut.

Thankfully Blair had seen him taking aim and launched himself, ramming the oblivious detective out the way.

The bullet had zinged overhead, hitting an outside water heater and blowing it sky high. Despite having had a soft landing on Jim, Blair still managed to get hurt. First when Jim had instinctively rolled on top of him to protect him from any further gun play (the guy really did weigh a ton) and second, when a pot plant that had been sitting on top of the water heater crash-landed on his outstretched arm.

Jumping up and gathering Ms. Sprinks into protective custody, Jim and the beer garden's other patrons had been privy to a world class round of swearing, most of it in foreign languages. It had been rather impressive.

Luckily, the arm wasn't broken, not so luckily the bruising interfered with Blair's ability to do fine work with his tattoo needle and several customers had had to be turned away. He'd taken this personally and helped track the gunman down, turning him over to police only, Jim suspected, because the law already knew of his involvement.

The tattooist obviously didn't want to take any heat over any 'accident' that might have occurred to the gunman, not when it could be so readily traced back to him. Besides, the guy had targeted a detective and was sure to get a stiff penalty. If he wanted to later Blair had some fairly shady contacts, friends from his youth and acquaintances of his father who could enact any revenge he wanted done for him in prison. Not that he'd ever do something like that. But he had the means, if he wanted to. Every now and then Blair had to struggle against his darker side.

And once more, Jim had led Blair into danger, only to have the younger man pull them both out. Imagining him being able to do it on the job gave him chills, despite the extra protection such an arrangement might ensure.

"Thought so." Blair said, nodding to himself. Jim was way over protective at times, the guy just couldn't get it through his head that Blair could look after himself.

Actually, Blair 'had' been attracted to hooking up with Major Crimes. Even way back when Jack had first recruited him, before he saw the kinds of crazy and explosive situations the job put you in. He'd liked the camaraderie of the bullpen, the ideal of justice, working for the overall good, being part of the team.

However, more than that Blair liked to walk the edge of things. He'd seen the dangers of being a cop first hand, but that didn't scare him, he found danger attractive. Once a month he took off to the wilds surrounding Cascade in search of that danger, that excitement. He claimed to be searching out books for the cafe, poking around in attics and cruising the second hand shops. He did do a lot of that, prowling garage sales and basements, even flea markets and auctions. But mostly he explored the hidden places, sought out the forbidden knowledge, hunted the shadows.

It wasn't in his nature to be static. Being a cop might offer a world where excitement came in dangerously large lumps, but it had its dull moments too. Like paper work, and rules and regulations that had to be followed.

His work in the cafe and tattoo parlor was equally as exciting, without the added benefit of nut jobs trying to off him quite so often as the detectives seemed to get. Speakeasy saw every kind of customer, every sort of deal and covert op. And the type of person that came in for a tattoo varied a lot more than most people imagined. A lot more. Plus, he had the freedom to just take off. No, he was happy in his choice of profession.

"So, what's the word on Jocklan?" he asked, reaching over to snag his Irish coffee and take a sip. Mmmm, nice. He nodded sagely as Jim told him about the hustler's father, frowned a little in thought and then started tossing out ideas like a machine gun.

Boy, can he talk. thought Ellison, nodding encouragingly to keep the words flowing. Blair could talk the balls right off a bandicoot as the new detective, Megan Conner, would say. Jim wasn't sure what a bandicoot was, but Blair probably 'could' talk its balls off. He could certainly talk Jim's ears off sometimes. Jim had perfected the knack of letting the younger man's words wash over him while his subconscious sifted out the important stuff from hypotheses and speculations.

Bottom line in the end came to Blair didn't think Jocklan kept in touch with his old man. His 'sister' on the other hand...there was the link they'd been waiting for. By tomorrow Jim would have checked Blair's theory and most likely have a conviction. Who'd have thought the daughter of a high court judge would be the mastermind behind a group of blackmailing hookers. Too bad the murder had stopped her scam, it looked like it had been a good one.

"Hey, Chief." Jim interrupted Blair's recital of why high powered people often had their kids go wrong, smiling faintly at his 'yeah, what' look. "I think we've got what I came for. But, maybe not." He lent in a little closer and met Blair's eyes, searching them briefly. "What say we discuss it over dinner at Chence's, my treat. Then we can go back to my place to...talk it over some more."

Discussing the case was definitely not on Jim's mind and he hoped his look relayed that. He held his breath as he waited to see if the boy genius had picked up on his meaning.

Blair's mouth had dropped open in surprise. Ellison had actually invited him on a date! Hot damn! And unless Blair was mistaken, he'd been invited to a little something afterwards as well...

"Hm, depends." He said, trying to sound nonchalant as he noticed Jim tensing up expectantly. "What ya serving for breakfast?"

Jim exhaled at the gentle tease and quickly listed the courses of a full American breakfast that started with pancakes with syrup and ended with hash browns. Blair looked impressed, and slightly nauseous.

"Uh, I'll just stick with the pancakes, man. All that cholesterol - it's not good for you." Blair made a face.

Externally Blair looked calm and collected, internally this was not the case. Jim was willing to stop the circling round they'd been doing from day one, so it was time to face the inevitable. God, he hoped this didn't ruin everything. "Pick me up at seven." He said.

Six o'clock had seen one of Cascade's finest rip through his wardrobe and declare pitifully, and in great disgust, that he had nothing to wear. Eventually he'd tried on everything he did own and decided to go with the hounds tooth jacket and blue tie with dark dress slacks underneath, and after much debate, respectable white briefs under that. The yellow g-string would just have to wait for later.

Slicking back his already short hair, Jim ran one last critical eye over the loft. Good, he thought, everything was clean and tidy, ready to be trashed by two energetic men trying to reach the heights. Not that he was expecting...Who was he kidding? There was going to be sex tonight, and it was going to be great. No mystery there, Blair had said as much with his breakfast comment. It was what happened afterwards that had his mouth dry and hands shaking. Would Sandburg stay the night? Could their friendship transmute into the romance he wanted it to be?

Shit, could 'he' loosen up enough to let it happen? He wasn't sure, but by god, he was willing to give it a try.

He was way past willing by the time they got home. Dinner had been great, though he couldn't have said what he'd eaten. Blair had sparked like a forest fire, and for once, Jim had sparked right back at him. They'd played innuendo games with the food, Jim all but choking to death with what Blair did to the asparagus. He'd retaliated with a 'Tom Jones apple eating' routine on a bread roll, cracking Blair up so much he nearly fell off his chair.

The waiters had been glad to see them go. Much eye rolling had been going on in the kitchen, Jim was sure. He'd overheard numerous comments to the effect that new love should be banned from exhibiting itself in public. He'd had to grin at that.

Blair decided to distract them both on the way to the loft by trying to pry the secret of Jim's legendary coffee out of him. Tales of the lethal stuff keeping entire divisions of detectives awake on stakeouts abounded in the bullpen, and Blair declared he could flog the stuff off to overworked grad students. They had eventually arrived at 852 Prospect in a somewhat calmer frame of mind, Blair still pleading his caffeine's case.

Smiling, Jim led him up the stairs then opened the door to his home and let him through. Blair had never been invited up before, Jim hadn't trusted himself.

"Wow, you own this?" Blair took in the immaculate, somewhat barren loft, noting the stair that led to an upper bedroom for later navigation. He was impressed.

"All mine, the whole building. I just live here though, and rent out the rest."

Jim took off his jacket then retrieved Blair's from the couch where he'd thrown it and hung the two on the rack behind the door. Blair wandered from the balcony to the kitchen, making little humming noises as he went.

"Wow, this is totally awesome. You know, I could really do something with this place. I did an interior decorating course once, ya know.

Actually, I designed Speakeasy and Acquiescence myself. It was fun, but doing this place would be better."

Jim felt a little shiver of unease at the thought, Blair did have a pink Labrador statue he used as a hat stand in the tattoo parlor after all. But then, the café and Acquiescence were both extremely comfortable places to go to. This despite one of them being the regular staging ground for inflicting severe pain on its customers (and he wasn't talking about Blair's coffee).

"I could handle that. Want to be my interior decorator, Mr. Sandburg?" Jim drew close and slipped his arms around the shorter man's waist, smiling down into the blue eyes.

"Certainly, Mr. Ellison. My advice to you right now would be," he paused and searched the paler blue eyes looking down into his own. "to kiss me."

Never slow on the uptake that's just what Jim did. Gathering Blair in he moved to cover the lips he'd been dreaming about for weeks now. They felt velvet soft, hot and demanding on his own.

Blair balanced himself against Jim's solid form, busy hands pulling the tail of his shirt free and running under it to feel the curve of Jim's back. He was unable to stop himself admiring the smooth skin and wondering if Jim would ever let him use it as a canvas. Something along the Cascade badge idea he'd originally tried to talk him into, but intertwined with a more flowery script round the edge, maybe a name, some thing like, say, Blair.

"Upstairs?" He asked when they finally parted to breathe. Jim nodded and took his hand, leading him up to his bedroom. There, in the pale glow from a skylight, they made love. To both of their surprise, it wasn't the lust-crazed marathon they'd been anticipating, but a slow, passionate, heated merging. It lasted hours and was over too soon.

Afterwards, they lay entwined, glistening with sweat, panting for breath. The rumpled silk sheets on Jim's bed stuck to them in odd spots, making Blair smile as he pulled them off. "Jim?" his voice came husky in the dim light.

"Yeah?" Jim's voice was about the same, only it held a note of worry in it that wasn't entirely unexpected.

"There's something I've got to tell you." Blair slipped out of Jim's arms and sat up. The night felt suddenly chill now he didn't have the other man's heat to warm him. Sighing, he braced himself; he'd left this till last knowing that if the excrement hit the rotating blades, at least he'd have the good memories to take home with him.

Jim was sitting up now too, eyeing his bed companion warily. "What is it? Whatever it is, Blair, you can tell me." Jim's voice was steady and reassuring as the man himself, Sandburg felt sure that he 'could' tell him any thing.

Actually, Blair didn't tell him. He showed him instead. First, his eyes grew luminescent, still remaining eerily blue. Then a shimmer started in their center, it grew outward and spread backwards down and over his body. When it was finished Jim blinked, feeling a shift in the weight distribution across his legs.

A wolf sat on his bed, looking at him with intelligent blue eyes. Shit. Well, that explained the silver bullet on his choker. Blair truly loved to walk the edge.

The shimmer started up again, then it was Sandburg sitting on the bed, looking at him with worry in his eyes. Before Jim could speak, Blair shot up and began pacing the floor. In a monologue almost to rapid to follow, he outlined his father's family curse which affected the first born in every generation.

Jim tried to interrupt several times but Blair was determined to tell his story before he got kicked out. Ellison's words got run over by stories of old family power struggles, voyages by sea, infanticide, loyalty to the pack, betrayal and madness.

Nervous as hell, Blair finally reached the end of the story and turned back to the bed. He'd come to rest besides the stairs, a good thing as he now clutched its railing in shock. There, sitting on the bed, was a black panther. Silk sheets wrapped around its lower torso and for a moment Blair actually thought the cat had eaten Jim, but then the shock passed and his mind started working again.

The big cat slid off the bed and came to stand before him, flowing upwards in a dark stream that reformed itself into one self-satisfied cop.

"What's the matter, Chief? Cat got your tongue?"

"Uh..." Sandburg blinked, still trying to figure out what had just happened.

"Simon really is a dragon, you know." Jim said conversationally, reaching up to wrap his fingers in Blair's long hair. "He's about a hundred years old and can tell a wer at fifty paces. He picked you, but didn't let on. Not to Jack. Not to me, not even when he started up the new division at work. First all wer crime fighting unit outside of Europe."

Blair still looked a little lost so Jim kept speaking, hoping all the younger man needed was time.

"There's three wercoyotes, a bear, a tusked bore and a new girl over from Australia called Megan Conner who's a weredingo. You could say the lady's a real bitch."

"Hey!" Blair protested, giving him a half hearted thump. Jim's lips twitched, just the reaction he was hoping for. "Us pack animals stick together, Ellison, so leave off the dog jokes!"

"Pack animal, Chief?"

"Yeah, pack. It's good to belong to one. I haven't, not for years. But once a pack accepts you in and you go to them, that's it. We stick together, loyal to the end. Once we bond, we bond for life." His voice had lowered as he spoke, and Jim felt the last words all the way down to his toes.

"Bonding, Chief?" he asked irrepressibly, nudging Sandburg with his hip. Blair rolled his eyes, allowing himself to be corralled back towards the bed.

"So, ah, you were expecting me to be a wolf, then." Blair muttered as Jim lowered him down and began a slow and torturous exploration of his torso.

"Mmm, nope." Jim nipped at one of Blair's nipples, then pulled back to observe it. "From Simon and Jack's description of you three going fishing, I fully expected you to be a wereguppy." He grinned evilly and sank down on Blair's other nipple just in time to coincide with Sandburg's indignant squeak.

"Bastard." Blair growled, arching his back into the suction.

"Hmm, the wolf tattoo was a dead give away, Chief. And who but a werewolf would wear a silver bullet round his throat? Is it true only a silver bullet can harm you?" Jim contemplated the golden skin under his hands, trying hard to ignore the images of violence his mind conjured up for him.

"Almost, man. But we can be done in by sexual frustration, too. So, ah, if you could get back to what you were dooooooing..." Jim had.

A little later and Blair lay drawing circles on Jim's arm, an urgent question forming in his head. Seeing that Blair had recovered somewhat, Jim rolled over and covered his body with his own, kissing hungrily at the delicious neck, rubbing himself slowly over the lightly furred body. He found the lube tangled in the sheets and poured some out, moving lower on the bed as he did so.

"Uh, just one other thing, man. Before you ah, do what you, ah, have planned down there."

"Hurm?" Jim's reply was muffled, so Blair asked his question quickly.

"Is this wer thing, 'oh god'," he paused to recover from the sudden burst of pleasure, "is it, uh, what made your ex-wife leave?" Despite the rather nice situation he found himself in, Blair remained troubled. The last thing he needed was the former Mrs. Ellison deciding she could handle claw marks on the sofa after all and coming back to claim her man. "Did she freak at the, 'oh wow', the werecat thing?"

"Nope." Jim looked up at him with good humor sparkling in his eyes. "Actually, she was cursed at the same time I was, only she wasn't so lucky." He paused to lick at Blair's stomach, delighting at the way the muscles fluttered under his touch.

"So what did she become? Coyote, raven, uh, bear?" Blair craned his neck to see what Jim was doing, shivering when the cop's answer whispered along a sensitive part of his body.

"None of those. Caroline got the worst wer you can be." Finishing what he was up to Jim ran his hands along Blair's sides, scraping the skin lightly with his nails. He gave Blair's hips a little lift and the younger man obligingly brought his legs up and hooked his ankles into the curves at the top of Jim's muscular shoulders.

"What...oh...what w...was that?" Blair held on to his control by a thread.

"Weregoldfish." Came the reply, and sharp white teeth shone briefly, before Jim moved to descend on his speechless lover.

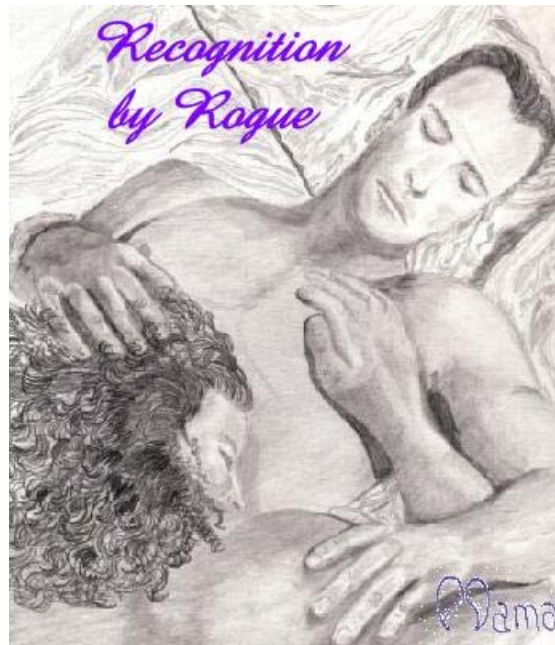
Oh My.



The End.

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Recognition



Recognition - Rogue

It's not easy being a cop's partner.

It's even less easy being in love with said cop, especially if that cop possesses heightened senses.

But it's worth it!

Okay, I suppose I should start at the beginning so this will make a smidgen of sense - oops. Pardon the pun. I can't seem to get away from those in this business.

Introductions first; I'm Blair Sandburg, anthropologist and Guide to the Sentinel of Cascade. Think that's not impressive? Try it sometime; guarantee you'll be wondering what the hell you've gotten yourself into. But it's a real thriller of a roller coaster ride. It's got those wussy rides - like The Mantis and the Magnum XL-200 - beat. Totally beat.

The sentinel-cop that I'm partnered with is one James Joseph Ellison, anal-retentive marshmallow with a twisted blue steel inner core and a surprisingly vulnerable heart. Please, don't ask me to list all of his contradictions; it'd take way too long. And speaking of long stories....

Let me tell you the story of how we ended up together. We met with a bang, he and I. Actually, he smacked into me while chasing a fleeing perp. I had stepped out of the door of the anthropological wing of the Cascade Natural History Museum. See, I consult there five days out of seven. It's one of the perks of my being the youngest professor on tenure at Rainier. Anyway, I had stepped out the door just as some guy had gone running past as though he were being chased by a pride of tigers with only one thing on their mind: lunch. Of course, being as

curious as I am, I'm gawking after this guy when I hear a shout of "GET OUTTA THE WAY!!" from the other direction. My head whipped around in time to see a wall of granite running at me and I only had time for one inane thought ("Granite walls can't **run!**") and then said wall plowed into me since I had chosen to ignore it's orders and stayed right where I was. I went down with heavy weight atop me, registering that none of it was fat, and then I was down.



When I woke up - well, what did you expect? Very stoppable object (my head), meets very immovable force (the concrete sidewalk). Hi. Pleased to meet you. NOT!

ANYway, when I woke up, I found this to-die-for-gorgeous man hovering over me, standing next to my bed. We looked at each other for a few moments and of all the things I **could** have said ("Who are you? Where am I? Why am I here?"), what I **did** say was: "You have the bluest eyes, man."

Those blue eyes blinked, nonplussed, and then that utterly sensual mouth opened and this rough, sexy, rolling purr of a voice spoke. "How are you feeling, Professor Sandburg? Do you want me to call the doctor?"

Let me tell you, my nerves tingled delightfully at the sound of his voice. However, once that sensation registered, another one quickly followed: **pain**. My head was **killing** me!

"Professor Sandburg?" the voice asked again, and it was the only nice thing happening to me at the moment.

"Uh, yeah. I'd like to see a doctor and I would love to have some aspirin. My head hurts," I said. I was puzzled by the subtle wince the man standing beside my hospital bed gave before turning to leave the room, presumably to fetch someone. I closed my eyes for what felt like only a moment, but I was shaken a few minutes later by a warm human hand and that voice calling my name.

"Mr. Sandburg? I have some aspirin for you."

I opened my eyes to see that the man was back. His hand left my arm and I felt such a profound sense of loss that I was surprised. I blinked, then waited as he raised the head of my bed carefully. A moment later, he handed me a glass of water that he'd collected and the aspirin and I swallowed them carefully. When I was done, he took the glass and set it on the hospital stand beside the bed.

"Thanks," I said. "Who are you and why am I here?" Questions I **should** have asked immediately, but wouldn't you know it....

"My name is Detective James Ellison. I'm the one who knocked you down outside the museum a couple of days ago," the tall, buff, gorgeous man said, his voice flat, his eyes wintry.

I winced. "Oh, man. I'm so sorry; I got right in your way. I didn't mean to, really - wait. When was this?"

"Two days ago, Mr. Sandburg. You've been out of it for a while. You hit your head pretty hard when you went down," the cop replied.

Then he did the most strange, amazing thing; he reached out and caressed first my temple, then my cheek, lightly with the back of his hand. He looked down at me and I saw the glacial eyes melt, soften with concern, and he asked quietly, "Are you all right? Really?"

"S-So far as I know, man," I stuttered, shocked at the heat leaping between us, the electricity crackling from my skin to his and back again.

I don't think he knew it, but I was having a fast internal argument with myself. Specifically, my libido. It went something like this:

ME: Knock it off!

Libido: I **would** if you'd give me some **help!**

ME: I didn't mean it like that! I meant **stop**.

Libido: Are you nuts? He's **perfect**.

ME: We're - I mean, I'M - in a hospital bed! I'm hurt! Now is not the time to start waving a certain flag, if you get my drift!

Libido: Buzzkill!

Fortunately for me, I managed to stave off any outward reactions because just then, the doctor appeared. Detective Ellison moved aside then, but he stayed in the room as the doctor, a matronly lady by the name of Barbara Jennings, went through the usual routine. Asked me how I was feeling, thanked Ellison for fetching the aspirin for me, told me I'd been out two days and while they **had** done a Cat Scan, the only thing I apparently had to show for getting knocked down was a bruised skull and a mild concussion. When she got to the point of mentioning me staying over another two nights at their lovely establishment in order to keep an eye on me, I balked.

"Uh, no. No thanks, Doc, but I'd rather go home if there's nothing really wrong with me," I said.

She frowned. "Mr. Sandburg, I advise against that. You need to be checked regularly through the evening when you sleep-

"Which solves one problem, I don't get a lot of sleep anyway," I said cheerfully.

"And I have it on good authority from some of your visitors that you regularly scorn the use of Western medicine **and** that you live alone," the doctor finished triumphantly.

"Hey, Doc, if it's a matter of getting someone to look after me for a couple of days, **no** problem, you know?" I said with a playful leer.

She gave me a half-amused, half-don't-try-my-patience look and said, "It's also the matter of knowing you will dismiss taking the painkillers I plan on prescribing. How do I know I can trust you to take them when every single one of your friends who has visited has assured me you'll flush them down the toilet the first chance you get?"

I had the grace to blush at that point. Before I could come up with my standard argument about holistic medicine versus western medicine, the detective spoke up.

"I can keep an eye on him for you, doctor. Swing by his place a couple of times a day. I'm going to need to take his statement about our accident anyway," Ellison said, stepping forward.

"You'll what?" I blurted, unable to believe what I was hearing.

The two of them ignored me. You wouldn't believe how incensed I was, too.

Jennings turned to Ellison. "Detective, are you sure it wouldn't be out of your way? Because I can write the paperwork to keep him here."

"Clearly, Doctor, he'll be miserable in here, which will hinder any progress in healing. No, it's not out of my way. Simple enough to do; I was a medic in the Rangers."

"Army?"

"Yes."

"Well, okay. Simple wake up routine every couple of hours for the first night and then getting him to take his meds for the next week. Then he'll need to come in for a check up."

"Sounds easy enough. What do you say, Sandburg?"

I had **plenty** to say.

"I think you're taking an awful lot for granted here, Detective. Who the hell put you in charge of me, anyway? Have I committed some crime that I'm unaware of? Am I under police protection? Or do you generally get off on adopting anthropologists who trip you up?"

Those eyes went glacial again and the voice followed along suit when Ellison looked at Jennings. "Doctor, would you excuse us for a moment, please? Go ahead and get his discharge papers and his prescriptions written up. We'll be along to collect them shortly."

Jennings had the nerve to smile at him. "Certainly, detective. I wish you good luck with him." Then she turned to me. "Mr. Sandburg, I expect you to listen to him and do the right thing. Take care of yourself, young man. And start getting more sleep!"

As she walked out of the room, pulling the door behind her, I remembered that I had told her I hardly sleep and I grimaced. One of these days, I'd learn to keep my big mouth shut.

Ellison snagged my attention by moving to stand very close to my bedside, leaning over a little so that he was crowding me in the most subtle of ways. I gulped and stared back at him, refusing to lower my gaze from his. I might have been bedridden at the moment, but I wasn't going to show him how intimidated I felt.

Something akin to respect crept into his blue eyes briefly, and then he growled at me. Well, that's what his voice **sounded** like when he spoke to me, I mean.

"Listen up, Sandburg. You fouled up my arrest attempt by getting in the way. Not only that, but **your** boss as well as my own is breathing down my neck for this. My boss for letting that guy get away - and believe me, he was a big fish that needed catching - and your boss is

yelling stuff like lawsuits for reckless endangerment."

I blushed at that point, mortified. "Oh, man. I'm **so** sorry. Chancellor Edwards **loves** money, man. She'll use any attempt she can to weasel some out of you if there's a chance. I'll swear to it in a court if need be that it was my fault, since I wasn't watching where I was going. Totally my fault. You couldn't have stopped in time to avoid the accident. I'm really, really sorry."

Ellison softened a little bit more and he reached out to pat my arm. "Relax, Sandburg. I know it, my boss knows it, and you'll let Chancellor Edwards know. I do appreciate your willingness to testify to that, though. Thanks. Now, then. Since I **did** knock you down hard enough to put you out for two days, you're going to **sort** of be under police protection. Mine. Edwards was right in one part of it; I was being a tad reckless. At least I wasn't driving, or so my boss thanks his lucky stars. I would like to keep an eye on you, partly to make up for putting you in here in the first place, and partly because I want to make sure you're **really** okay."

That was when I figured out a couple of his contradictions: stoic, tough, kind-hearted and generous. I'd seen the stoic and tough; he then showed me kind-hearted by wanting to make sure I was okay out of a genuine desire to do so, rather than avoid a lawsuit, and he showed me generous by offering to give up his spare time in order to do it.

So of course I said yes. I mean, come on! How much more intrigued did I have to be, really? I'm an anthropologist! I **study** people for a living! And I sure as hell wanted to study **him**! Yes, I'm leering. You would, too, if you had a Jim Ellison of your own (you can't have mine, so get that thought out of your head right now) to **play** with, if you get what I'm saying.

I had no idea, though, just **how** I would be studying him at that point in time.

He took me back home after I'd gotten checked out of the hospital and we'd picked up the prescription. He was driving a teal F-150. Comfortable ride, but I wanted my Corvair. More room to sprawl out in and do it with style, for one thing!

At any rate, his reaction to my choice of living space was, shall we say, less than impressed. Especially when the rodent trap snapped.

"What was that? Was that a mousetrap?" he demanded after we'd entered my warehouse. Well, technically, it isn't **mine**; I mean, I don't own the deed to it or anything, but I pay rent and I was allowed to fix it up into a living space however I wanted. Hey, it pays to have friends in the right places, you know? The rent significantly reduced, the wherewithal to spruce the place up any way I want, the heating system turned on and maintained for me ... yeah, it could be worse. What's a few rats here and there compared to that?

Jim, however, seemed to want an answer, pronto-like, so I gave it to him.

"Oh, no, no. Mice are, like, small and cute, but these ... these ... **these**...." And I held up my hands to show him I wasn't exactly exaggerating about the size of my flat mates. He was kind of skeptical, so I showed him the recent "catch of the day". It was fascinating to see a man who deals with blood and pain and death daily blanch at the sight of one li'l ol' rat ... okay, not so little. The size of a mature terrier, but still, not too bad. I've seen bigger and uglier. Not by much, but I have, so it counts.

He turned to look at me as I walked back towards my established living space. "How can you live like this?" he asked as he waved his arms around. I had claimed half of the warehouse to spread my stuff around and put up a sort of barrier to divide the rest of it off. The rats tended to obey that barrier, for some reason.

I refused to be daunted by his attitude. I grinned at him - as I recall, that seemed to irritate him for some reason - and said, "Where else am I going to get ten-thousand square feet for 850 a month?"

He blinked, then glanced around again. "Is this even zoned residential?"

"If it wasn't, my friend wouldn't let me live here. He's a straight-lace; is terrified of causing trouble or being involved in it."

"You know, this is **not** where I pictured a respected anthropology professor to be living," Jim muttered.

"Respected? By whom?" I asked, curious.

"Your students and friends all spoke highly of you when they showed up to visit. Some of the staff weren't surprised that you'd landed in the hospital and had a few words to say about that, but the rest of 'em were genuinely sorry for you and hoped you'd get better soon. Said you were a **great** teacher, really knew your material. A wonderful asset to the department." This was said with a wry grin.

"Yeah, well, I'm the youngest professor on staff. Even if I weren't, the ratio of respect to pay isn't based on age, really. It depends on the contributions you make to your chosen field and what sort of recognition you get for it. Therefore, since I've made plenty of contributions to my work but have only been recognized for my work with the Chopec, I won't see an increase in pay and benefits until I start doing more - hey, man, you okay? What's up?" See, Jim had gone bone white at that moment and I was a little alarmed.

He shook his head. "What was that about work?"

"Huh? You mean, the Chopec?"

"Yeah, that."

"Well, a few years ago, I was on an expedition to Peru and managed to get myself lost in the jungle. I had an excuse! Some wild cat was after me; a black jaguar. Chasing me. Didn't especially feel as though it were hungry, though; more like it was trying to **herd** me. Weird. Anyway, a few miles later, I get found by the Chopec, some of their warriors anyway. I managed to get the point across that I'd been running for my life from a black cat. It was really weird, 'cause they looked at each other - there were four of them - and seemed to **know** what I was talking about in this totally mystical way. So, I got taken back to the village and was cleaned and fed and then had a powwow with the tribe's Shaman, a great guy named Incacha. I knew enough of the local Peruvian dialect that we could converse with a mild degree of difficulty - they all laughed at my accent, though. Apparently, it stank very much bad. Well, I managed to tell Incacha what we were doing and so on and so forth. I ended up collecting a ton of information and then they took me back to the campsite. I waited until we got back to the states, though, before proposing an actual study by me for my dissertation. My advisors agreed and I went back down there and lived with them for a while. Got enough information to get my dissertation **and** to make waves with the Peruvian government. Apparently, wood and oil companies were encroaching on the forest pretty heavily and with the information I learned about the role the Chopec play in the ecological scheme of things, along with cultural history, well, it put a stop to the threat against the Chopec."

"Things ... are okay, then?" Jim asked at that point, and I noted he looked a little pained.

"Oh, yeah. Things are fine. In fact, Incacha was the proud papa of a baby girl by the time I left. He was over the moon, let me tell you. Apparently, six sons were enough for him and he wanted a little girl. Got her, too. His wife, Alidure, told him that seven children were enough and he'd have to put procreation on the backburner for a while - well, that was the gist of what she said, anyway. It was funny, now that I think about it. He agreed with almost comical reverence, man."

"I'm ... glad to hear that."

"Yeah. Know what was the most fascinating thing I heard about while I was there?"

"What?"

By then, I'd gotten kind of worried about the big guy. We'd settled on the couch, but I got up to get him a beer and make myself tea; not allowed to have any alcohol while on meds, which I had reluctantly yet dutifully elected to take.

"While I was there, I learned of the tribe's sentinel, although they called him **Sentinalme**. He was a stranger from another land, Incacha told me, but he was invaluable to them while he was there. Helped patrol their borders and flushed out the drug lords that had moved into the area, before his own people collected him again. Apparently, he'd gotten lost or left behind, depending on how you look at it. But it was amazing! I'd heard of sentinels before, you see. I wanted to do my dissertation on them, but could never find a subject. Wanna know what a sentinel is?"

He nodded wordlessly as I brought back our drinks and handed him his beer.

"A sentinel is someone who possesses five genetically enhanced senses. All of them - sight, sound, smell, taste, touch - heightened far beyond normal humans. Imagine being able to see for miles, hear for miles; smell and taste things that would be invisible to others; feel things to a depth of awareness that nobody else could. That's why sentinels were called the guardians of the tribe. The watchmen; it was their job to warn of impending dangers; to provide updates on weather and game patterns. To sense illnesses before they struck hard enough to decimate the tribe. See what I'm saying?"

Jim nodded at me again.

"Anyway, apparently I missed this sentinel by a year or so. His name was Enqueri and - Jim! Are you okay?" I asked frantically, because at that point, he dropped his beer bottle and it shattered all over the floor.

Then he really floored me.

Turning to me, he said, "Runasimita rimankichu?"

Which, in Quechua, meant: "Do you speak Quechua?"

I gaped at him, and he said, again in Quechua, "Allichu, runasimita rimankichu?" which translated to: "Please, do you speak Quechua?"

Swallowing hard, I replied, "Ari, rimanki Quechua. Pin kanki?" Essentially, I agreed with him that I spoke Quechua and then asked him who he was.

What he said next had me bolting to my feet and backing up, gaping like a fish.

"Enqueri sutiy."

"Qan ... qan..." I stuttered, before switching to English. "**You** are Enqueri?!"

"Ari. Mayman rinki, Blair?" he said quietly, getting to his feet.

"I ... I don't ... this is **too** freaky, man!" I yelled. I knew he had asked me where I was going, but at that point, I didn't have a flaming clue.

"Ama," he said quietly again when I backed away. He didn't want me to go.

I paused, then whispered at a sub-vocal level: "Speak English, man. I think faster in that language."

And he answered me!

"Whatever you want, Chief."

My head snapped up and I stared hard at him. "You heard me."

Okay, so it wasn't genius thinking, but **jeez**, you know??

He gave me this wry little grin. "Sentinalme sutiy. I **am** a sentinel, Darwin. Of course I heard you."

"Why are you ... how ... aren't you the teensiest bit freaked out right now?" I asked as calmly as I knew how.

Jim sighed and shrugged, and against my will, my eyes fasted on that muscular chest and those broad shoulders. Hey, I could be on my friggin' deathbed and I'd notice that body, okay?!

"I know I **ought** to be, Sandburg, but frankly, I'm a little tapped out right now," he growled. "May I explain?"

"I think you'd better, man, 'cause this is definitely getting beyond me."

"Fine. Sit down. Take your meds. Rimani, rimanchik. I'll talk, you'll talk."

I settled down and hastily swallowed my pills with a gulp of cooling tea as he sat back down on the couch. "So. Parlanki."

He grinned at me. "Thought you wanted it in English?"

I made a vague half-annoyed, half-get-on-with-it gesture at him and he began.

"Did you happen to see an article in a Newsweek magazine about an Army Ranger stranded in the jungles of Peru for 18 months and then rescued by the Army, finally?" he asked me.



I thought hard and finally remembered. I **had** read about it, five years ago. Nodding, I looked at him and saw a ragged bandanna and dirt and stubble superimposed over his current visage. It was odd, but the eyes were too similar from the picture I had seen way back then and the ones I was looking at, at that moment. Too lost, too weary, too confused, too lonely.

Apparently I saw too much because I **swear** a shield went over those blue, blue eyes and his emotions were suddenly blocked from me. I cursed at that; the man had far too much practice at doing so to be that efficient. I didn't like what that implied as to his past and present emotional status, but I didn't pursue it.

Instead, I looked at him. "That was you, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "That was me. My chopper was shot down because my team and I had been sold out. I was the only survivor of the wreck. Came close to there **not** being any survivors. I had been injured and the cuts were infected. I was found by Incacha and some of the other Chopec. Yes, the same Incacha you met. He nursed me back to health and I repaid the debt by teaching them how to defend themselves against the guerillas in the region. We drove out the drug lords and mercenaries and kept them out. Then the Army brought me home."

I was utterly fascinated and was hanging on his every word. He and I had known the same Shaman and tribe? **Too cool!**

He'd seen my eagerness, that was for sure. Hell, once it really started to sink in that he **was** a sentinel, I realized that it would've been impossible for him to miss!

Grinning, he continued. "Before I was rescued, however, we had lots and lots of talks. Several of them centered around my guide."

"Your what?"

"Guide. The person who would be by my side; my mate. The one who would teach me about being a sentinel; how to be a sentinel."

"I get it now. Richard Burton - the explorer, not the actor - who first learned of sentinels and brought his findings back to the modern world, he mentioned that the watchman had someone to guard his back, to help keep him from zoning out. But it sounds to me like you know how to be a sentinel; that Incacha taught you how to be one."

He shook his head. "Incacha was a stop-gap guide, for lack of a better phrase. He was not destined to be **my** guide. I was to come home, he had to stay there. He knew my guide was out there, though. Knew we'd find each other. Said that we would both know. Told me that when I met the Wolf, I will have found my mate. That I, the Panther, would know."

I froze. Panther? **Black** panther? Wolf? Like the one I sometimes dreamed of?

Jim tilted his head a little and his eyes dropped to my chest. I got the feeling that he wasn't visually undressing me and I was proved right a moment later when he said, "Your heart sounds like it's about to jump right out of your chest. What's wrong, Chief?"

"The panther you mentioned ... black jaguar, right?" I asked, my voice quavering.

He nodded.

"Incacha ... when I told him I had been chased by one, he smiled at me and said that the Panther was not here, meaning there in Peru. He ... said **the** Panther; not **a** panther, but **the** Panther, with a capital 'P'! He was talking about **you**, wasn't he?!"

Jim smiled at me and my heart wasn't the only thing leaping about then.

"Ari ... um, yes. Sorry about that."

"S'alright. So, if **you** are the Panther ... and how did you get that name, anyway?"

"My animal spirit, according to Incacha, is a black jaguar. Actually, I've seen him a couple of times, but it's been a while since the last sighting. So, that's why I'm called 'the Panther'. And the black jaguar that was chasing you in Chopec territory was probably my animal spirit."

I was silent for a moment, trying to absorb all this. Never let it be said that I'm stupid, however, because it wasn't long before I came to a conclusion that both thrilled and terrified me. "**I'M** your guide?!"

Jim shrugged nonchalantly but his fiery blue gaze was anything but. "Maybe. My guide - my **mate** - is supposed to be the Wolf."

"I dream about a wolf," I whispered before I could stop myself, and shivered when he sat up straighter and his eyes burned brighter. I licked my lips nervously, and his eyes dropped to my mouth.

"Sumaq simi," he said softly, telling me that he thought my mouth was beautiful.

I went hot and looked at him intently. "Jim ... munawanki?" I said, asking him if he wanted me.

His eyes were so hot when he looked into mine. So hot and powerful. "Ari." Just that one word, but it was guttural and full of want and I had no doubt that he meant it.

But when I offered myself a moment later, opening my arms with a smile, he shook his head and sat back away from me.

Talk about confused! I must've had question marks exploding out of my scalp like some kind of cartoon character, because he grinned at me and said, "Calm down, Sandburg, and I'll explain things."

I nodded and with great effort, kept my mouth shut. It's got this tendency to run away from me sometimes; just ask any of my friends, they'll tell you I can't shut up to save my life.

Nodding approval, Jim was silent for a long moment. He started out with a non-sequitor. "You know, that was one of the things I missed most in the jungle; cold, tasty beer. The Chopec stuff tastes for shit."

"Tell **me**," muttered.

He smirked. "Hit you hard, did it?"

I smirked back. "Q'echa onqoywanqa kashani," I spat, telling him the Chopec's version of beer gave me the shits.

He laughed at that point. Threw back his head and roared with it.

Apparently, he knew exactly what I was talking about.

His laughter got me going, so I joined in. After all, it **had** been somewhat amusing, the contortions I went through trying to keep from shitting myself sometimes.

When our laughter finally died out, he grinned over at me. "How many times?"

I shrugged, grinning. "Only six. Once I mistook it for water and chugged down half a jug before the taste really seeped in. When it did, I immediately ran for a latrine hole and squatted. Not two minutes later, I was practically disemboweling myself with the force of it! I wised up, though, and refrained from drinking anymore. Love the buzz that came after the crap, but the crap was too much."

Jim laughed at me ... asikun (he laughed at me). He then surprised me into nearly falling off the sofa. "For me, it was chunka is kayniyoq ... twelve. I couldn't leave well enough alone. It was like catnip to me. I spent quite a lot of time bathing as the result, but it was sort of worth it. Especially when I found out that by concentrating hard, I could ignore the taste of it."

"You'd end up bathing a lot anyway, with your sense of smell," I murmured absently.

He nodded. "Yup. So, here's the thing. My senses have recently come back on-line; like a week ago. Not too long before I met you. I'd gone camping for the weekend and boom! Suddenly, everything was louder, brighter, a lot more intense. Should've caught too **many** fish, but the sudden reappearance of my senses **hurt** so I didn't catch squat."

"I can imagine."

"No, you can't. But you might be able to help. Here's the way I see it. There's too many coincidences here between us. We've both met the Chopec; we've both met Incacha. We both know about sentinels. I **am** a sentinel. **You** dream about a wolf, I am the Panther. My mate is supposed to **be** 'the Wolf'. You're a **teacher**. I **need** a teacher. You're fascinated by sentinels; I'm right here. And unless I'm mistaken, I turn you on as much as you turn me on, which is very. Does this add up for you the same way it does for me?"

I nodded eagerly, licking my lips again. He closed his eyes and tightened his jaw, which gave me a little thrill. He wanted to kiss me, but was forcing himself to hold back. When he opened his eyes again, his look was incendiary and I wanted to rip off my clothes to put out the fire. Or maybe fan the flames. Either way...

"Try not to do that anymore," he grumbled, and I knew what that meant. I nodded agreement and waited for the rest of it.

"Now here's the kicker, Chief. My guide has to be by my side almost constantly in order to help me. I'm a **cop** and I'm not ready to stop being one yet. Point of fact, I'm getting transferred out of Vice and into Major Crime which, believe me, is a wonderful step upward for me."

"I believe it. From what I hear, Vice is nasty business."

"It's the ninth level of **Hell**, Sandburg. The things I see; the things I **do**..." he whispered harshly, and I couldn't hold off anymore.

Scooting close, I lightly lay one hand over top one of his. He looked at me quickly and I said with absolute assuredness, "Not anymore, Jim. Things are getting better; **will** be better. I'll help you!"

Quicker than I could blink, I was scooped up in a firm hug against him. His face was mere inches from my own, and we shared breath. "Really, Sandburg? You're not blowing smoke, here ... you truly mean what you say? You'll be my guide?"

"Yes. I want this. I want you. I want to learn about you and learn for you and keep you safe," I grunted, wrapping my arms around him.

"It means you'll have to work with me in my world as well as your own," he said quietly, trying to give me an out as he wound his fingers into my hair.

I didn't **want** an out. Everything I wanted in a mate and as an anthropological mystery was right there in my arms. I'd rather be tied down and forced to listen to Barry Manilow **and** be tickled for hours on end with no relief in sight than give up what I had right then.

"I **know**, Jim. I know working with you is probably going to be dangerous. I'm prepared to accept that. I ... I probably shouldn't say this, but I've known I was empty, was missing the other half of my soul, for a long, long time. And when I saw you, and being with you now, I know that other half is **you**. Please, please don't make me give you up now! I'd rather die!"

He squashed me in a fierce hug, then. "No! No dying, never. I won't think that. Ever. You're sure, Blair?"

He'd said my name and oh, the chills of pleasure it gave me! Rough, rolling purr and a whisper of silk combined in one that was my name coming from his lips. Already hard, I nearly came just from hearing it even as I gave him my word. "I'm sure, Jim. I'm **so** sure. I refuse to cut my hair, but I'm with you all the way, one hundred percent!"

He laughed joyously at that and then I went out of my mind because he kissed me. That sensual mouth was on my own and my brain fried in that one moment. We were both reduced to our primal instincts in that moment, I think. The next time I consciously thought for myself, we were both naked and on my bed, the futon spread out into a full mattress, and he was kneeling between my spread legs.

"Sumaqnki," he whispered, telling me that I was beautiful.

"Sumaqnki," I repeated, reaching up to trace his face lightly before bringing my fingers and palms down over his neck, shoulders, and chest.

He purred at that, which made **me** purr, although not nearly as well as him. What'd you expect? Him cat, me dog. Meow, bowwow. Of course, there was some howling and yowling thrown in as well, but that came later, along with the rest of us.

(You know, I never used to be this ribald until I met him. He says he can live with it. I hope so, since he started it!)

After some more mutual petting and animal noises, Jim kissed me again, deeply, passionately, then lay down fully atop me. I wrapped my arms around him to hold him tighter to me; he felt so darn good. I vaguely recalled that he was supposed to be taking my statement, not my tonsils, but I really couldn't complain about the way he was going at it. Talk about taking my statement directly! Oh, well. About the time his hands cupped my buttocks and pulled our groins together, I wasn't thinking about much else except getting his cock in my ass and coming harder than I ever had in my life. We kissed frantically, mouths wet against each other, hot and wet against the flesh of throats and shoulders and chests. I nearly bucked us both off the bed when he latched onto my pierced nipple and played with it delightfully. I swore some filthy things at him, but it only inspired him to greater tricks. I still haven't decided, even after all this time, if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

We rolled on the mattress, rubbing and stroking tenderly, passionately. I licked sensuously at his nipples, he nipped at mine, until we were both near sobbing with arousal. It didn't take much, really. Just a look from him is enough to turn me into an unrepentant slut. (He says he can live with that, too.)

"Look at me, Chief," he pleaded in a wonderfully breathless way, and I opened eyes I hadn't known I'd closed. When they were open, he asked, "Moving too fast for you?"

I shook my head frantically. If he stopped now, I was sure I'd be heartbroken. "No. I've waited so long for you."

He smiled. "Me, too, munakusqa."

My eyes widened. He'd called me his beloved. "Munakusqa," I breathed back.

His grin was nearly incandescent and it made me feel lighter than air and stronger than King Kong.

Then he lowered his head once more and began to trail kisses down my waiting body. I sighed happily and he moved his body to accommodate his actions. Sliding down between my hard, hairy thighs, he placed burning kisses there. I shivered hard when his hands slipped beneath my buttocks and then up around my hipbones for a steady grip, and then I whimpered in anticipation when I felt his hot, moist breath nearing my erection. He nuzzled me, glanced up, and before I knew it, he'd taken three inches of my dick into his hot, wet mouth.

I quivered and bucked, shouting, but he held me down as he licked and suckled me. When I felt my orgasm starting in my balls, he must have too, because he left off sucking me with a near obscene slurp and began licking lower. He bathed my balls for a few moments before moving to my waiting hole.

I really have no words to describe what happened next. All I was aware of was intense pleasure as something hot, slick, and flexible drove me flaming bonkers.

It wasn't long before I was yelling for more.

"I want you inside of me!" I begged, doing my best to ride down on that hot tongue. "I can't take anymore, man, please! Come inside me!"

With a chuckle, he raised himself over me. "Allin apakunki," he whispered, telling me that I begged so well.

I proved it by using body movements and hot words to entice him as best as I could.

Apparently, it was well enough.

I'd barely had time to whisper that a tube of lube would be in my desk drawer along the far wall before he was gone, leaving me naked and wide open to the air and his gaze, which I now knew could see well enough from the far wall. Two seconds later, he was back, kissing me hungrily, and I got the shock of my life.

He was kneeling above me and reaching behind **himself** with well-lubed fingers.

"Wh-what?" I stammered.

"I want this," he said harshly, though a tiny smile twitched at his mouth. "I want to give this to you; to have this from you."

"But - but then why-" I asked, trying to ask why he had bathed me with his tongue if he were not going to take me then.

"To let you know that I intend to take that sweet hole at some point in the very near future," was the heated reply. "And to give you pleasure. You did like it, didn't you, Chief?"

I smiled, reaching up to stroke his chest and belly, watching as his fingers probed deeper inside himself in reaction to the petting. "Yeah, Jim. I liked it. I liked it a **lot**, man."

"Good. That means you can return the favor some time." A slight pause. "If you want to."

"If I want to...? You **must** be joking. More like when **won't** I want to. The answer to which is never." I gave him my sassiest grin and got one in return. Yowza, but the man is pretty!

But don't let him hear you say that. "Pretty", evidently, shouldn't be used to describe him. If I told you what he **does** think describes him, you'd puke. So, see, I'm doing you a favor, trust me.

Finally, he was ready and I was slicked up. He lay down atop me again and we kissed for a while, and then he rolled so that I straddled him. I lifted myself up and shifted so that I knelt between his thighs. He lifted and spread his legs so I could have easier access and I nearly came at the sight of his wet hole waiting for me.

"Oh, man," I whispered. "Where have you been all my life...?"

"Waiting for you, Chief. Now come **in** here, please! I've waited long enough!" he demanded, and pulled me closer.

I leaned down to kiss him as I fitted myself to his entrance, then slowly pushed. For a moment I was afraid I wouldn't go in, but in the next moment, he relaxed so much that I was halfway inside before I quite knew what was happening. When I did, I groaned deeply and he groaned back, our breath mingling as our tongues and lips and teeth did.

I slid deeper and deeper inside until finally, my balls were resting against his ass and he was making these delicious sounds of hunger, his hips already jerking minutely beneath me as he tightened reflexively around me.

I groaned again. "Jim, if you don't stop that, this is gonna be over whether either of us likes it or not."

"Then I suggest," he purred in that voice of his, "that you **move**, Chief."

Which I did. With vigor.

Bracing my hands on either side of his head, I lowered my mouth to his and kissed him for all I was worth as I began to ride him. His legs wrapped around my waist of their own volition and I pumped into him with deep, lingering strokes before I began to gain speed and strength.

He gasped out what might have been my name, but I wasn't the one with sentinel hearing. What I **was** certain of was that he was loving every moment of it, if his reactions could be judged accurately. His hips jerked up to meet mine, he held me close, and he just about sucked my tongue out of my head. If that **wasn't** enjoyment, I'd hate to see diffidence or even dislike.

As I began moving faster and harder, he pushed me away slightly and we both gulped in breaths of air. He looked up at me, his features wreathed in pleasure, and I gazed back as he gasped, "Yes ... yes, Chief! Sweet, **so** sweet! More, oh more, please!"

"Yeah!" I shouted, my hips moving like greased lightning. "Yeah! Jim! Yes, Jim, yes, you can have it. You can have **me**! Right now, oh, yeah!"

I was amazed at this, frankly. I had never been this verbal during sex before. I can't speak for him, but when I have sex, my brain kind of sidelines it and shuts down for a little while. I'm lucky if I can get out even the most basic Anglo-Saxon words. Maybe it was because I was going into it - into him - with **every** part of me? Because I was. I was giving him all of me: heart, body, soul, and mind. I'd finally found him, not knowing he was what I had been searching for. But I had found him, and every part of me was his.

He groaned beneath me as though he was dying, but I knew he wasn't. There was pure lust and aching hunger in each note of that groan and it drove me near crazy. I shuddered hard when I heard him mutter, "Yeah, babe ... god, I can **feel** you pulsing inside me. Feels so **good**, please, **please**, don't ever stop, never, ever...."

I was loving it, too. Didn't ever want to stop these glorious sensations cascading through me. But as much as I loved the fucking, as much as I loved loving him, each thrust was bringing us closer to the end, especially when I shifted and began stroking over his prostate. And I thought I'd seen reaction before! Hah! When I stroked his little pleasure nub, he thrashed about like a Bronco on speed.

I wish I could say I was made of sterner stuff than most men, but I'm afraid not. When he bucked, clenched hard, and shrieked my name, I was a goner.

Leaning down again, I gave him a lusty, frantic kiss, which he returned, and then I leaned up again and my hips moved in short, sharp jabs, pushing deep inside him, glorying in the feeling of his sheath folding warm and wetly around that most sensitive part of me. "Jim, Jim!" I yelped at the ceiling. "I'm not ... I can't ... too **sweet** ... not gonna last!"

He let out an anguished sound, hunger and lust mixed together, and then reached between us and took himself in hand. He jacked roughly, quickly, and my eyes riveted to the sight of his penis slipping in and out of his own fist as I plowed deeply and roughly into his tight channel.

When he went rigid beneath me, I finally lost control of myself. I closed my eyes, let my head fall back, and howled a blood-curdling wail as I gave myself over to the coming and slammed into him, digging myself as deep as I could go, my semen spurting hotly from my dick. Over and over and over, until I was almost afraid I would never stop coming, and dreading the moment I would.

I heard a deep-throated yowl from somewhere below me and intense pressure squeezed my cock. I barely felt the splash of his come coating our bellies and chests before I passed out atop him, slumping down to cover him.

We awakened much later to eat, neck a little, love again, nap again. We woke up again, he put in a call to his captain, and then we snuggled together in our nest on the futon mattress.

I lay curled in the shelter of one of his arms, my head pillowed on a broad shoulder as I slowly petted his broad, muscular chest. His skin felt like velvet, with that hard muscle beneath. For one moment, I had male envy, but he let me know that he appreciated my own muscular chest, though smaller in stature it was.

After a while, I asked, "Will you tell me about your time with the Chopec? How you came to be with them, I mean?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?" I pressed.

"I don't want to. That time is full of ... qhate sonqo yuyarina. Bittersweet memories. It hurt that I lost my team to a few traitors I should have been able to trust. Maybe someday, Chief, I'll tell you about it. Right now, though, I don't want to talk about it."

I nodded. "All right. So, what do we do about getting me in as your partner? I've got this thing about guns, man. Don't like them at all."

He glanced down at me and grinned. "Neo-hippie witchdoctor punk," he said with fond amusement.

"Bet your ass," I replied promptly.

"Nah. I'm fond of this ass."

"I am, too."

"This I know. Believe me, I know."

I sat up at that, draping myself over his chest so I could look into his eyes with worry. And why not? I may have only just met this man, but I already knew he had my heart, and I had his. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Jim smiled that heart-melting smile at me and shook his head. "Nah. I'm a little sore, maybe, but it's a good sore. Settle down, simisapa."

I blinked. "Blabbermouth? You called me **blabbermouth**?"

"Uh-huh."

"**Why**?"

"Cause that brilliant brain of yours never shuts up and your mouth is attached right to it."

I shrugged. "So I have a phaqsqa osq'on; big deal. But ... do you really ... my talking bothers you?"

I was instantly turned to cuddle him, his arms wrapping around me. I snuggled into the heat of him, enjoying myself immensely.

"Chief, there's something you need to understand. Before we ran into each other - okay, before **I** ran into **you** - I've been alone. I live alone, don't have many friends, don't get out much unless I'm on a case. I'm not **used** to someone who talks as much as you do. But that doesn't mean I **won't** get used to you; doesn't mean it bothers me. It's something I need to get used to, but it's a part of you. And I know this has happened fast, but I do love you, already. We're soulmates, just as Incacha said we'd be. He was right when he said I'd recognize you. I never would have gone to bed with you this quickly otherwise."

I smiled and snuggled closer. "I know, Jim. I know exactly what you mean." I yawned then and said sleepily, "Hold me? Feel so warm, so safe, here."

He knew I meant that I felt that way in his embrace. His arms tightened around me as he whispered, "Always hold you, munakusqa. Always. Noqa waylluni. Now sleep, baby."

"Noqa waylluni, munakusqa," I whispered back, and then went to sleep.

And a couple years later, here I am. Anthropologist and Guide to the Sentinel of Cascade.



I'm also a consultant who rides along with Jim in the Major Crime unit. In no small part due to me, I'll be quite frank, I managed to smooth out any ruffled feathers and rough patches that Jim and his new captain, a big black teddy bear of a grumpy man named Simon Banks, would have hit. They're both friends now and Jim has managed to create friendships with the other officers in the bullpen.

I've carved out a niche for myself as well. There were quite a few officers in the whole PD who were openly unhappy about my presence, especially after I moved in with him. But between Jim and myself - and a few close calls in which I did my very best to save a fellow officer's bacon (read: Ellison) - I have sort of endeared myself to most of them. There are a few diehards, but that's to be expected. Can't please everyone all of the time, only some of them. Abraham Lincoln; very wise man. Shame he was killed.

There've been a few hairy spots during our career together. And some spectacular fights. Jim isn't one to open up and talk easily and I do nothing but. However, we know for a fact that we love each other, that we would die for the other, and that never will we abandon or betray the other. So, when we fight, the make-up sex can be some blistering hot, let me tell you!

Other than that, though, we seem to be doing alright. I've put him through test after test - which he has bitched about quite articulately - that has led to making significant inroads on discovering what his abilities can do. Those discoveries have come in handy a few times in his cases, at which point he'll thank me very nicely. I do **mean** nicely, too. And I've come a long way in learning my own abilities as his guide. And all I can say is that it's nice to be needed so deeply by this one man who gives off the vibe of needing no one.

So, all in all, we're doing pretty well. Anything else that comes our way, we'll just have to-

"Chief?"

"Uh ... yeah, Jim?"

"What're you doing, babe?"

"Being nibbled on by a horny sentinel?"

"Besides that."

"Mmmmm ... oh! Uh, nothing, really."

"Well, then, close up shop and come to bed."

"At 8:30? Jim, it's not **that** late, man."

"No, Sandburg, I mean come to **bed**."

"Oh ... oh! Right! Gotcha!"

"You'd better. I want to be the one inside tonight, Chief."

Well, I've said what I had to say. Good night, good luck, you're on your own! I have some serious loving to attend to.

"Whoa! Chief! Blair, don't run up those stairs so fast, okay? I don't want you to slip and ... and ... aw, God, you're stripping. You know I'm a sucker for stripping and ... ooh, playing with yourself ... right. I'm coming!"


"Bet your ass you are."

"Chief, we've been over this."

We sure have. And we'll do it again, too.

I **love** my job!

THE END

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 Strangers by Night


Strangers by Night - Rushlight

Blair huddled deeper into the thigh-length thickness of his heavy coat and pressed back against the chill wall of the building behind him, trying to ignore the steady pounding of his heart. The lingering scent of baked pastries and bread dough caught his attention, leaking through a nearby window, and his traitorous stomach gave an absent-minded grumble, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since early that morning. He ignored it with an effort, turning his attention to the street around him. The normally negligible weight of his ever-present backpack felt like a stone strapped to his back, weighing him down, and he shifted the thick strap across his shoulder impatiently.

Around him, the street glistened under the streetlamps with a silvery sheen, wet with the rain that had fallen earlier that evening, and it reflected the brilliant crimson and white lights of the occasional cars that passed by in a glittering mosaic of refracted brilliance. Everything around him was painted silver on black, moonlight on shadow, touched with the faintest glimmering of color where the streetlights bled across the scene in front of him. It never ceased to amaze him how even the most thickly populated metropolis could exude a certain aestheticism, after the light had faded and the streets were cloaked in a concealing layer of darkness. Tonight, however, it made him think of nothing so much as midnight in the city of the damned. He could still hear the insistent footsteps of the pursuers who followed him, and he inwardly cursed as he realized that he hadn't lost them after all.

It seemed that youth and cleverness were no match for stubborn determination, after all.

Fighting back the growing flutter of fear that insisted on settling next to the ache of hunger inside his stomach, he pushed away from the wall of the bakery and made for the gaping black entry of an alley that yawned open about twelve feet away. His footsteps seemed to echo around him as he ran -- **too loud**, he chastised himself harshly -- and he bit back the bitter and unwelcome sting of tears as he swooped into the shadowed expanse of the narrow crevice between the buildings without stopping to catch his breath. There was no way he could outrun these bastards in the open streets; his only chance was to find a place to go to ground until they decided to give up the chase.

As soon as he got a good look at the haven he'd chosen, Blair realized that he'd made a terrible mistake. There was no exit from the alley at the far end -- it ended in a solid brick wall, where the buildings to either side converged in some heretofore unanticipated amalgamation of architecture that seemed deliberately Machiavellian in his current state of mind.

Shit.

He nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of scuffling footsteps behind him, blocking off his only route of escape; he hadn't expected them to be so close behind him. Clenching his fists, he turned, refusing to look intimidated by the six or seven shapes that ranged out in front of him, backlit by the lights from the street. He tensed immediately, sensing instinctively the subdued air of menace that seeped into the alleyway ahead of them like a cloying fog.

"Hey, guys," he said, relieved that his voice wasn't shaking. He pushed his hair back away from his face with one hand, affecting an air of forced casualness; the hand, unfortunately, was shaking. He glanced back and forth between the tall shapes nervously. "Fun's fun, all right? You've proven you're the biggest, baddest badasses in Cascade. Let's just call it a night, what do you say?"

"Fucking cocksucker," the largest one of the group said by way of reply, moving further into the alley until the light from the streetlamps was eclipsed behind him, casting Blair into what seemed a mile-long shadow. This particular Neanderthal looked as if he had been carved

from a solid slab of granite; he was in his late teens, massively built, with a thick neck and a shaved head. From some of the conversation he'd overheard earlier, Blair had learned that his name was Nick; it seemed an innocuous name for such an irrefutable asshole.

The other boys spread out around him, flanking Nick to either side and fixing Blair with decidedly unfriendly gazes -- there were six of them altogether, each several years older than he was. They seemed more than content to let their leader do all the talking, and merely lend the uncompromising intimidation of their presence. Blair barely caught a glimpse of heavy dark clothes and the fleeting flash of bright gang colors before the light disappeared behind them, morphing them into a horde of half-seen shadows.

"Fucking **faggot**," Nick continued, and his voice was angry now, ugly, filled with loathing and bitter contempt. Blair flinched at the word despite himself, remembering the numerous other occasions in his life when he'd heard that particular epithet flung at him. "You think you're so hot, wagging your ass through my city, fucking whoring on the street corners..."

"That's not true!" Blair exclaimed hotly, unable to help himself. He skittered back a few steps reflexively, tensing. "I was just ... I didn't..." His heartbeat was **racing** now, his pulse thundering in his ears, and his breath rasped shallowly with each anxious breath he took. The air seemed to crackle with impending violence, chilling his skin and causing the hairs to stand up rigidly along the back of his neck.

It was no secret that the streets were a dangerous place for someone like him to live -- he was too young, too pretty, and too clever by far to fit easily into the natural order of things. Add to that the fact that he was gay and obviously unable to hide it convincingly, and what he had was an explosion waiting to happen. It seemed strange in these so-called enlightened times that "gay" could be considered synonymous with "whore", as if by having an atypical sexual preference he was immediately classified as a societal deviant. Never mind that the only crime he was guilty of was being caught gazing in appreciation at another boy, and being far too vulnerable to defend himself from the consequences. It was the same old story, ad nauseam -- only the players changed.

Fighting back the tears that burned insistently at his eyes, Blair backed further into the darkness that pooled like spilled ink between the buildings, his stomach clenching. He was shivering, and he found himself wishing fervently that they'd just get it over with already. It wouldn't be the first beating he'd gotten in his lifetime, but he was desperately afraid that these clowns wouldn't be content to leave it at that. There was something deeply disturbing about the sheer single-minded determination with which they'd tracked him down tonight, as if they were mortally offended by his very existence in the universe and felt it was their sworn duty to teach the long-haired hippie teenage punk street-kid a lesson he would never forget.

He was afraid that they were going to kill him.

Suddenly, there was nowhere left to back up to. Shit, shit, **shit**. Blair let his backpack slide from his shoulder to thump on the ground next to the dumpster at the end of the alley and straightened slowly, letting his arms fall to his sides in a pathetic attempt to limber up for the coming tussle. Fuck, but he wished that he knew how to fight. Maybe it would be better to just let it happen, not fight back, and not risk pissing them off any further by resisting. But he had never been one to just stand idly by and let others abuse him, no matter what the circumstances. And he sure as hell wasn't going to beg, either. He figured that these jokers would get a real big laugh out of that, right before they kicked his teeth in.

He ducked the first swing more from reflex than anything else, and the sheer overabundance of adrenaline that was pumping through him gave him the speed he needed to land a blow of his own. One of the shadows that surged around him spun away with a harsh grunt, clutching at its face, and Blair felt a momentary spike of exhilaration before the rest of the shadows converged on top of him.

The sudden flurry of motion and fury that erupted around him made it seem as if there was a legion of adversaries ranged against him instead of only half a dozen. The first blow hit him across the ribs, making him double over in agony, and then a second followed through across the side of his face, half-blinding him with the pain of it. Blair fell to his knees, gasping, just as a third blow caught him across the backs of the shoulders, sending him pitching onto his side on the ground. After that he lost count, as he wrapped his arms around his head and settled himself in to just **endure**, and the pain flared and spread within him like a living thing, blow after blow after blow, and they were laughing now, damn them, laughing as they kicked at his writhing form, shouting obscenities at him and urging each other on with harsh cries and dark invectives, fury feeding the fire of their bloodlust until nothing in all the world was real for Blair except the pain.

It ended unexpectedly. He was peripherally aware of the fact that an unfamiliar voice had cut through the fray, but still, it took him several moments to realize that the beating had stopped as abruptly as it had begun. He tentatively raised his head from the folded cocoon of his arms, blinking rapidly against the flare of light at the end of the alleyway as he tried to figure out just what in the hell was going on. These bastards hadn't exacted near enough punishment to assuage the sheer naked **fury** that seethed within them, and he was wary of this seeming break in their focus on him.

It was difficult to tell what was happening, what with the darkness and the close quarters and the insistent pounding in his skull, but he thought he could make out a tall figure standing just inside the far end of the alley. Like a pack of wild dogs, Blair's attackers were circling towards the newcomer in uncertain appraisal, trying to determine whether he constituted a threat to them.

"Whatcha doin', boys?" the stranger inquired casually, and Blair's heart leaped as he noticed that the man held a handgun in a rather convincing two-handed grip at shoulder level, the perfect picture of righteous retribution falling down on those who dared oppose it. There was something about the guy that just screamed **cop!** to Blair, and his pulse raced as he considered the implications of it.

"Fuck off," Nick responded pleasantly, and Blair had to bite back a snort of near-hysterical laughter at the seeming normalcy of the conversation. *Excuse me, sir, could you please step back and let us finish murdering the hippie gay Jew in peace? Thank you.*

It was difficult to see in the shadows that cloaked the alley, but Blair could almost believe that the stranger smiled. He was a big man, broad-shouldered, with hair cut short, maybe twenty-five years old. He didn't appear to be intimidated in the least. "Detective James Ellison," he said, just as pleasantly. "Cascade PD. You do realize that hate crimes aren't exactly encouraged in this city, don't you?"

"Shit," one of the boys behind Nick muttered, bouncing nervously. "Cops, man." The others looked none too pleased with this discovery, either.

"Fuck that." This appeared to be Nick's all-time favorite word in the English language. "He's no cop. Cops don't work alone, and they're not going to care what happens to a runaway faggot kid that nobody cares about." He seemed to be trying to bolster his own confidence as much as that of his troops, and Blair felt momentarily heartened by the thought that Nick might possibly be willing to cut his losses and run in the face of this newfound opposition.

"You okay, kid?" It took Blair a minute to realize that the cop was talking to him. He felt the weight of the other man's gaze on him and nodded shakily.

"Y-yeah," he said hoarsely, surprised that his vocal chords were deigning to work at all after the thrashing he'd taken. Cradling one arm around his aching ribs, he scooted into a sitting position with his back against the dumpster and absently wiped at the blood on his lip with the back of one hand. "I'm okay, man."

He watched in reluctant admiration as the cop moved into the alley, giving curt instructions for Nick and his companions to stand up against the alley wall. One of the gangbangers took a menacing step forward, a sturdy-looking length of chain dangling from one beefy fist (which they apparently hadn't gotten around to using on him -- thank you God that they hadn't used that on him), but Ellison disarmed him neatly without ever letting loose his grip on his pistol and shoved the boy forcefully against the wall. Muttering angrily under their breath, the others complied without too much of a hassle.

"Why pick on the kid?" Ellison asked, holding his gun steady in one hand as he slid a cell phone out of the inside pocket of his coat with the other, presumably with the intention of calling for backup or an ambulance, or both. He sounded honestly curious.

Nick laughed, glancing over his shoulder at the older man, and there was nothing of humor in it. It was a harsh, ugly sound that made Blair cringe. "He's a fucking fairy, man. You can't tell me you really give a shit what happens to him."

The words made the hair on the back of Blair's neck stand on end, and he shook in helpless shame and anger that such words should ever be leveled against him. No matter how many times he told himself that it shouldn't matter -- that they were only words -- it never failed to cut him deeply. And that such abuse should be hurled at him in the presence of this strong, inexplicable, somehow sympathetic man who had chosen to defend him for reasons that Blair still could not determine, was well nigh unbearable. Angrily, he wiped at the tears on his cheeks with his palms, trembling uncontrollably.

He still couldn't see the stranger's face well enough in the dimness to read his expression clearly, but Blair was sure he saw those strong shoulders tighten fractionally at Nick's offhanded comment. Maybe he was as offended by Nick's casual bigotry as Blair himself was.

That was the moment when things started to get really strange. Time itself seemed to still as moonlight broke from behind a cloud and the cop suddenly froze, his entire demeanor shifting from tense watchfulness to an instant, almost zombie-like vacancy. Blair stared in growing horror as he realized that something had just gone shockingly, unaccountably wrong with his rescue. Awareness slowly dawned on the others as well, and Blair watched in mute alarm as they each stepped tentatively back away from the wall and then, sharing uncertain glances with one another, turned and fled.

Ellison made no move to apprehend them. He didn't even seem to realize that they were gone.



Nick was the only one to remain behind, and Blair could hear him cursing at the cowardice of his erstwhile comrades. The older boy clenched his fists at his sides in unspoken rage at this betrayal, muttering something unintelligible under his breath that had a great deal of F's in it, but then his attention shifted back to the cop in front of him.

Blair felt the hairs prickle along the back of his neck as Ellison continued to seem unaware of what was going on around him. Nick took a

slow step toward the cop, then another. Still, Ellison did not react to his presence. Blair was excruciatingly aware of the gun that was still held tightly in the cop's outstretched hand, and knew instinctively that this was what was drawing the focus of Nick's attention, as well.

"No," Blair whispered, feeling a surge of unfettered rage rise up in him. There was no way in **hell** that Nick was going to be laying a finger on this man. Rising unsteadily to his knees and then pulling himself carefully up to his feet by clinging to the side of the dumpster behind him, Blair snatched up a discarded beam of wood from where it lay against the wall of the alley and carefully limped toward the tableau that was playing out in front of him.

Nick seemed to have forgotten Blair's presence entirely, or else he had completely discounted him as a threat. That suited Blair just fine. Trying to be as silent as possible, he hefted the beam up onto his shoulder and moved in behind the other boy, shaking more with anger than with fear. He ached in about a hundred different places, and there was blood gumming the eyelashes of his left eye, but he ignored his physical discomfort as he moved in behind Nick. Nick was chuckling softly to himself now, obviously amused at the cop's continued unresponsiveness, which was really beginning to scare the hell out of Blair.

Before Nick could gather up enough nerve to attempt to disarm his suddenly vulnerable adversary, Blair let loose with the beam, catching Nick across the shoulders with enough rage-induced strength to send the other boy flying to the ground like a felled piece of lumber. Nick gave a raw, pained cry and rolled away, staring up at Blair with wild eyes and raising his hands up in front of his face defensively.

Blair held up his weapon like a baseball bat and dared Nick with his stance to try anything further. Alone now, unarmed, and without the encouragement of his colleagues, Nick did the math with admirable haste and came to the conclusion that he was no match for his furiously defiant former victim. Hastily, he skittered back in crab-like fashion and then pulled himself unsteadily to his feet.

"You'd better watch your back, fairy boy," the gang leader said furiously, each word dripping with such hatred and scorn that they made Blair shiver in chilled response. In the filtered light of the lamps on the street, his expression was one of abject fury. Then he turned around and ran, racing around the corner of the bakery to catch up to his departed friends. The muted echo of his footsteps faded and then disappeared altogether.

Blair let the wooden beam drop from fingers gone suddenly numb and turned to face the man who had just saved his life. A feeling of unreality fell over him, as if this entire evening were nothing more than an incredibly vivid nightmare, and he could expect to wake up at any moment. Shivering, he stepped up to the cop's side and touched a tentative hand to his back.

"Come on, man," he urged, feeling the ringing echo of panic begin to rise in him. What the hell was wrong with this guy, anyway? He'd swooped in out of the shadows like fucking Batman, chasing off the bad guys without hardly raising a sweat, and now he was completely MIA. It didn't make any sense, and the sight of that studiously blank stare was making Blair's skin crawl.

He tightened his grip on Ellison's shoulder and shook him gently -- the response was immediate, and Blair jumped in surprise as the cop straightened with a gasp, turning swiftly around as if he didn't remember quite where he was.

"What the fuck..." Ellison hissed, shoulders clenching, and Blair backpedaled as quickly as he could, half afraid that the man was going to mistake him for one of the gangbangers he'd been in the process of arresting. He froze as that sharp-eyed gaze suddenly latched onto him, pinning him to the spot and spearing into the heart of him all in the same moment. It was like locking gazes with a fucking **mountain lion**. Blair couldn't breathe for the length of time it took for Ellison to recognize him, and then all of the tension seemed to bleed out of the other man's frame. The hand with the gun dropped down to his side.

"They gone?" the cop said with a sigh, running a hand back over the hair at the top of his head and turning to glance back at the street.

"Yeah." Blair hated that his voice was shaking. "I mean, they all ran off when you blanked out, but I had to scare the last one away." He glanced briefly down at the fallen beam by his feet, and then looked up again, trembling. "What the hell happened to you?"

Ellison shrugged, shoving his gun back under his coat with a sharp, angry motion. "I don't know. It happens sometimes." He sounded completely unconcerned, but Blair (who was a bit of a master at obfuscation himself) figured that it was merely an act to conceal how much it bothered him. The older man sighed. "What's your name, kid?"

Blair hesitated, but he saw no real reason to lie. "Blair," he answered, rubbing absently at one shoulder as he moved to pick up his backpack. "Blair Sandburg. I really do appreciate the help. Things were about to get really nasty, I think."

"Jim," the other man offered. "And you're welcome." Now that the moonlight had broken from behind the clouds, Blair could see that he was actually quite handsome. **Fuck**, he thought in bitter recrimination, immediately curtailing that line of thought. *Isn't this the way you got yourself in trouble to begin with?*

Ellison's expression suddenly sharpened in a way that made Blair distinctly uncomfortable, as if he were somehow able to sense the younger man's sudden increase in heart rate. His eyes in the murky, half-lit darkness were the intense blue color of gas flame.

"Look, man, I appreciate the help, but I have **really** got to get going," Blair said with a forced smile, looking away nervously. His heart was pounding now with more than the aftereffects of the fight; if this man really was a cop, there was no way Blair could risk letting him know that he was living on the streets. Nick had already let too much out with his thoughtless verbal assault, and Blair truly feared nothing so much as a trip to social services and a one-way ticket back home.

The cop -- Jim -- nodded dubiously. "You sure you don't want me to call you an ambulance? Or I can call someone to come get you..."

"N-no, but thanks anyway." Blair's mind was spinning, searching for any means of extricating himself from this untenable situation. "I ... I'm a student at Rainier. Anthropology." Seeing the blatant disbelief spread across Jim's face, he added hastily, "Yeah, I know I look young, but the court granted my petition for emancipated minor status earlier this year. I don't have any medical insurance, though, and you know how much an ambulance ride costs in this city. I am **fine**, man, perfectly fine. I'm staying at McConnell dorm. You know, the one on the north end of campus?" He was all but bouncing now in his nervousness, gesturing absentmindedly with his hands.

The expression in Jim's eyes was unreadable, but Blair had the uncomfortable suspicion that the man didn't believe a word of his hastily concocted tale. Blair shifted anxiously from one foot to the other, praying to every deity he had ever heard of that the fiction would be accepted at face value.

"It's after curfew," Jim said finally, making Blair's heart sink. "You won't be able to get into the dorm until morning." He paused for another inscrutable moment, then added, "If you want, you're welcome to spend the night at my place. You can get cleaned up, get something to eat, get some sleep, and be on your way in the morning. You really shouldn't be by yourself tonight after the knocking you took."

Blair blinked at him in surprise. He'd gotten the impression that Jim wasn't buying his "emancipated minor" story at all, so why the hell was the man offering to help him? If he really was a cop, he should feel obligated to contact the nearest social services office and report Blair as a runaway. If he **wasn't** a cop, the very last thing Blair should be willing to do was go off alone with him.

Blair wanted to mistrust this man -- he couldn't remember the last time that anyone had played straight with him about anything -- but there was something undeniably appealing about the offer. His stomach chose that moment to remind him exactly how long it had been since he'd eaten last, and he rubbed a hand over it absently, trying to massage the dull ache away. He was tired and cold and beaten in both mind and body, and suddenly, nothing seemed quite so alluring as the thought of a warm, dry place to sleep for the rest of the night.

Reluctantly, his shoulders sagged forward in defeat. "Sure," he said, trying to sound more casual than he felt. "Sounds great, man. Thanks."

Jim smiled, as if he understood just what a struggle it had been for Blair to accept his offer. "Come on, kid," he said gently. "My truck's just around the corner."

Blair followed him tentatively, trying not to think too hard about what he was doing. Sure, this guy had just saved his life, but Blair had to wonder just what exactly he expected to get in exchange for the service. He'd lived this long on the streets without resorting to selling himself, and he wasn't planning to start now. The low, insistent ache in his stomach grumbled mockingly at him, however, as if taunting him by asking how much longer he thought he'd be able to keep **that** promise.

Jim's truck was a surprisingly attractive teal green four-by-four with a rack of spotlights mounted on top of the cab and the rear door of the bed removed to provide less wind resistance during acceleration. The thing purred like a kitten when Jim turned the key in the ignition, and Blair couldn't help but smile in admiration as he held out his hands in front of the sudden blast of heat that poured from the vents as the heater kicked on. "Sweet," he commented absently, shivering as the heat worked its way slowly into him, chasing away the lingering bite of the cold.

"It was a gift from my old man," Jim said brusquely, pulling smoothly out into the near-empty street and pointing the truck toward the center of town. He didn't sound at all happy about the admission. "Not like I could actually refuse it; it's hard enough as it is to make ends meet on a cop's salary."

"So you really are a cop?" Blair tried to sound casual, but he knew that his voice betrayed his anxiety. Maybe Jim would just think it was a lingering case of nerves from the fight.

"Yeah." Jim glanced at him briefly, and then turned back to the street in front of them. A few scattered droplets of rain struck the windshield as the weather turned determinedly foul once again. "You don't have to worry, kid. I'm not going to run your ass in."

"Blair," Blair corrected, without knowing quite why he did so. "My name's Blair." He hunched back further in his seat and tucked his chin into the collar of his coat morosely. "Not 'kid'."

Jim didn't say anything in response to that, but his silence was weighing.

There was no further conversation as they drove, and eventually Jim pulled the truck into the parking lot of a tall red building on Prospect Avenue. Blair jumped reflexively when the steady growl of the truck's engine sputtered and died away, and he sat there stiffly for a moment, listening to the heavy silence around him.

"We're here," Jim said unnecessarily, and Blair turned to look at him, one hand clutched tightly around the strap of the backpack in his lap.

"Yeah," Blair said, not sure what he was agreeing to. His heart was pounding again.

He opened the door beside him and slid out of the truck without thinking, dropping his gaze to the ground. Jim made sure the doors were locked and then led the way toward the double glass doors that opened into the apartment building, half-jogging to get in out of the lightly falling rain. Blair followed after him without having to be told, glad that at least it wasn't **pouring** out like it had been earlier in the day, and absently adjusted the strap on his shoulder when he reached the shelter of the building.

He hesitated outside the door of the third-floor apartment when they reached it. There was no pretending anymore that this wasn't happening, that he didn't have a decision to make. He met Jim's gaze challengingly for a moment and then glanced nervously back over his

shoulder, sweeping his gaze down the length of the hall. Everything around them was still and silent, offering no clues whatsoever about the philanthropic sincerity of the man in front of him. For all Blair knew, the guy wasn't even a real cop.

"Relax, Chief. I'm not going to bite." Jim smiled wryly, rubbing at the back of his neck with one hand and regarding him with a look of mild amusement. "I'll tell you what? We'll keep the door unlocked, so you can leave whenever you want. Fair enough?"

Blair met his gaze evenly, considering. He couldn't believe he was actually standing here, intending to go alone with this man into his apartment. He'd heard enough stories on the streets about scenes exactly like this one, and they always ended the same way.

But Jim **had** saved his life. And nearly gotten himself killed in the bargain. It was curious, but Blair felt strangely protective of him, as if it was somehow his responsibility to make sure that the man was taken care of. Perhaps it was a sense of duty he felt because of the amazing rescue earlier that evening, but somehow he knew that it was more than that. That debilitating stroke or seizure or whatever it was had been truly frightening; there was something vulnerable about this man, despite his obvious ability to take care of himself, that set Blair's protective instincts racing into full gear.

"Sure, man," he said, realizing suddenly that Jim was still waiting for an answer. He bounced lightly on the balls of his toes, trying not to look as anxious as he felt. "Whatever you say."

Jim smiled slightly and moved to enter the apartment, letting Blair trail behind. Blair hooked one thumb under the strap of the backpack on his shoulder and looked around with wide eyes as he stepped inside, taking in the details of the room around him.

It was bigger than he'd been expecting. The predominant feature of the place was the sheer amount of open space that stretched within it; it was decorated sparsely, with an attention to detail and lack of excessive ornamentation that he found oddly comforting. Definitely a bachelor's pad. Involuntarily, his eyes followed the angle of the wide wooden stairs to the half-glimpsed expanse of the open loft that stretched out above the far end of the room; it appeared to be a bedroom. Swallowing with difficulty, he turned his gaze away.

Jim was in the kitchen, rummaging around in the refrigerator. Blair realized he was still standing in front of the open doorway and shut it, slowly.

"You want a soda?" Jim asked.

Blair dropped the backpack off his shoulder and set it carefully on the floor beside the door. "How about a beer?" he countered, pushing his hair back away from his face with one hand. His heart was hammering inside his chest, but he was determined not to show how uneasy he felt.

Jim snorted as he came back into the living room, carrying a pair of Diet Cokes in one hand and an icepack in the other. "Sure. You gonna tell me you're twenty-one now, kid?"

Blair held his gaze evenly. "Eighteen. Why?"

"Yeah. And I'm sixty." Jim handed him one of the Diet Cokes and the icepack. "More like fifteen, I'd say."

Now, that **did** sting. "I'm sixteen," he snapped, popping the tab on his soda with a quick, irritated motion. He immediately guzzled about half the can, surprised to discover how very thirsty he was.

"You want to catch a shower while I make us something to eat?" Jim asked, deliberately ignoring the intended obfuscation about Blair's age the same way he'd ignored the emancipated minor lie earlier. He gestured toward a darkened hallway stretching out in back of the kitchen. "How do hard-shell tacos sound? All I'll have to do is brown up some hamburger and grate the cheese, and we'll be good to go. You can slice the vegetables when you get cleaned up."

Blair nodded, glad for any excuse to leave the room until he'd regained his composure. He pressed the icepack gingerly to the sore spot above his left eye and winced reflexively. "Sounds great, man. Really great." Just the thought of sitting down to a home-cooked meal was making him break out into an ear-splitting grin, and his stomach clenched in fervent approval of the idea.

"You got some spare clothes to change into?"

Blair glanced down at his ripped and dirt-streaked flannel shirt and brushed his palm absently across the thighs of his jeans. Despite his instinct to persist in the obfuscation that he was a college student, he realized that there was little point any more in pretending that he was anything other than what he was.

"Uh ... no," he said, feeling uncomfortable all over again. "I mean, yeah, I have a spare shirt and jeans, but they got drenched during the storm earlier this week and I haven't had the chance to go to the laundry..." His face colored as he realized just how pitiful he must seem to this man.

Jim was silent a moment. "You're not a student at Rainier, are you?" he said at last. His expression was inscrutable.

Blair kept his gaze focused unwaveringly on the floor in front of him, and concentrated on trying to control the tremors that wanted to vibrate through him. "No," he whispered, feeling his face flush, and wondered just where the hell this sudden masochistic streak had come from. Since when had the truth held any great appeal for him, anyway?

To his relief, Jim didn't seem distressed by the admission, nor did he seem ready to toss the younger man out on his ass for lying. In fact, Blair thought he saw a glimmer of admiration pass over the other man's eyes, there and then gone. He couldn't help feeling that he had just passed a test of some sort, although he couldn't even begin to imagine the reason why.

And that still left the question of why in the world this man was helping him.

Jim told him to stay put and then jogged upstairs to the bedroom loft, returning with a folded pair of grey sweats in his hands. He handed the clothes to Blair and nodded in the direction of the hall. "You've got about ten minutes till dinner's ready," he said, and there was something surprisingly mild in his voice that made Blair look away uneasily.

Mumbling a disconcerted thanks, Blair went down the hall to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. He wasn't quite convinced yet that Detective James Ellison didn't have ulterior motives in inviting him here, and he wasn't about to take any chances until he had more of a handle on the situation. Moving carefully, he stripped out of the blood-smeared clothes he was wearing and dumped them in a corner of the room, wincing as each movement jarred his newly acquired injuries. Damn, but he'd almost forgotten what it felt like to get worked over like this. Nick and his cronies had certainly been efficient in their enthusiasm.

He set the water running in the shower as hot as it would go, and while he was waiting for the temperature to adjust, he stood in front of the low sink and looked at his face in the mirror. Shit. He reached for a couple of tissues from the box on the back of the toilet and dabbed at the swelling cut over one eye, running cold water into the sink and dampening the makeshift cloth lightly. He winced as he probed at the open wound, carefully clearing the dirt and blood away from the new collection of bruises that decorated the left side of his face. Fortunately, underneath all the blood and grime, it didn't appear to be too serious.

Thank god.

The thought reminded him once again of how lucky he was that Jim Ellison had appeared on the scene when he did. No matter how trustworthy the man ended up being, Blair owed him his life. He clenched his hands tightly around the edge of the sink and hunched his shoulders forward suddenly, trying to control the violent shakes that wanted to wrack through him. Right now, he really just wanted to forget that this evening had ever happened.

And he would start by washing the evidence of it off of him. There was a satisfyingly thick cloud of steam pouring from behind the thin shower curtain now, and he stepped into the shallow bath eagerly. The water felt heavenly as it pounded against his aching body, throbbing painfully where it slid across the network of darkening bruises that dotted his torso but intensely satisfying nonetheless. He soaped up his hair with the shampoo he found on a nearby ledge and massaged at his scalp luxuriously, enjoying the pure primal comfort of being **clean**, and then proceeded to wash the rest of his body perfunctorily. By the time he stepped back out into the steam-filled room, he was nearly boneless with satisfied pleasure.

He pulled on the clothes that Jim had provided for him carefully, mindful of his still-aching body, and couldn't help but notice the faded white logo of the Cascade PD that decorated the front of the sweatshirt. It was starting to look as if Jim was telling the truth about being a cop after all. The sweats were about two sizes too large for him, but once Blair tightened the drawstring around his waist and rolled the sleeves of the shirt up some, he was reasonably comfortable. Still it felt odd, though, being warm and dry and cocooned within the lush softness of another man's clothes.

It was with no small amount of trepidation that he left the relative safety of the bathroom to make his way back into the main room. Jim was in the kitchen, working diligently over the stove, and the air was filled with the rich, sharp scent of browning beef, causing Blair's stomach to rumble fitfully. Jim looked up over the small center island and froze briefly when he saw Blair emerge into the room.

"Don't you clean up nice," he commented, and then shifted his gaze away, looking vaguely uncomfortable. Blair got the impression that he wasn't quite sure why that particular remark had come to mind. Or else he wasn't sure what had prompted him to say it aloud.

"Thanks," Blair said hesitantly, not at all sure how to take the comment. Changing the subject quickly, he asked, "What can I do to help?"

Looking relieved, Jim gestured at the cupboard behind him. "Plates are up there if you want to set the table. Then there's a tomato in the bottom drawer of the fridge you can start slicing."

Blair moved to comply, setting the table carefully for two and then positioning himself at the counter next to Jim to start cutting the tomato. He kept his gaze lowered as he worked, initially uncomfortable about standing so close beside the man, but he was pleasantly surprised to find that they actually worked quite well together. They went smoothly about their respective chores and before Blair knew it, they were sitting down at opposite sides of the table and he was shoveling his taco shell full of spiced beef and assorted condiments.

"So, what'd you do to piss off those guys, anyway?" Jim asked, glancing up at him briefly in the process of reaching for the bottle of hot sauce on the table in front of him. "They're small-time, but they're mean little shits."

"Tell me about it." Blair touched the skin above his left eye gingerly. With some embarrassment, he realized that his hand was shaking, and he quickly moved it underneath the table onto his lap.

But not quickly enough to escape Jim's notice, apparently. "Hey, don't worry about it," he said, and his voice was filled with that odd note of gentleness again that Blair found so unnerving. The look in his eyes was unreadable. "It's none of my business anyway."



"No, it's all right." Blair took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, forcing himself to relax. "I was sitting by the fountain at the university this afternoon, reading -- I've been spending a lot of time on the campus lately, sort of hanging out there when no one notices. I've kind of been sleeping wherever I could find space that security doesn't patrol too well, and I guess that clued Nick and his goons in that I wasn't a student there." He shook his head. "I honestly didn't think anyone was paying any attention."

"Easy pickings," Jim commented, pausing in between bites of his taco.

"Yeah." Blair dropped his eyes to the plate in front of him, trying to ignore the warm flush that was tingeing the tips of his ears. Jim had already heard it all from Nick; what difference would it make to repeat the story now? "Well, there was this guy from the football team who walked by, and I sort of..." He trailed off, not sure quite how to say it.

"You were checking him out." Jim sounded very matter-of-fact about it, which calmed Blair's rampaging nerves considerably.

"Yeah. But I wasn't being obvious about it -- I swear! Shit, man, I was just **looking** at him, and the next thing I know, these neo-Nazi fucking **bastards** are chasing me all over the damn city." He realized he was shaking again, but he didn't care. He finished off the last bite of his taco angrily and then reached for the fixings for a second. "They waited until after dark, of course, when there was nobody around, and then they just sort of cornered me in this one corner of the campus. Started calling me all kinds of pretty names, and I knew right off what they'd seen. I mean, how could I have been so fucking **stupid**?"

Jim's fingers suddenly brushed across the skin of his wrist from across the table, stilling him in mid-tirade. Blair stared at him in surprise, seeing the naked concern gleaming in the other man's eyes.

"It wasn't your fault, Blair," Jim said quietly, his voice intent. He held Blair's gaze evenly. "You didn't deserve what they did to you. They were just out cruising for trouble, and you were a convenient target. Guys like that don't care **who** they harass; they're mad at the world, and they feel they have to take it out on somebody. Any excuse at all would have been sufficient."

"It's because I'm different than they are," Blair said softly, dropping his gaze. Instinctively, he recognized the truth of Jim's words, and some of his inner self-flagellation faded. "I'm too young, and I'm smarter than they are, and I read too much. And I'm gay." There -- he'd said it. "It's the same old story, man. It never changes."

Jim regarded him contemplatively for a long moment, then turned back to his meal. "Being different is hard," he agreed, so softly that Blair could barely hear him.

Blair swiped irritably at the wetness that was pooling at the edges of his eyelashes. "So what's your story?" he asked, glad for a chance to change the subject. "What happened to you in that alley? Was it some kind of seizure?"

It was a moment before Jim responded. "Something like that," he said, sounding uncomfortable. He wouldn't meet Blair's gaze. "It happens to me sometimes; I'm not sure why." He hesitated, apparently unsure about whether he wanted to elaborate, but then he continued, "It's like all of a sudden, I get caught up in something that's going on around me -- the ringing of a church's bell, or the smell of the salt in the air down by the ocean, or the way the moonlight forms patterns on the walls when it comes out from behind a cloud -- and everything else just ... blanks out. Sometimes I don't ... don't come out of it for hours. Other times I'll just get these mammoth fucking headaches, like the whole world is trying to crush in on me and I can barely hold it off."

"That bites, man," Blair said sympathetically. "Have you been to see any doctors?"

"Yeah. No one can find anything wrong with me. According to them, there's no **physical** reason for any of it." His eyes looked haunted; he gazed at Blair speculatively for a long moment, as if he were judging whether or not to divulge anything further. Finally, he said, "My boss has put me on 'temporary medical leave' until I get it worked out; he says I'm a liability to have out in the field."

"Shit." Blair was honestly incensed on the other man's behalf. "That can't be very good on the self-esteem."

Jim snorted with surprised laughter, caught off guard by the comment. "You're right," he said dryly, grinning. "It's not."

Blair smiled at him, beginning to relax for the first time since the entire nightmare evening had begun. "You took a risk coming into that alley to help me, didn't you?" he said, seeing the miracle of his rescue in an entirely new light. "I mean, not knowing when you might have

another attack."

Jim shrugged. "I was just driving by when I heard the commotion and decided to stop and check it out. No big deal."

Blair blinked in surprise. "You heard us in the alley when you were driving by on the **street**?" The thought seemed peculiar for reasons that he couldn't quite pinpoint. He thought about how the windows had all been rolled up and the heater was blowing on full when he'd gotten into Jim's truck. It was almost impossible to think that anyone could have heard the scuffle at the far end of the alley under those circumstances, no matter how enthusiastic Nick and his boys had been.

"Yeah." Jim looked uncomfortable again, but before Blair could ask why, he was countering with, "But what about you? Things could have gotten really ugly if you hadn't run off that last asshole for me. You said that there was one who didn't take off running, and you had to chase him off, right? I'm guessing it would have been easy enough for you to slip by while he was occupied with me and just disappear into the ether. You took a real chance, helping me."

Blair was startled by the comment; the thought had honestly never occurred to him. Flustered, he turned his attention back to his meal.

After they were finished eating, Blair moved to help Jim carry the empty dishes into the kitchen. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so full and sated and generally at peace with the world, and he found himself chatting easily with Jim as he washed the dishes, handing them each to the other man to dry.

"You're really serious about this anthropology thing, aren't you?" Jim asked, bending to put away the last of the pans in the cupboard beneath the counter. He wiped his hands on the damp dishtowel and laid it over the edge of the sink to dry.

"Yeah." Blair pushed his hair back away from his eyes and leaned against the pillar beside the table, crossing his arms gingerly over his chest. "I've already graduated high school -- I wasn't lying about that, man." His grin was wry. "I want to start taking classes at Rainier, but I can't do that unless I can get Naomi to sign off on it. Naomi's my mom," he added belatedly. He dropped his gaze to the floor, rubbing absently at a sore spot on the curve of one shoulder.

He waited tensely for the expected question, but it never came. He could feel Jim's eyes on him, but then the older man was looking away from him, obviously intending to let the subject drop.

"You hurting bad?" Jim asked unexpectedly, and that odd, somehow tender note was back in his voice again. His eyes were shadowed.

Blair looked up at him in surprise. "Some, I guess." Which was a bald-faced lie, actually; right now he felt as if he'd been knocked over in a train wreck.

Jim sighed. "You took quite a pounding out there tonight; you really should have someone take a look at you. I can drive you to the hospital, if you're worried about the cost of the ambulance ride."

"I'm fine, man." Blair could feel his face heating, and his heart rate immediately jumped into triple digits. Damn, but he hated how out of control his emotions had gotten lately. There was no way he could let himself be checked into a hospital; there was too much of a chance that they'd find out he was a runaway, and take the expected steps to ship him back home.

The expression on Jim's face was thoughtful; it seemed almost as if he understood the younger man's dilemma. "I'm not a doctor, but I have had some first aid training on the force. Would it bother you if I checked you over?" He sounded honestly concerned.

Immediately, Blair's heart seemed to jump into his throat. This was either a perfect example of the kindness of strangers, or else the smoothest come-on line he had ever heard.

Jim sensed his hesitation and frowned slightly. "If you don't feel comfortable having me look you over, we can find you a doctor. But I saw the kind of thrashing you were getting, and I really think you need to get looked at. I don't want to wake up in the morning and find you in a coma with brain damage from a concussion."

Blair glanced away from the laser-precision of that blue-eyed gaze, his heart pounding. He wanted to believe in Jim, but he was still uncertain whether the man was honestly what he appeared to be. And he had a right to be skittish, goddamn it. He'd been through a lot in the past couple of hours, and his life hadn't exactly prepared him to give into the kindness of strangers readily. For all he knew, this man was some kind of twisted pedophilic pervert who got his jollies coercing teenage boys into his apartment and then having his wicked way with them. It occurred to Blair suddenly that if that were the case, there would be very little he could do to stop him.

Nevertheless, he allowed Jim to coax him into the living room, where he perched on the edge of the coffee table and rested his hands on his knees in an effort to appear more relaxed than he actually was. Jim disappeared into the bathroom to fetch some first aid supplies and then followed him. Setting the materials down on the table, he touched Blair's chin lightly, tipping his head up to look at him.

"Jesus," Jim commented softly, frowning. His eyes sparked with a dark emotion that made Blair shiver involuntarily. "They really did a number on you."

Personally, Blair didn't think the damage to his face was that bad. "Could've been worse, man."

Jim snorted lightly. "Yeah."

He checked Blair over perfunctorily, looking for signs of serious injury in a way that made Blair think he truly must have had extensive first aid training in his lifetime. He was very thorough, asking Blair if he was feeling any dizziness, had any dark spots or blurriness in his vision, if he felt at all nauseous. Blair answered each question in the negative, relieved despite himself when it seemed that he didn't have any kind of lasting injury after all. When Jim asked him to remove his shirt, he found himself complying without even a token protest.



Blair turned his gaze to the side as the older man knelt in front of him, trying to breathe evenly through the sudden increase in his heart rate. "Relax, Chief," Jim said quietly, picking up on his fears regardless. "I just want to get these ribs taped up before you lie down for the night."

Blair kept his eyes glued to the floor and tried to ignore the feel of those feather-light fingers ghosting over him, winding the smooth white tape around his chest and ribs. Despite his fears, Jim's touch was impersonal, probing with surprising gentleness along his skin, tucking the ends of the tape in against his sides when he was done with each pass. Blair pressed his lips together and concentrated on not reacting as those strong, somehow graceful hands moved over him, somehow both soothing and exacerbating his nervousness all at the same time.

Finally, Jim stepped back away from the table and pronounced Blair relatively fit. "By morning, you're going to feel like a walking bruise," he said, smiling reassuringly, "but you'll be all right. You were lucky." He shifted his gaze away after a moment, as if the sight of Blair half-unclad made him distinctly uncomfortable for reasons that Blair couldn't begin to fathom.

"Thanks, man." Blair dressed again hurriedly, wondering at the fact that he didn't feel any less naked in front of this man fully clothed. It was as if Jim could somehow see **inside** of him in a way that had nothing to do with clothes or barriers or the outside appearances of things.

Jim smoothed over the awkwardness of the moment by going into the kitchen to fetch them fresh sodas from the fridge. Blair moved to the couch and sat back with a sigh, propping his feet up on the low coffee table and running his hands back through his hair. He could still hardly believe that he was here; there was a surreal feeling to the setting around him, as if he could expect it all to wink out of existence at any moment and leave him stranded back out on the street. He glanced at the broad balcony windows to his right, watching the rain slide in midnight-black rivulets down the smooth glass. During the day, in more favorable weather, this room must have an awesome view of downtown Cascade.

What would it be like to live here, he wondered suddenly, to **belong** in a place like this? To come home every day and know that you had a place to sleep among people who cared about you? Someplace warm and dry and comfortable, where people accepted you for who you were?

He wiped at his suddenly damp eyelashes irritably as he heard Jim approach from the kitchen. If he didn't find some way to get his emotions under control, he was going to scream.

Either Jim didn't notice his momentary lapse of control, or he chose to ignore it. Either way, Blair was grateful. Jim handed him an unopened can of Diet Coke and a fresh icepack, along with three Extra Strength Tylenol.

Blair grinned as he accepted the medicine and swallowed the pills easily, washing them down with the soda. "Thanks," he said, settling back against the cushions and lifting the icepack up to the side of his face.

"You're welcome." Jim's tone was wry. "I can tell you from experience that it'll get worse before it gets better."

"Yeah, I know."

Silence greeted his statement, and Blair glanced at the window again, biting his bottom lip. He was sharing a bit more than he was comfortable with about his home life. Beside him, he thought he heard Jim sigh softly.

Instead of commenting, Jim moved to squat in front of the wood stove at the far side of the room. "It's kind of chilly in here. You mind if I start a fire?"

"Nah, that'd be great." Truthfully, Blair did feel a little cold, and he was glad for the offer of additional heat. He eyed Jim's back surreptitiously as he bent in front of the fireplace, unable to stop himself from noticing the smooth slide of muscles underneath the other man's shirt as he reached for a nearby log and set it into the hearth.

Damn. Deliberately, he moved his gaze away. Outside the balcony windows, lightning forked a jagged edge across the sky, followed soon

after by a bass rumble of thunder. Rain pounded a staccato cadence against the glass.

"So, tell me about this anthropology program that you want to pursue." Jim came back to sit on the couch beside him and stretched out his legs with a contented sigh, obviously enjoying the opportunity to just sit and rest after what was presumably a very long day. He looked over at Blair curiously. "You say that you've already graduated from high school?"

"Yeah, two years early." Blair was surprised at how easy it was to talk to this man. He followed Jim's lead by stretching out as comfortably as possible and leaning his head against the back of the couch, enjoying the coolness of the icepack against his face. "But I can't get admitted into a university until I'm eighteen, not without my mother's permission." It was difficult to keep the low note of bitterness from his voice.

Silence greeted his statement, but he knew by now that Jim wasn't going to pry. After a moment, Jim said, "I went into college right out of high school. Majored in business, if you can believe it." He snorted in self-directed amusement.

Blair glanced at him inquisitively, his curiosity piqued. When it came to prying into other people's pasts, he did not share Jim's constraint. "Why'd you take business classes if you didn't want to?"

Jim shrugged. "That's what my father wanted me to do."

Blair remembered Jim's earlier comment about how his father had bought his truck for him. "Money's really important to your father," he guessed, without thinking.

"You have no idea." The grin Jim favored him with was wry. "Of course it took me four years of college to realize that I really didn't **want** to go into business, and I signed up for the police academy instead. You should have seen the look on my dad's face when he found out."

Blair laughed out loud, wincing in between muttered gasps as the movement upset the stiffening bruises on his face. "I'll bet," he said, once he had gotten himself back under control. Grinning, he added, "Don't make me laugh, man. It hurts."

"Sorry." The amused spark in Jim's eyes, however, was not at all repentant. A moment later, though, he sobered. "My dad and I always had problems when I was a kid. He used to try and set my little brother Stevie and me against one another all the time, sort of a macho man pissing contest, if you know what I mean. Like nothing we ever did was ever good enough, you know?"

"Yeah, I know." Blair knew the feeling of not measuring up all too intimately. Turning his attention forcefully away from that line of thought, he asked, "Did you have seizures back then like you do now?"

Jim hesitated. "Sometimes," he admitted, shifting his gaze away. "Not nearly as bad as now, but yeah, it used to happen back then, too. Like I'd hear things, or see things, that no one else could. Of course that made my dad fricking overjoyed, having a son that all the neighbors thought of as a freak. I learned real quick to keep **those** kinds of comments to myself."

Blair stared at him, feeling an unnerving sense of d♦j♦ vu shiver through him. He never would have guessed it from their initial meeting, but maybe he and Jim had a lot more in common than he had originally assumed.

"My mother never made me feel like a freak," he said softly, without really thinking about the words as they left his mouth. "But she had this endless stream of boyfriends, you know? And most of them were pretty cool, actually. But they never lasted. And even when we lucked out by finding a good one, there'd always be another asshole on the way."

"They hit you?" The question was asked casually; apparently the Jim Ellison book of etiquette deemed it acceptable to address the topic once Blair himself had initiated it.

"Not all of them." He shrugged. "And whenever they did, man, Naomi would pull me out of there so fast it made the bastard's head spin. She's a good mom, Jim, and she always took care of me."

Jim held his gaze seriously. "I'm sure she did."

"It's just that she could never seem to settle down, you know? And even the ones who didn't hit me were never really happy to have me around. Naomi's such a free spirit, and she tends to attract people who're similar to her. They never really appreciated having a kid hanging around, dragging them down. Add to that the fact that I'm too smart for my own good, I could talk circles around most of them, and I'm gay. You'd think this is a tolerant country, but it's fucking not, man."

"Sounds like your mom was attracted to a lot of disturbed people."

Blair glanced at him sharply, then away, tightening his fist in his lap. "It was just dumb luck, man." Letting his breath out in a heavy sigh, he said, "The nice ones just wanted to 'fix' me, you know? Like there was something wrong with me. Some of them were just plain mean, called me 'faggot' and whateverthehell else they could think of. Like I was trying to personally ruin their image by being the way that I am. You've already seen proof of the fact that I can't hide it very well."

Jim gazed at him sympathetically. "That can't be very good on the self-esteem."

Blair let out a bark of surprised laughter, recognizing his own words tossed back at him from earlier that evening. He held his side painfully

as the laughter jarred his sore ribs, and shot Jim a withering glare. "Bastard," he said, grinning.

Jim was grinning, too, although his eyes were serious. "So why'd you leave, after all this time and the roller coaster of the many boyfriends? Why now?"

Blair's laughter stilled abruptly, and he glanced down at his lap, smoothing at a wrinkle in his grey pants. It took a moment for him to answer. "It was Naomi's latest boyfriend."

He could feel Jim frown, even though he couldn't see it. "He was really bad, huh?"

Blair smiled tightly. "Nah, he was great. We did things together, you know? Going to the movies, hanging out together. Almost like a dad would do. I really liked him. And he didn't even care that I was gay. It just ... wasn't an issue with him."

He could sense Jim's frown deepening, and now there was a puzzled cast to it. "So what was the problem?"

It was a moment before Blair could make himself answer. He moved his gaze to the window and stared out at the rain morosely. "Naomi didn't love him, man. And he really wasn't very good for her. Kind of stifling, you know? But I could tell she was thinking about settling down with him, getting married even. She always smiled when he was around, but I could tell that she wasn't really happy. But she was going to go ahead and marry him anyway."

"Because of you." There was a new note of understanding in Jim's voice.

"Because of me," Blair agreed. He wiped at his eyes with the back of one hand surreptitiously. "I couldn't let her do that, Jim. Make that kind of a sacrifice, that kind of a life decision, because of me. To make sure that I was happy, that I wouldn't feel the need to grow up any faster than I already have."

"So you left."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I was planning to get a job, get my own place, prove to her that she doesn't have to take care of me anymore. But it's not as easy as it sounds, man. I've been ... so fucking terrified that people will realize I ran away from home, and send me back there. Because I don't think I'd have the nerve to leave again."

"You go out and try to support yourself, it'll be well nigh impossible for you to go to school." Jim sounded concerned.

Blair shrugged. "Whatever it takes, man. I'm not going to see Naomi wreck her life because of me. I could never do anything to hurt her like that. I've been ... calling her every week to let her know that I'm okay. That I'm doing okay, I mean. She's worried about me, but at least ... at least she's not tied down to me anymore."

There was silence then, punctuated only by the drumming of rain against the window and the low crackle of the wood in the fire. Jim's silence was one of thoughtful acceptance, which Blair found enormously comforting. He dropped his head back against the top of the couch and let his mind wander, relaxing into the comfortable stillness that stretched between them.

Why **had** this man chosen to help him? It seemed incredible that he would have seen Blair, recognized him for what he was (and Blair was convinced that Jim had known from the start that he wasn't a student at Rainier), and yet still invited him into his home, knowing what he knew. What did he hope to gain?

Blair thought suddenly of the odd feeling that had come over him as he'd stood outside the apartment door earlier that evening, when he had been near overwhelmed by the incomprehensible desire to take care of this man, to protect him, to ensure that he didn't come to harm. He wondered if perhaps Jim had felt something similar toward him, if in fact he had felt it before Blair himself did. If so, why? What did it all mean?



He thought about Jim's headaches then, and that odd seizure, and Jim's accounts of seeing and hearing things that other people couldn't. It was tickling something at the back of his mind, some memory of something he'd read, somewhere... Something to do with tribal watchmen, and people with heightened senses, scouting around the edges of the villages to track the movements of game...

"Hey, Jim," he said quietly, breaking into the companionable silence that filled the room. "I think I've read something about this problem you've been having. I'm not exactly sure, but I want to go down to Rainier's library tomorrow and check it out."

Jim didn't respond immediately. "Schizophrenia?" he said at last. Blair could tell by the tone of his voice that this was his greatest fear.

Blair shook his head. "No, not schizophrenia. Something ... different."

Silence again. Blair was beginning to be able to read this man's silences the way he read his smiles.

"I'll go with you, if you want," Jim offered after a moment. He sounded tentative. "To the library, I mean. If you **can** find something that'll help me, I'd be really interested to hear about it."

Blair wondered suddenly how each of them would have turned out if they'd made different choices in their lives. If, say, Jim had been the one to leave home, instead of kowtowing to what his father told him to do. Or if Blair hadn't decided to run away from home, had in fact found some other way to deal with his problems. A Jim with more sharp edges, and him without quite so many. Would they ever have found each other? Would there ever have been anyone with which he shared this easy, laid-back camaraderie that felt as natural as breathing?

"Sure, Jim," he said, holding the other man's gaze steadily. "I'd like that."

Something in Jim's gaze flickered then, and Blair felt a burst of heat sizzle straight down into his groin. He sat up straighter, startled, but Jim had already looked away again.

"Jim?" he queried, his heart pounding.

Jim wouldn't meet his eyes. "I think it's time we both thought about getting some sleep," he said, reaching for his empty soda can and standing abruptly.

"Jim?" Blair's voice had sharpened, and it stopped Jim in his tracks halfway to the kitchen.

He didn't turn. "I don't want you to think that I'd hurt you. I wouldn't ... I **couldn't** do that."

"I know that, man." Blair stared at the hard line of the other man's back, confused and more than a little frightened. What the hell had just happened here?

Jim sighed. "Let it rest, Blair. Let's just ... get some sleep, okay?"

This time when Jim started for the kitchen, Blair let him go. He settled back against the corner of the couch, thinking. Letting his eyes trail after Jim, he wondered what the other man saw when he looked at him. Did he see a pitiable, whiny kid? Or did he see something more? For the first time, he found himself wondering if Jim thought he was attractive.

Wondered if one of the things Jim's father hadn't liked about him was the fact that he was gay.

When Jim came back into the living room, his emotions were clearly locked away once again. Jim Ellison, master of repression. Blair had to hide a smile at the thought.

"Look, I've been thinking." Jim hovered over the coffee table, looking uncertain. "You don't have to leave tomorrow if you don't want to. You're welcome to stay for the week if you want, until you can find a place to live."

"A week?" Blair echoed, surprised and indescribably thrilled by the offer.

"A week," Jim agreed. "Just until you can get out and get into a place of your own. They're looking to hire someone down at the precinct -- you know, putting files away, doing some light typing, that sort of thing. I can put in a good word for you, if you'd like."

Blair stared at him in utter shock. It took him a moment to find his voice. "Uh ... yeah. That'd be great, man. That'd be, like, **so cool**." He was nearly bouncing on the edge of the couch now, barely able to contain his excitement. It hardly seemed possible that he was being offered the chance to get off the streets, and in a way that wouldn't compromise himself or Naomi.

Jim smiled. "Not a problem, Chief."

Despite protests, Blair stayed on the couch while Jim went to put fresh sheets on the futon in the spare bedroom. Outside, the storm was quieting, and he listened absently to the lulling sound of the rain on the windows as Jim pattered around in the back room. Already, this place had the feel of home to it, and he wondered if Jim would honestly be willing to toss him out on the street again after his allotted week was up.

Somehow, he doubted it.

Maybe Jim was in need of a roommate, after all. It was something that Blair would bring up when they went to the library tomorrow. If he did get that job at the precinct, he should be able to shoulder his share of the rent, and the money he saved sharing expenses would give him the opportunity he needed to go to school in the evenings. If, of course, he could convince Naomi to sign him in at Rainier, and give him her blessing to go off on his own and pursue his dream of becoming an anthropologist.

When Jim emerged from the bedroom, he paused at the smile he saw on Blair's face. Blair had his chin resting on the back of the couch and was watching him avidly, knees tucked up to his chest.

"Something I should know about?" Jim said mock-warily, obviously pleased to see the younger man in such high spirits.

Blair shook his head. "Just thinking." There would be time enough to talk to Jim about his fantasies in the morning. His lids turned heavy as he pondered the thought of a future with this man; somehow, in a way he couldn't quite describe, it just felt **right** to him. Maybe it would feel right for Jim, too.

That low flicker moved across Jim's eyes again, there and then gone. This time, Blair was certain that he hadn't imagined it. It made a sizzling warmth slide under the surface of his skin, electrifying him with its subtle energy, warming him in ways that he had never before experienced.

The truth shot like raging buckshot into his mind: Jim Ellison thought he was attractive. Maybe he thought he was a good person, too.

"Jim...?" Blair said tentatively, an unstated question. His heart was speeding again, as that pleasurable flush moved through his body.

"Blair." Jim sighed and took a few steps nearer to the sofa. He hesitated, then said, "I saved your life tonight. Gave you some food, gave you a place to stay. There's an understandable amount of hero worship going on here."

Blair stiffened, lifting his chin from the back of the couch. "I'm not a kid, Jim."

"I know that. But you are young, and trusting, and vulnerable, and I am not going to take advantage of that." Jim's tone was unyielding.

"I saved your life, too, you know." Blair wasn't sure quite why he felt the need to press this point, but for some reason it seemed important to him.

Jim held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded slowly, conceding the point. "Maybe we just saved each other," he commented softly, dropping his gaze to the floor. Blair had the distinct impression that he wasn't referring to the fight earlier that evening.

Time seemed to still as that one isolated moment drew out into a lingering eternity, defying all known laws of physics. Blair stared wide-eyed at the suddenly vulnerable man in front of him, as the persistent cadence of the rain faded into the background around them. He watched in mute wonder as Jim's hand lifted in seeming slow motion to touch the side of his face. Just the slightest brush of fingers, a lingering bloom of warmth against the arch of his cheekbone, and then Jim's hand fell away.

"I think it's time for us to get some sleep, Chief," Jim said, and time jumped into its normal course once again. His eyes in the suddenly bright lights of the room were very blue.

Blair drew a shuddering breath. "Yeah," he said, dropping his gaze away. He wasn't surprised to find that his hands were shaking, and this time, it wasn't from fear. He wiped them across the tops of his thighs absently. "Yeah."

He uncurled gingerly from his seat on the couch, his body already stiffening from the abuse it had taken earlier that evening, and allowed Jim to help him into the spare bedroom. Suddenly, he was excruciatingly tired, the fatigue crashing over him in dark waves, and he lay down with a low groan of pleasure, glad for the chance to rest his aching body against the sheets.

"Get some sleep, Chief." Jim pulled a blanket up from the foot of the bed to cover him with, and carefully brushed his hair back away from his face. The gesture was curiously intimate, in an impersonal sort of way, and Blair smiled softly to himself as he snuggled further down into that welcoming warmth.

"Good night," he said softly, looking up with sleepy eyes to meet the older man's gaze. "And thanks."

Jim smiled, and the expression brightened his eyes, giving his entire face an almost beatific cast that Blair found eminently appealing. He decided then and there that he was going to find ways to make this man smile as often as possible.

"See you in the morning." Jim turned to leave, palming off the light switch as he went, and Blair watched him go with a feeling of warm contentment spreading deep within him. *See you in the morning...* It seemed both encouragement and promise, in a way that transcended both.

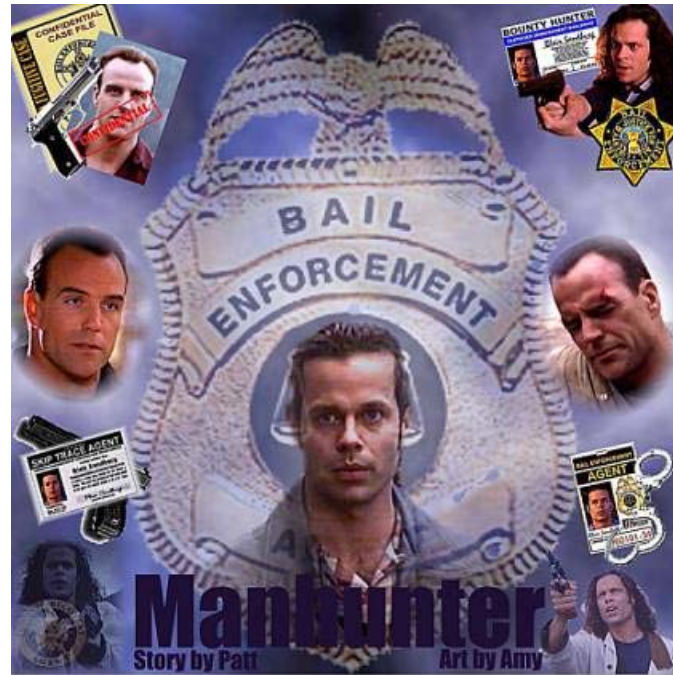
Blair felt a bit as if he were Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole; he didn't know quite where he was going to end up, but he was determined to enjoy the journey regardless. He felt an undeniable bond with Detective James Ellison, and more than that, he **liked** him.

And he was fairly certain that Jim liked him, too.

With thoughts of a future he couldn't even imagine dancing lightning-quick through his mind, Blair allowed himself to give into the irresistible lure of sleep, lulled by the steady drumming of the rain.

The End

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Manhunter - Patt

*The hunter and the hunted are the same.
 The hunter can't give up until he gets his prey.
 The prey is trying, but knows he hasn't a chance.
 He gives in to the hunter, and hopes for the best.
 When did this hunter start to collect men?
 He'll be called Manhunter for the rest of his days.
 His target finally gives up, letting the man win.
 But what did he accomplish?
 What did he lose?
 He'll always be the Manhunter, isolated and alone.
 Leaving us to wonder who is the real victim.
 --Patt*

Blair Sandburg stood next to the hotel bed, packing up his belongings. He had all the tools of his trade in his suitcase. Because of the weapons he wasn't able to fly, so he ended up taking long trips in his truck, a red Dodge Durango. It looked and ran perfectly. Putting the last few things in his bag, he looked around the room to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything.

God, he was tired. * When was the last time he'd slept with a woman? Shit, when was the last time he'd even done anything himself? Business was always first, so it would have to wait. When would he see his apartment next? Better yet, why did he even bother having one? *

Blair Sandburg was a Bounty Hunter. Not a very glamorous job but one that paid very well. Blair had been able to make a name in the business of always getting his man-or his woman-if the case called for it.

The man he worked for was one Simon Banks, Bail Bondsman. He and Simon ran the business alone. That's why Blair was so tired. He needed a break, and so did Simon. When he got back, he planned to talk to Simon about taking on a partner of sorts.

Loading his suitcase into the trunk of his car, he got in, started it up and pulled out of the motel parking lot. Once on the interstate, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed up Simon's number.

"Banks," came the loud booming voice from the other end of the line.

"Hey, Simon. I dropped Keegan off at the local authorities and got my signed slip for you. So you won't be losing any money on that one," Blair said, smiling at the memory of how surprised Keegan had been to have someone like Blair Sandburg overtake him and get the cuffs on him.

At 5' 7" tall and weighing in at 163 pounds, he didn't automatically scare the bad guys. He always took them by surprise with his speed, his cunning-and dammit, his fighting ability. He might be small, but he was wiry.

"Thank god, I was beginning to worry there. When are you going to be back? I have a high profile case right now. I would lose so much

money on this one, it wouldn't even be funny, " Simon said sounding desperate.

"Shit, Simon, I need a break," Blair complained.

"We all need breaks, kid, but I'm going to lose big money if you don't help me out here," Simon pleaded.

"Tell you what, Simon. I'll be home in four days. I'm taking a short vacation. I need a break. Nothing's going to happen in four days, right?" Blair asked, hoping that he'd talk Simon into this.

"Sandburg, I have to talk to you about this. We're talking big money. I'll lose everything. I need you to fly here," Simon said, again sounding desperate.

"Fine, Simon, I'll leave now and be there in the morning," Blair said, resigned to the fact that he was never going to have time off in his life.

"I'll see you first thing in the morning. I'll have everything waiting for you," Simon said before he hung up the phone.

Simon was going to head over to Blair's place because he knew his friend well. He'd make it here tonight. And Simon was going to be there waiting for him. Things were indeed desperate enough.

Blair plugged his cell phone in and continued driving down the road. He put his radar detector on the windshield and began his fast trip home. With any luck, he'd make it there by tonight. * Damn, I might get to sleep in my own bed. *

He didn't stop for anything but gas and drove into Cascade at just after ten that night. Looking at his watch, he thought to himself that this must be some type of record. When he drove up to his apartment building, Simon was sitting in his car waiting.

Getting out of the Durango, Blair didn't say a word as he and Simon grabbed his things to take upstairs. "Simon, why can't I at least sleep in my bed?" Blair asked.

"You can, but I brought this over so we could discuss it," Simon said as he walked into Blair's apartment. Blair handed Simon the receipt for the last skip and they continued up to the apartment.

"Wow, you watered the plants this time. Thanks. It's nice to find something alive when I get here," Blair said with a grumpiness that was brought on by lack of sleep. "So tell me, who's the skip? And don't forget to give me a receipt for what I just gave you."

"His name's James Joseph Ellison," Simon said, picking up the folder to show Blair.

"J.J. Ellison, from Ellison, Unlimited?" Blair asked incredulously. Blair knew of this man. He was one of the richest men in Cascade. Hell, probably one of the richest in the country. Blair had heard that he'd just as soon slit your throat as do business the right way.

"The very same. He was arrested two days ago for attempted murder. The person he hurt was in a coma. He was able to post bail because he has money. The judge made him post bail with a bondsman. That's where I came in. He said he was innocent and it would be proven. I believed him. The man in ICU, his partner, died this morning. So now he's being sought on murder charges. He said all along that he didn't do it, but you never know. I just want him back for the hearing," Simon said, starting to pace. He knew this would be a hard one.

Blair opened up the folder and said, "He's got no wife, no children, no best friends other than the man that died? Shit, Simon, there's not a fucking thing to go on."

"Yeah, he doesn't have any friends. He told me that he was home alone all night long. He has no alibi. No one knows where he is. You know darn well that you'll find some way to figure out where he is. You always get your man, " Simon said, trying to sound hopeful.

"Simon, calm down. I just got the jacket. Let me look through it and I'll see what I can do, okay?" Blair said getting up to get a beer. "Want a beer?"

"No, I need to leave you alone so you can figure out if you have any ideas on how to save my ass," he said, getting up and walking to the front door.

"I'll see you at the office first thing in the morning unless I come across something that jumps out and grabs my attention," Blair said, holding the door for Simon.

"Well, I hope you can find something or we'll both be out of work in two weeks."

"Go. Let me do my thing," Blair said with his first smile since he'd been home. He wouldn't admit it but Simon was like the father he never had and he really loved the man. He wouldn't let anyone hurt Simon, especially this rich, spoiled dick. No way! Blair was determined to find him.

He read the file at the kitchen table while he cleaned his Glock, Beretta and his favorite, Heckler and Kock Model P7. He assembled his tools and cleaning utensils getting ready to clean his pistols. Blair only used a quality gun cleaning kit. He pulled the cleaning rod, patches, and lubricant, closer to his guns and began his work. Blair was so anal about his guns that he had a special pad on which to set the pistols as he cleaned and disassembled them.

As he picked up the first handgun, he checked to be sure that the gun is loaded. On the Glock, he removed the magazine, then pulled the slide back and ejected the round from the chamber. He glanced into the chamber to ensure that there wasn't a round inside. He then released the slide, and, with the pistol pointed down towards the floor, pull the trigger. Empty, just the way he wanted it. He then did the very same thing with all of the rest of them.

He began by using a small brush to gently clean inside the barrel and slide area, followed by the recoil spring assembly, the receiver then and the magazine. Blair was so gentle with his guns; people would probably think he was weird while watching him almost caress the weapons. Blair felt like if you treat your weapons well, they'd be there for you every single time you needed them. Slack off and you might not have another chance to clean them again.

Adding a few drops of cleaning fluid onto the ends of a small gun patch, he attached the wadding onto the end of a cleaning rod, then ran the rod through the barrel piece and back through again. Blair wasn't leaving any debris inside the barrel. Blair then started putting them back together, in the reverse order from which they were taken apart.

Once this was all done and he felt that nothing more was needed, he wiped all of the pistols down with a soft chamois. Smiling the entire time he did this, he wondered if other people did normal things in their spare time.

Blair got out his gun cases and put the cleaned guns inside of them. Everything was ready. He then got ready for the trip. He opened up his bag with all of his gun cleaning supplies in it, making sure he had enough supplies, ammo and anything else he'd need. In this same bag, were his shoulder holsters for the different weapons. He had six sets of handcuffs and a case for them, too. One pair was always on his belt. Next to his handcuffs and case was another leather case with Pepper spray in it. Then he made sure that he had all he needed for his M18L Laser Taser. This was really one of Blair's favorite things to use when you don't want to put a bullet in someone but know you have to stop them. This duffle bag had only weapons and weapon cleaning supplies in it. He had two other duffle bags with his other essentials. He always kept his ammo separate. It was almost like an omen, type thing. He felt like they should never be kept in the same bag.

The phone rang and Blair picked it up and said, "Sandburg."

"Yeah, I have that item you ordered for your truck," the voice said.

"Can you deliver it tonight?" Blair asked.

"Yes, but it'll be \$100 extra for that."

"Fine, bring it now. I need it first thing in the morning," Blair answered.

"I'll meet you down in the parking lot, Sandburg, and I'll show you how it works," the voice continued.

"Sure thing. See you in 20 minutes," Blair said as he hung up the phone.

To anyone in the parking lot, it might've seemed a little odd when the man drove up, got out of his truck, and pulled out a car seat. Blair had seen a movie where the BH had used a car seat to hide his weapons, plus it would help his vehicle to look like a mommy car. Blair had called this man who made it up for him. It would hold a small arsenal. Blair wouldn't be left without his equipment again. That had happened once and Blair was shot and left for dead. He wasn't wild about bullet wounds. The man put it all in and Blair pulled out his bag with his newly cleaned guns and put them in there. It all fit perfectly. Blair handed him the bills and the man counted them as if Blair was in the habit of cheating him all the time. "Bill, do you honestly think after all these years, I would choose today to cheat you? You wound me."

"Sorry, Sandburg. I get used to most of the people I deal with and they aren't trustworthy like you are. Sorry," Bill said. Thanks, man. Nice doing business with you." He said starting to walk off and turned to climb back into his truck.

"Hey, wait. I was gone the last few days when J.J. Ellison was arrested. Do you know anything about this guy?" Blair asked.

"Man, you know if I knew anything I would tell you, right?"

"Bill, calm down, it's not a big thing. I just know you have your ear to the ground all the time and wanted to know if you'd heard anything."

"Well, since you're being so nice, I guess I could tell you one thing," Bill started.

Blair pulled his wallet out when he noticed the pause in Bill's telling him what he needed to know. "How much, Bill?" Blair asked.

"Another \$100," Bill answered.

"I'll pay you after you tell me something worth paying for."

"Okay, that sounds fair. I heard that he couldn't count on his dad or his brother to help him, so he had to go to his grandmother," Bill said, beaming with pride at knowing something that no one else did.

"Bill, tell me, how the hell did you know that?"

"I was sitting in the booth next to him in a diner when he called his dad. I recognized him from the papers. I knew it might come in handy. He called his dad. He called his brother and then he called his grandmother."

"Did you get any names?" Blair asked holding a notebook and pen ready to write.

"Yes, I did. William Ellison was the first call he made. He asked for him by that name but when the man answered, he called him Dad," Bill began.

"That makes sense, that he would call his family," Blair said.

"Too bad his family didn't seem that concerned about him," Bill replied.

"Okay, who was next?"

"He called someone named Steven Ellison and called him, bro, very sarcastically.

So I take it he didn't want to help him either," Bill said helpfully.

"And the third call?"

"Well, it was really weird, Sandburg. It was an odd name. He called her Drammy. I've never heard anyone call their Gramma that before."

"It might have been a code name. Did you hear what he said to the person?" Blair asked again, hoping Bill would have more than just this.

"Yup, this is your lucky day, Sandburg. He said he'd meet this Drammy person at the cabin."

Blair pulled out three one hundred dollar bills and handed them over to Bill. "Thanks a lot, Bill. This might help me a great deal."

When Bill left, Blair made sure everything was inside the car seat and then he locked his truck and set the alarm. Now to head upstairs and get things checked over for another trip.

Once inside his apartment, he pulled out two more duffle bags and started taking inventory and packing. In the first one, he put all of his camping supplies. A butane stove, butane heater, first aid kit, 2 sleeping bags, a two-man tent, freeze dried food, bottled water and a fire extinguisher.

He unpacked his dirty clothes and replaced them with enough clean ones to last for a ten-day trip.

Blair was exhausted when he was finished; it was getting very late, but even so he sat down at the computer and started searching for anything that would have to do with Drammy. Drammie, or Drama. He knew that somewhere there was something he had to find to get to JJ Ellison. Blair pulled up Ellison's personal files on the computer and then started looking for things. He found something that made him smile. He had a friend in college whose name was Rick Drammer. Blair had found Ellison's Drammy. Could it be that simple? He doubted it. Now he just had to find out where Drammy had a cabin. Looking up information on Rick Drammer, he found out that he owned a cabin about two hours from Cascade. Blair logged off, intending to sleep for about two hours and then he was going to head out to find James Ellison.

Blair pulled his garments off and climbed into bed but found that sleep eluded him. He kept seeing Ellison's picture in the file. He looked confused and almost scared. Why would Ellison look scared in those pictures? What was Blair missing? Blair got out of bed, wrenched the file out of the last bag and took it over to his bed. He was just going to read a few more details before he went to sleep.

As he flipped through the pages, he found out one thing that bothered him. The man had never asked for a lawyer. He said he was innocent and would prove it. He said he knew who did it; he only had to prove it. Why would Ellison do that? And if he did indeed know who the killer was, why not tell the police? Blair glanced over at the clock and groaned loudly. He knew that he needed some sleep or he wouldn't be worth anything tomorrow.

He laid the file on his chest and closed his eyes for a few minutes to think and that was the last thing he remembered. The next thing he knew he was sound asleep. In his dream state, he saw a beautiful man. He was faceless, but his body was gorgeous. Blair knew that this man was meant to be someone in his life. Now he just had to remember it when he woke up in the morning.



He woke up when the alarm went off at 4:00 in the morning. Blair dragged his butt out of bed and took a cold shower to wake up. He loaded up his Durango with his fresh gear and then was on his way, stopping only at the gas station to fill up with gas and get some hot coffee. That was one of Blair's weaknesses. He loved coffee. So much so that he found it hard to concentrate when he didn't have it in his system. Taking a sip of the piping hot beverage, he couldn't believe how good it was. It was the flavored brand that he particularly loved.

The drive was a little boring so he put a CD in. He'd picked one up that was a CD talking about Anthropology. He'd been studying like this for about two years now. He knew more than most people did with little schooling; he loved learning. Right now, the man telling the story about Sentinels was talking about the legends of watchmen and guardians for the tribes. Blair liked this idea. He found it almost a romantic thought. * Sandburg, you're a romantic at heart. Need to get these notions out of your head before you go soft. *

The rest of the drive was quiet and problem free. When he got to the small town, he got his map out and found out how to get to Drammy's cabin. He wasn't going to ask for directions and let Ellison know he was in town. He needed to keep this very quiet. He wasn't in a hurry so he decided to check into a hotel first. Looking up and down the streets of the small town, Blair realized that he'd never find a hotel here. Motel, maybe, but never a hotel.

He checked into a nice clean little motel and took his personal bag into his room. The rest stayed in the Durango. Setting the alarm, he got settled in the room and turned on the television to pass some time until he could check out the diner for dinner. Sometimes you found out more by hanging around a diner than by watching non-stop for a week. The exhausted skip tracer had his fingers crossed.

Two hours later, Blair found himself in a clean diner, in his own booth, where he could watch anyone and everyone that came into the place. Blair always liked watching with his back to the wall. The waitress took his order and he sat back drinking more coffee. Just watching people come in and out of the place was interesting. While he was watching, the door opened and in walked James Ellison. Big as day. The owner greeted him and then a waitress took him to his own booth across the room from where Blair was.

Blair wasn't going to make any move now. He hated altercations in crowded places. He just sat back to watch Ellison.

He wasn't at all what Blair was expecting. Ellison was smiling, joking and talking with the owner and the waitress. He was relaxed and a very gentle looking person-not at all what Blair had expected when he finally met up with him. * Sandburg, just keep in mind that many serial killers' neighbors say later, "He was such a nice fellow." So, stop worrying about that and watch your skip. *

The other waitress brought Blair's dinner. It was like being in heaven. Everything was cooked with very little fat and tasted like nothing he'd ever had. Blair realized that he hadn't eaten dinner in almost two days. No wonder he was attacking his dinner with such gusto. He looked up and saw Ellison staring at him with an odd look on his face. Blair couldn't help it, he smiled sheepishly. No doubt Ellison thought he was some kind of pig, or perhaps, a starving person finally getting enough money for a meal.

Blair continued eating like there was no tomorrow and found Ellison heading over to his booth. Ellison stood and looked at him and said, "Why did you have to come? They would've followed you. Now they'll know where I am."

Blair calmly wondered to himself, * How did Ellison know who I was? *

"Sit down, Mr. Ellison, and we'll talk," Blair said casually.

"I'm leaving. If you want to chase me, fine. But I'm not going in without a fight," Ellison said leaving the diner.

As Blair started to get up, the waitress and the owner stood in front of the booth. Blair said, "I need to leave, right now. Have you ever heard of obstruction of justice?"

"Yeah," the owner said, "we've heard of it. We've also heard of letting someone live their life as well as they can. He's not hurt anyone. He's

one of the most gentle people we know."

"Then let me take him in so we can prove that he's innocent," Blair asked.

Just then, a customer flew through the door and said, "Someone has Jim in the alley and they're killing him! Does anyone have a gun? They're going to kill him for sure!"

Blair stood up quickly and said, "I'm armed. You know I can help him."

The owner said, "Please don't hurt him. He's a good man."

"I won't hurt him. Now can I get out there and help him?" Blair asked.

They all stood back and wondered what the hell Sandburg could possibly do to help. He didn't have the size or strength to help Jim Ellison. The owner said, "Would you like me to help?"

"No, I want you all to stay inside no matter what. Do you understand?" Blair asked.

"Yes, but please don't hurt Mr. Ellison. He's a good man," the youngest waitress pleaded.

"I promise I won't hurt him," Blair said and ran out the door. He stopped at his Durango and pulled up the lock for the car seat, pulled out another gun and his Laser Taser. Grabbing a few sets of the one-time use cuffs, he started running for the alley. He clicked his alarm on over his shoulder. When he got close enough to hear the men with Ellison, he slowed down.

A woman walked up to him and said, "I'm Sheriff Taylor. I'm here to help you. I don't want you to take them on alone."

Blair was actually grateful for that.

They inched their way down the alley. The first voice said, "Hurry it up! Kill the son-of-a-bitch. We can't have anyone left to finger us."

A second voice said, "Don't you think we should find out what the hell he said to that bounty hunter?"

"Even if he said something, we'll take care of the bounty hunter when we run into him," a third voice said.

They dropped Ellison on the ground when a voice said, "Well, it's time to discuss it with me because you've run into me."

"Mr. Bounty Hunter, if you know what's good for you, you'll get out of here and fast. This isn't your business," the largest man was saying.

Sheriff Taylor said, "I don't want to have to hurt you, gentlemen. Please put your guns down and no one will get hurt."

The men stared at each other with big smiles on their faces. They must have thought Sandburg and Taylor weren't a force to be reckoned with.

Blair had his arms behind him so that he looked relaxed, but he wasn't. He had guns in both hands. He was hoping he wouldn't have to shoot his way out of this. Didn't look like he was going to get his wish, though.

There was a loud moan from Ellison on the ground and the four men who had attacked him went into action. All pulling their guns, they took aim to fire on Sandburg, but he already had his guns out and shot two of them without a thought. It wasn't that he liked shooting anyone, but these men left him no choice. Blair hadn't just shot them; he had aimed to hurt them badly or worse.

Sheriff Taylor had shot the other two men and they were all lying on the ground moaning.

Men came running from the diner. Someone said, "You promised you wouldn't hurt him."

"I didn't hurt Ellison. They were trying to kill him. I had to shoot them." Blair said as calmly as he could.

Blair leaned down, checked for pulses and found them. Three men were going to live to go to trial. One of the men that Sheriff Taylor shot was not so lucky.

Before dealing with Ellison, Blair helped get the men cuffed and ready to go to the hospital.

Blair then slid his handcuffs out of the leather case on his belt and put them on Ellison because he knew he'd be coming to soon.

Blair knew that he might have to fight this town to get Ellison out of here. He really didn't want to do it, but also knew that it was his job. Sheriff Taylor started asking the men questions and found out the one that was dead was the leader. He was also the only one that knew who hired the men.

Blair shook his head and said, "Well, do you need me to sign some papers or something?"

"No, Mr. Sandburg. We need you to take our Jim and hide him until it's safe again. He'll tell you when that is." Sheriff Taylor then motioned for the men close by to pick Jim up and carry him to Blair's truck.

"I have to take him back or my boss will lose his business," Blair said, trying to explain himself, not really knowing why.

"Jim would never let your boss lose his business. It's not his way. He just needs more time, that's all. So take him up to the woods and stay where no one knows who you are. Don't come back for some time." Sheriff Taylor said.

Blair watched the men carry Jim over to his Durango and Blair hit his switch to unlock the vehicle. They were very careful putting him in the front seat. The largest and older man said, "Do you have anything to fix him up with? Bandages and so on?"

"Yes, I have a first aid kit. I'll take care of him; don't you worry, " Blair said as he got into the driver's side. "I took extra classes in first aid, so please don't give us another thought."

He had his window down and heard someone yell, "Someone's coming up the road really fast, Sheriff. Better get that young man out of here."

The Sheriff leaned into Blair's window, kissed his cheek and said, "Take good care of our Jim. He's one in a million."

"I'll do my best, ma'am," Blair said starting the Durango and pulling out of the parking lot and taking off. * Blair wondered why he was so willing to fall in with the townfolks' wish to keep Ellison safe. With any luck, he wouldn't have to worry about this town for a while anyhow. *

His passenger said weakly, "I have a cabin that no one knows about. No one. Go straight until you reach the tree that's split down the middle and turn left. Go five miles and that's my cabin. The name on the security gate says Miller. The code for the alarm system is 31152."

Blair took off for this place like a bat out of hell. Ellison looked bad. Blair found himself shaking. He'd never seen anyone beat up quite this badly. He needed to get the man somewhere and figure out what was wrong with him. * Sandburg, what do you think you'll do with him once you get there? It's not like passing a first aid course makes you a fucking doctor. *

His passenger said quietly, "Hey, Chief, I'm going to be all right. I used to be a medic in the service. I just need to stay low and get better. I might have some broken ribs, my shoulder and maybe my leg. But other than that I'm doing pretty well."

Blair didn't even ask him how he knew this shit. He just believed him although he fucking looked half dead. * Jesus, why'd you have to say that, you idiot, now he'll probably die on you? *

"Calm down, Chief. You have to slow your breathing and your heart rate or you're going to pass out," Ellison said sounding surprisingly calm.

Blair looked over at him as if he had grown a second head. "How in the fuck do you know if my heart's going too fast? And I'm not breathing fast."

"I'm sorry I said anything. The turn's up here, Chief. Turn left," Ellison said weakly.

"Man, don't pass out. You're too fucking big for me to carry," Blair said, trying to lighten the mood. However, it was too late, he had passed out. * What the hell was that business about hearing my heart beat? Is this man insane on top of everything else? *

After driving around a while, Blair finally found the security gate that said Miller on it. Pulling up, he punched in the security code and waited for the gates to open. Driving up the road, he saw one of the most beautiful cabins he'd ever seen, and damn if Ellison didn't have a three car garage, too.

When Blair parked and shut the truck off, he tried to wake the unconscious man. He was unable to get any type of response. Ellison was barely breathing, from what Blair could tell by looking at him. Under the dome light, he could see the blue lips. * Shit... *

Blair got out, ran and opened the cabin with keys he found in his passenger's front pocket. Running back, he opened the Durango and tried to rouse the man enough to give him some help but he was completely out. Blair knew this was going to be hard but he was determined to get this man in a bed where he could fix what he could. Blair did the only thing he could think of. The fireman's carry was the best way of getting him into the house. * Back, don't fail me now. * As he lifted Ellison onto his back, he groaned and said, "Holy fucking shit...*

He went as fast as he could because Ellison weighed more than he thought. Once inside, he laid him down on the bed in the first bedroom. He rushed back out to the car and grabbed all of his gear. He had to make three trips before he was able to get it all in. He closed the front door and locked the deadbolt. Then he turned on the security system. Ellison, or the builder, was thinking when he had this cabin built. It was set up for any type of emergency. There were even backup generators. Blair found the button that said electric gate and turned it on. He didn't want anyone up here without his knowledge. .. Now Blair felt like he could concentrate on one James Ellison. Blair had a feeling that Ellison was going to take a lot of nursing back to health.

Blair brought in a pan of clean water and cloths to clean Ellison with. * They must've used fucking baseball bats on him. Jesus...* As he started cleaning him up, his patient woke up. Moaning, he turned to Blair and said, "You have to set my leg. The pain's beyond belief. I can't stand it."



Blair could hear the desperation in Ellison's voice and knew that he had to do something for him...and soon.

First thing he had to do was strip him of all of his bloody clothing. Ellison didn't fight him on this. He seemed to understand that Blair was only trying to help.

Looking into Ellison's eyes, Blair compared pupil sizes. They weren't unequal and seemed to be reacting normally to light. This was all good news. It meant that Ellison didn't have a concussion. * And where did you get your medical degree, Sandburg? Just keep watching him. * Blair knew that he'd still have to check the man's vitals and his pupil reaction every hour for a while.

Blair ran his hands firmly over the man's cheekbones; checking for broken bones. He ran his fingers from in front of Ellison's ears to the man's chin. There seemed to be no fracture on his face at all, which again was really good news. Blair knew, though, he would have to continue watching him until he was better.

Blair worried about Ellison puncturing a lung due to a fractured rib. He listened to hear if his breathing was too fast but he didn't hear any labored breathing at all. Maybe his patient was very lucky.

Blair knew that he needed to get Ellison into a half-sitting position. Getting the larger man moved was going to prove much harder than Blair had anticipated.

He cleaned up the blood from Jim's face and told him to try not to breathe so hard. Ellison really needed to relax a little. He told him to concentrate on something else. To think of nothing else but that one thing and see if that would help things. Immediately Jim's breathing slowed down and he seemed to calm quite a bit. Blair would have to ask him how he did that so quickly. Right now, he had better things to do.

Blair then checked to see if Ellison had any noticeable shortening of a leg or unusual positioning. Running his hands down the large man's thighs, he felt above the knee caps, the knees themselves and just below for swelling, which would indicate fracture of the lower end of the femur. He looked for damage to the knee joint or to the kneecap, and fracture to the upper end of the tibia, respectively. Unrelenting, Blair moved down each lower leg to the ankle, feeling the bony prominences on either side. He checked inside Ellison's boots for blood. Finding none, he was pleased about that, too. It wasn't as bad as Blair had first thought. It looked as if he had a sprain, not a fracture. Blair had expected Jim's bone to come popping out of his leg or something.

Using small sofa pillows, Blair put plenty of padding between Ellison's legs, moving the uninjured towards the injured leg, and tied the legs together firmly with broad bandages, starting with a figure-of-eight bandage around the ankles, but avoiding a bandage on top of the swollen area. Blair knew that the injured man needed to rest more than anything, to help himself heal, but would need to get him comfortable first. He applied heat to the swollen area and put two pillows underneath his legs to keep them elevated. But he still had to keep Ellison's upper body from lying flat.

Blair got more ice for Ellison's face. It was pretty swollen but Blair was almost sure that there was nothing broken. If nothing else, Ellison was sleeping quietly and apparently comfortably. Blair was surprised at that. Getting up, he got some juice and some Tylenol. When he came back Ellison was lying there looking at him. For some reason, this scared Blair. He said, "Ellison, are you all right?"

"Yeah. I feel a little better. Thanks," the injured man whispered.

Blair was never so happy to hear someone's voice in his life. For a brief moment he'd thought Jim Ellison was lying dead on the bed with his eyes open. For some unexplained reason, this scared the shit out of him. * Well, Sandburg, you have plenty of time to think that over while you're stuck up here taking care of him. * Mentally berating himself for being such an asshole, he went into the kitchen to see what types of food they had to work with.

Going through the cupboards, Blair found a lot of soup. * Good, because he's not going to be able to eat anything major for a while. * He found canned milk, coffee and some canned juices. Blair made a pot of coffee and put the canned milk in the fridge, along with the canned juice. He needed to be sure that Ellison got plenty of liquids.

After the sick man had slept for about two hours, Blair made up a small bowl of soup and got him a large glass of juice. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the chair next to it. Ellison opened his eyes and said, "I can't eat right now. I don't feel like it."

"Well, Ellison, you're either going to eat now or I'll call an ambulance and have them take you to Cascade General. Do you understand?" Blair asked sternly.

"Fine, but if I puke you're the one that has to clean it up," Ellison muttered.

"Well, I'll deal with it, Ellison. Now I'm going to feed you. Your shoulder isn't broken as far as I can tell. So I just have it wrapped because it's probably sore. Same with your leg - I think it's just twisted. And I don't want you to use your arms yet. Are you doing okay?"

"What do you think, Chief?"

"Right, dumb question. Sorry. Now open up and eat like a good boy," Blair said, laughing as Jim Ellison crossed his eyes at him.

Ellison found out that he was hungry and Blair had been right. He'd feel better if he rested and ate something. He also drank an entire glass of juice with Blair's help. Then he leaned into Blair's arm and fell asleep. Blair looked down at the sleeping man and wondered how he had ended up like this.

The next two days went by the same as that first one. Blair helped Ellison with bathroom breaks. He had made a sort of bed pan and a urinal of sorts. In addition, Blair gave him sponge baths every day so nothing would get infected.

Ellison was healing really well. Blair was quite impressed, if he had to say so himself. Finally, that day, after two long days (that seemed like twenty) of taking care of Ellison, Blair was surprised to hear him say, "Chief, call me Jim, okay?"

"Okay, Jim." Blair said and wondered why that seemed so important to this man.

"I could never thank you enough for this. You've saved my life, literally." Jim said, getting tired again.

"Well, you'll be giving me plenty of money when we get home if we don't make it to the next court date. Your lawyer was able to extend it before I left Cascade. He also said he'd talk to the police about things for the time being. If we don't make it back, Simon will lose his business and his home. So you'll pay all right."

Jim watched as Blair sat at the kitchen table and cleaned his weapons. He did this daily and Jim had come to feel very protected and safe when he knew how much this man cared for his guns. Blair looked over at Jim once and saw him watching him and smiled shyly. Jim turned his head and looked out the window by the bed. He tried to think of other things. Nothing helped. For some reason, he really liked this man. Jim had been with men before but he could tell that Blair Sandburg hadn't been with anyone of the same sex. He always knew; his instincts had never once been wrong. * Why do you always do this? Fall for someone that isn't straight for a change. *

Blair was almost done cleaning, shining and polishing his weapons and kept looking over at Jim's bed. For some reason, Jim was watching him more today. Well, they'd been up here for awhile; and again he was probably just horny. Laughing to himself, he continued his work and looked over at Jim to see him watching him again.

* Shit, Sandburg, he does have a thing for you. Now what are you going to do? Sandburg, you're the one that's horny. *

Blair finished his work and cleaned up the kitchen. He walked in and sat down next to the bed and said, "You feel like talking?"

"Sure. What do you need to know?" Jim asked.

"I need to know what the fuck's going on. Who were those men in that alley and why were they trying to kill you? Who are all of those people in town? Why do they like you so much? And last, but not least, if you didn't kill your friend, who did?" Blair said finally taking a breath.

Jim just stared at him and said, "Okay, one thing at a time. Those men were hired by my friend's killer. They didn't want me to get back to Cascade and let it out about who I think really did it."

"Did you recognize any of them, Jim?"

"No, none of them. I don't think so anyhow. Next question's easy. Those people in town are like my family. I bought this town some time ago. No one knows but them. I keep their little town alive and all I ask is for no special treatment when I'm up here in my cabin. None of them know where it is. I help pay their salaries to keep the town going. It's a nice little town."

"Well, now it makes sense. They all acted like you were some sort of god or something," Blair said, smiling.

"As far as who killed my friend, I think it was his wife. I overheard her last month talking about some of the money she'd taken out of the bank account. He wasn't just my partner; he was also my investor. His wife did the books. I think that she was skimming and was fucking

both of us in the process."

"Wouldn't the police look at her as a suspect?" Blair asked.

"I'm sure they are looking at her as a suspect but she has an alibi. She was with her lover," Jim said flatly.

She... was fucking both of us... Did that mean... "Oh, shit. She was sleeping with you?"

"No, Chief, I went by to have him sign something and I could hear her in the house with another man. Believe me, the sounds I heard couldn't be misconstrued. I wanted to tell him but I didn't want to hurt him. I knew that would," Jim said breathing hard.

"Man, you were sleeping with him? Weren't you?" Blair asked, shocked.

"Yes. He was with me that night. He insisted on going home. I didn't want him to but he said he was going to break it off with her. That was the last time I heard from him. Later that night, she called and said he hadn't been home. The next thing I knew he was in ICU and his wife told police that I had tried to hurt her husband before."

Blair started pacing back and forth across the living room until Jim finally called out and asked him to stop. "Chief, it shouldn't matter if the papers find out I'm gay. I have money invested wisely. I don't have to worry about making more. The only thing I do worry about is my family."

"Jim, those men I shot were sent to kill you. Someone has to be behind this besides the wife. What's her name, anyway?"

"Rita. I think it was the man she was sleeping with the day I went there."

"This is a strange question, man. But how did you hear what was going on in Rita's house if you weren't in there?" Blair asked.

"Chief, you don't even want to know."

"Why not? What could it hurt?"

"Well, first of all, it lays ground for an insanity plea," Jim said sadly.

"Just tell me. It'll never leave this room," Blair said, trying to get Jim to trust him.

"I don't know why, but for some reason I have heightened senses."

"You mean, you can hear really well?" Blair asked.

"I could hear Rita from my truck and she was inside the house, in her bedroom."

"No shit? Do you have any other senses that are affected?" Blair wondered aloud.

"All of them. All five." Jim said looking defeated and exhausted.

"Hey, man, you better rest for awhile. We'll talk about this when you're up to it. Rest, Jim. Try not to worry," Blair said, touching Jim's arm and rubbing it gently.

Jim was asleep within moments. Blair was humming with excitement. * God, what were the chances of ever finding someone like he had heard about on his CD? A watchman or guardian, isn't that what the man called them? Shit, Jim Ellison might be a full blown Sentinel. * Blair walked out to the garage and got into his car and got the CDs on the Sentinel project. He knew he needed to study up on it. When he got back into the cabin, he once again locked himself and Jim in, safe from the world for the time being. He put the CD into the portable player, attached it to his belt and listened while he made some dinner. As he worked, he was fascinated by what the man had to say. He didn't even notice that Jim had wakened and was watching him as he paced in the kitchen. When he looked over he saw Jim's lips moving and snatched the earphones off and said, "I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't want to wake you up. I had to listen to something. What were you asking?"

"I just wanted to let you know that what you're listening to isn't always true. I can tell you what's true and what isn't."

"Shit, Jim. You could hear it from across the room with the earphones on?" Blair asked in amazement.

For the next two hours, Jim told him everything he'd need to know about the senses he had. Then Jim told him about times when he would lose track of time.

"This Professor said those episodes are called zone outs. You're focusing too hard on one thing. You need to use two senses to be on the safe side. We can work on it. I'll listen to the rest of it and we'll try some things."

"Chief, you're enjoying this, aren't you?" Jim asked smiling.

"Actually, yeah. I love learning. And then to have something like this happen while I'm studying about it makes me think it was meant to be; like fate, karma, or kismet. Whatever. What? Stop laughing," Blair said, swatting at Jim but missing him on purpose.

"Sorry, Chief. You just reminded me of a hippie for a second there," Jim said trying not to laugh and hurt his ribs.

"Okay, sleep for a while and when you get up, you can have dinner and we'll talk some more," Blair ordered.

"Yes, Master," Jim said, but did close his eyes and fall asleep quickly.

Blair looked over at him and smiled. Jim was a nice looking man. Even with the bruises, he could tell how nice he must look when healed. It seemed like forever since he saw him for those few moments at the diner. Blair found himself wanting to see him when he was fully healed, and not to sponge bathe him or nurse him back to health. Unless he really wanted a sponge bath.

Blair hooked up his laptop to the telephone and got online. He and Simon had opened up accounts for emergencies. That way no one would trace either of them.

Subj: Boss man, I have news.

Date: 3/22/01 5:09:54 PM US Mountain

Standard Time From: Skippy2@Tracer.com

To: Skippy1@Tracer.com

Hi, Simon. I just wanted to let you know that everything's going well. Let me give you a run down of what's happening and you can email me and ask questions.

1. The Skip has a cracked or bruised rib, healing quite nicely right now. I thought his leg was broken, but now think it might have either been sprained or just twisted. It's healing well, also. His other injuries are all superficial. We hope to make it back in time for the court date but I'm not sure if we'll be able to make it. Will keep you posted.

2. The Skip has been filling me in on a few things. First of all, he overheard his friend's wife sleeping with another man. She was stealing money from their business. I might as well tell you up front, the Skip was sleeping with said friend. Not the wife, the friend. Could you please check out who hangs around that woman?

3. There were four men in a small town two hours from Cascade, won't tell you where, but they attacked our skip and tried to kill him. I had to defend our skip and in the process had to shoot two of the four men. The other two were shot by the sheriff, and one of them died from his wound. They told Skip that they were hired by a woman, so Skip figures it was wife of friend. We really need to check and see who she hangs out with. That would help a great deal.

4. Simon, there isn't a chance that we'll get out of here before the two weeks are up. Do you think you could let Skip's lawyer know that he's doing okay but he needs to mend before we come in? I have to keep him alive and I don't think I could do that if he was in Cascade. These people are very serious. I'm keeping him resting and safe here. Don't worry. I'm going to send you some money for the business. It's in a bank account in Mexico. I'll give you all of the numbers so you're able to get to it. I'm sorry for not being there to help you, Simon. I think this man's innocent and I really think he needs our help. You'll forgive me, right?

Talk to you later on. Write and let me know what's going on. I'm a little stir crazy here.

Best wishes,
Little Skip.

Blair sent off the email, checked his mailbox and found six notes from Simon. All of them asked if he was all right. He knew that Simon would be worried to death. At least he got that email sent off to make his boss feel better. Smiling as he answered all of them, he signed off and went to check on Jim again.

Jim was in the middle of having a nightmare. He started to get agitated but Blair stopped him from moving around too much. Jim opened his eyes and said, "What are you doing, Chief?"

"You looked like you were going to come off the bed, man. I really don't want to have to start all over again."

"Do you ever sleep?" Jim asked looking at the tired man.

"Well, I sleep every night. You know that."

"You call that sleeping? In the chair next to the bed?"

"Well, it's better than not sleeping at all, man. I take what I can get," Blair said, smiling.

"Well, from now on, we'll share this bed, it's big enough. I'm not going to attack you or anything. No need to worry," Jim said seriously.

"I wasn't worried. The thought never occurred to me."

"Oh," Jim said, reddening slightly.

"Well, that came out wrong. Sorry," Blair said, matching Jim's blush and raising it to really blushing.

"It's okay, Chief. Really," Jim said, moving slightly. "Hey, I just moved a little and I can breathe easier. I think I'm on the road to recovery."

"Good news. We need to get you in shape so we can get to trial," Blair said, thinking of Simon more than anyone.

"Sandburg, I'm not going back there without a fight. Do you understand? They'll kill me and then you'll have nothing," Jim said sadly.

"Jim, I promise I won't let them hurt you," Blair said.

Deciding to change the subject, Jim asked, "So what's for dinner tonight?"

"I'm making something and I'm not telling you what. You'll be surprised. Unless, of course, you can tell me what it is from the smell alone while I'm cooking it."

"You're on," Jim agreed, smiling.

Blair jumped up and started dinner with Jim lying there waiting to start guessing. He didn't want to burst Blair's bubble but he already knew what he was making. He could smell the hamburger while it was thawing and now he could smell the green peppers, red peppers, onions, tomatoes, eggs and salt and pepper. Jim smiled when he realized that he was making a meatloaf. When Blair bent over to get the bowl for the loaf Jim called out, "Meatloaf."

"All right, how in the hell could you know that? I haven't even started yet," Blair complained.

Jim explained how he could smell all of those things and when he started smelling them. Blair was so impressed that he almost flew over and jumped on the bed. Damn, he wished that Jim was in better shape.

* Sandburg, get your damn mind out of the gutter. *

Once he was finished making it and shaping it, he put it in the oven with two baked potatoes. He put the oven on 350 degrees and set the timer for one hour. He felt better about Jim having a real meal for the first time in days.

He walked into the bedroom and turned on the television so Jim could watch some news. Blair got his laptop and sat down on the bed next to Jim. He powered it up, hooked up the line and checked to see if Simon had answered him back yet. Sure enough, there was an answer from Simon.

As Blair went to check his mail, he looked down and Jim was sound asleep on his arm. It was so damned sweet realizing that he was trusted that much..* Sandburg, you're getting soft. Get your mind back on business and stop thinking about him as anything more than a skip. *

Subj: Boss man, My ass.

Date: 3/22/01 7:09:54 PM US Mountain Standard

Time From: Skippy1@Tracer.com

To: Skippy2@Tracer.com

Sandburg, what the fuck are you doing? Have you lost the little bit of sense you had left? I want you back here on the double. I know that you want to believe skip. Hell, I want to believe skip. But it still boils down to the fact we have no proof and we need him here in seven days or I'll lose everything. You'll be aiding and abetting. Just try to think about that for a moment.

I checked on the wife of Skip's friend and she's got some interesting friends. I'll tell you about them when I talk to you. She's been living pretty high on the hog since Skip has been out of the picture so I figure that she has some of his money. That's if he's as innocent as we believe he is. Sure wish this Skip would remember who he heard or saw at the house that day with his friend's wife. See if you can help him remember anything. Okay?

I guess I could ask you if you're all right but you would tell me that you're fine, no matter what, wouldn't you? I hope that you'll stay safe. I think about you as my second son. Take care of yourself and come back safe and sound. Talk to you soon.

Big Skip

Blair decided that he'd ask Jim about the person's voice. He might be able to get him to relax and try to have voice recollection from a zone.

* Jim seemed to be at a loss about that time so maybe it's someone he knows and he zoned. That would make some sort of sense. I'll talk to him when he wakes up. *

Blair answered Simon's email and told him not to worry so much. He explained that Ellison had told him not to worry and he'd pay for everything. Hopefully, that would make Simon feel more secure. When he finished he started making notes about the case. Who killed Roger Marshall? Why? Did Jim know who the killer was? Did he hear him or see him? Did the wife know about the two men? How long had the affair been going on between Marshall and Ellison? Did anyone else know that Ellison was gay? Would this really not bother Jim to have people into his private matters? Could Jim have killed his friend and lover? Would Jim allow him, Blair, to help him to relax and meditate until he had some memory of what had happened?

These were all good questions and Blair intended on asking Jim all of them. The timer went off on the stove and Jim woke up and said, "Smells good, Chief."

"I'm glad it does. I'd feel horrible if you said, 'Yuck, that smells bad.'"

Jim couldn't help laughing quietly. He was warming up to this young man. He seemed to be one of the nicest men Jim had ever met-as long as Jim remembered that they were only in this for business. Sometimes Jim had to tell himself this. He had miserable luck with lovers.

Blair got everything ready and brought the food over to the bed. He helped Jim sit up a little more. The younger man noticed that Jim was moving a lot easier tonight. That was good. He put the lap tray across Jim and helped him eat. They both ate off the same tray. Blair found it easier to have it there for both of them.

"This is delicious, Blair," Jim said, smiling.

"That's the first time you've ever called me by my name. I was ready to look over my shoulder and see if there was someone else in the room."

"Very funny. Actually, I like calling you Chief. You're the boss and all," Jim said as he started to laugh.

"Laugh it up, funny man, but remember who has to help clean you up after you go to the bathroom," Blair said evilly.

"Low blow, Chief, low blow."

They finished their dinner in silence. Blair finished cleaning up afterwards and did the nightly routine of bringing out the wash basin, cloths and towels. Blair noticed that Jim seemed to be having problems tonight. "Jim, is something wrong?"

"No, other than I'm just tired of being dependant on you to be clean and everything else."

"I'm sorry things are going slow but I think you're really making a quick recovery. Your injuries looked much worse than they are. I'm thinking in a day or two we might try walking just a little bit."

"Thank god for that." Jim muttered. As Blair ran the cloths over Jim's body, Jim had to think of awful things to keep from popping a boner while Blair was doing this. Thank god it seemed to be working. Once Blair was done, he wrapped the leg and ribs again and then put clean sheets over him to keep him warmer.

Jim was so grateful that he was done that he sighed.

"That bad or that good?" Blair asked smiling.

"Just tired of it. I feel like I've been here for a month."

"Tell me about it, Jim. I'm not used to being cooped up either. I can't wait to get this thing over with so we can get back to our lives."

Soon after that, Blair said, "Jim, I'm leaving my gun here while I jump into the shower. Then when I'm done, if you're not too tired, I have some questions."

"Okay. I'll nap while you're in the shower."

"Jim, I need you to stay awake while I'm in the shower," Blair said seriously.

"Okay. Don't worry so much," Jim said smiling as Blair got up and walked into the bathroom.

Blair got under the hot water and felt some of the soreness and stiffness leave. * God, I'm so fucking sick of being indoors. I'm bored, tired and horny. Life goes on, Sandburg. *

When he finally came out, Jim was asleep. Blair was angry but knew that the other man was tired, so he let it go this time. Next time, he'd wait until Jim had napped before he left him alone again. Blair covered Jim with a quilt and then he climbed into bed himself. After about ten minutes, he felt Jim curl up behind his body and Blair felt so good that he fell asleep.

Jim woke the next morning curled up behind Blair Sandburg and wondered if anyone had ever told him how wonderful he smelled. * Like something exotic. He looked, smelled and acted like something or someone exotic. * If Jim had more nerve he'd tell him that. Right now, Jim needed to move because his cock was digging into Sandburg's ass. Not a good thing with the skip tracer who saved your life and is still trying to save your ass.

He was finally able to move away from Blair and he heard a moan come from the man next to him. "Hey, man, you took away my blanket."

Jim laughed then realizing that Blair was probably one of the most open people he'd ever met.

Blair did what he always did when he woke up. He relieved himself and then came and took care of Jim. Blair found it harder and harder to just keep it clinical. * Man, he has a nice cock. Jesus, Sandburg, get a grip. Oh no, not that kind of grip. *

"Want to share what's so funny, Chief?" Jim asked with his voice full of humor.

"No, I sure don't!" Blair said as he got up, took care of things, cleaned them up and then started breakfast.

* Man, what a long fucking day. *

The Beast Inside

*I watch, with crude bodily pleasures.
Becoming a slave to my lower carnal desires.
I hunt for one thing and one thing alone.
My intellect tries to push the lustful feeling aside.
My male in me, has ruined it for us both.
I continue to watch him; he is a sensual beast.
My sexual appetite has no boundaries.
The quest is on; the search begins.
I'm the pursuer, while he remains the pursued.
Hounding him until he can no longer give chase.
I've become a hunter.
He's become the hunted.
I'm a Manhunter.*

--Patt



After Jim's afternoon nap and a little bit of exercise on his leg, Blair decided to question Jim and see what would happen.

"Jim, who do you think killed Roger Marshall?"

"Shit, Sandburg, why not just come right out and ask things you want to know?" Jim said, almost stuttering.

"You wanna answer my question?"

"I think that Rita Marshall had him killed. I really can't see her doing it."

"Do you know why she would have had him killed?" Blair asked.

"Well, my guess would be that she might have found out about us. She was big on how things looked. She wouldn't like him being a fag one bit. Or maybe it was something as simple as Roger found out about her taking money from the company and she had to silence him," Jim said calmly, yet sadly.

"Jim, do you think that you might have seen or heard something at the Marshall house that day you were there? Do you feel like you might have zoned on something that was said?"

"I don't think so, Sandburg," Jim said, losing patience.

"So you think she knew about you and Roger? How long had you been sleeping together?"

"What the fuck has this got to do with anything?" Jim asked angrily.

"Well, it could mean something, Jim. Why not answer it and find out?"

"Fine, you want to know. It was the first fucking time we slept together."

"Why didn't you want to tell me that, Jim?" Blair asked with a slightly confused look on his face.

"Because... I just didn't want you to know," Jim said, his face turning more red by the moment.

"Holy shit, it was your first time? Oh, fuck. That changes things, Jim."

"No, it doesn't change a fucking thing. I had feelings for him for a long time. I was just afraid to do anything about them."

"So you were in love with him?" Blair asked.

"No, not in love. In lust," Jim answered.

"So, she couldn't have known about you and Roger, right?" Blair asked.

"Well, she might have because Roger hated her. He was going to dump her. That was before he slept with me. He liked men. He never liked women and just married her for looks."

"You think that he told her how he felt about you?"

"He might have," Jim said quietly.

"All right, what am I missing here? Did she know or didn't she?"

"She knew. She called me and told me to stay the fuck away from him."

"Or what?" Blair asked.

"Or she would tell my family and his family and ruin him."

"Do you believe she would?" Blair continued.

"Yeah, that's why Roger came over to my house that night. He wanted to calm me down. I told him I didn't want everyone to know about us."

"So, that was the second time you slept with him then?"

"No, we didn't sleep together that time. We talked, we argued and then he left," Jim said, looking away from Blair.

"What did you argue about, Jim?"

"He said he didn't want to get serious. He had other fish to fry," Jim said, embarrassed.

"So he was dumping you?" Blair asked.

Jim looked away again and answered, "Yes."

"Jesus, Jim. This will come out and it won't look good," Blair said trying not to panic at the thought of him helping a man who might have killed someone. * Oh, shit. *

"Well, we'll cover that when we need to. Jim, I'm sorry that we're having to cover things that are upsetting to you," Blair said, realizing that he meant every word. "Jim, how many people knew about you and Roger?"

"No one besides Rita. Well, that I know of anyhow."

"Do you know if anyone else knew about Roger being gay?"

"Sandburg, have you been listening to me? He wanted to sleep around. Of course there were others that knew!" Jim said, with such pain in his voice that Blair felt like wrapping his arms around the bigger man.

"Okay, only a few more questions Jim and then you can rest, all right? "

"Whatever, Chief. I can tell you think I did it now. So what difference does it make?"

"That is so not true, man. I was a little worried for a few minutes but then I realized you aren't the type to kill someone."

"Oh, you would be surprised, Chief. They'll find out I was a Ranger and they'll know I wouldn't think twice about killing someone."

"Jim, there's a big difference between the service and your friend." Blair heard something come out of Jim's mouth, but didn't understand it.

"What did you just say? I'm not a Sentinel, Jim. I couldn't hear you."

"I said I wanted to kill him. He fucking used me," Jim said. There were tears in his eyes. Then just as quickly his face went back to the cold,

dark and angry Ellison look.

"Now that I can understand," Blair said touching Jim's hand lightly.

Jim looked at Blair and said, "I don't need your pity."

"It wasn't pity. I like you. I'm glad we're here discussing all this and working things out."

"That's because you're weird," Jim said, trying to make a joke but failing miserably.

"We'll get this all figured out, Jim. I promise," Blair said, and found that he really meant it. He knew that Jim wouldn't kill anyone especially someone that he might have thought he loved.

"Jim, would you care if anyone else knew about you and Roger?"

"Well, I told myself I didn't care but when Rita called and threatened to tell my family, I panicked. I felt like my world would never be the same."

"How you doing here? Up for something else or do you want to sleep for awhile?" Blair asked concerned at the gray look that had come over Jim's face.

"I'm okay, I'd rather have it done with and then we can move on to whatever else you want to do," Jim said despondently.

"Jim, do you mind if we try something here?"

"No, what's up, Chief?"

"I want you to lie back and relax, close your eyes and listen to my voice. I want you to meditate and try to remember what you saw and heard the day you went to the Marshall home."

"Chief, I really don't want to think about it," Jim said stubbornly.

"Tough. Now relax, take deep breaths and do what I say."

"Fine, but I don't remember a thing." Jim sounded nervous.

Blair had him relaxed and talked him through memory tasks but nothing seemed to work.

"Jim, I think you're too tired to do this right. So why don't we do this tomorrow."

"Okay. I'm tired. I might just sleep for a little while," Jim said as he turned on his side and acted like he was sleeping.

Blair moved up behind him and curled his body around Jim's. Jim tensed up but Blair refused to give in. Before long, Jim relaxed and let himself be held by Blair and fell asleep.

As they lay there, Blair realized that he was falling for this man. It wasn't as if being with a man was anything new. Blair had slept with a man in college, once. However, it didn't take. He felt like this one might. While he was thinking, he realized that he needed to give Jim some breathing room. Then he'd be able to remember plenty. So for the next four days, Blair was going to do everything he could to make Jim's recovery faster and more comfortable. Blair smiled to himself when he thought about what he'd really like to do. * Take a nap Sandburg; you're excessively horny. *

Each day as Jim got stronger, Blair found it harder and harder to stop touching the man. He was like a magnet for him. He was drawn to him. It was almost as if Jim could tell and used this against Blair. * Don't be silly; he isn't even aware of what he's doing. *

They started a slow recovery program of Jim trying to walk daily. He'd take a few steps and he would exercise his body so he didn't lose all of his muscle mass. On the fifth day, Jim walked to the bathroom for the first time unassisted. He was very pleased with himself. Blair was pleased, too, but now he'd have to watch him like a hawk. Blair knew that Jim would try to make a run for it as soon as he was stronger.

Jim asked Blair, "Do you think I could take a bath? I'm dying to soak in that hot tub."

"Sure, let me help you get in, okay?"

Blair started helping Jim off with his clothing and noticed that Jim seemed tense this time. "Something wrong, man?"

"No, I'm just tired and want to soak in the tub," Jim said as he started to get into the barely filled tub.

As Jim lay back in the tub letting the warm water loosen his muscles, he started to relax until Blair started washing his body. "Chief, don't."

Blair looked down and could see Jim growing harder as he rubbed the cloth over his chest and belly. "It's okay, Jim. It'll be all right."

"No, it won't," Jim said sadly.

"I'm sorry. I thought maybe you wanted me," Blair said, pulling away from Jim.

Jim grabbed his wrist and said, "I do, and that's the problem."

"I'm not so sure I like being called a problem," Blair said, smiling sexily at Jim, knowing that it would work.

"Chief, I'm so fucking scared of this."

"We'll work on it, Jim." Blair got out of his clothing and got in the hot tub. They began kissing and Blair knew instantly that this man was going to have to be his. Jim's kisses were like breathing; he knew he'd never be the same without them again. * God, how corny does it sound to say I think I found the other half of my soul? Nevertheless, I think I have. Who am I kidding? I know I have. *

Blair knew that he had to take things easy so he said, "Jim, lie back and enjoy the ride. We'll get crazy when you're feeling up to it. Tonight, I just want to make you feel good." Blair started kissing him again and stroked slowly up and down Jim's cock. Jim was moaning into Blair's mouth making the younger man almost lose it before they'd done anything. He decided he'd better speed things up or he'd come without Jim. The bigger man slid his legs open as an invitation. Blair took him up on that invitation and moved in between them, taking great care not to hurt him. He started stroking him harder now and playing with his balls until Jim was moaning loudly. Blair moved his finger down to Jim's hole and said, "Do you want me to, Jim?"

"Oh god, yes!" Jim answered, panting hard into Blair's face. Blair pulled back again and then went to town giving Jim the best blowjob he'd ever had in his life. When Blair's finger entered Jim's center, Jim came in Blair's mouth with a loud scream. * Ellison, you slut, you just screamed. *

Blair got up and while still between Jim's legs, started pumping his own cock while Jim watched in fascination. Blair kept pumping it until he was close, when he said, "Jim, touch me." Jim reached down and slid his finger into Blair's hole and Blair came all over Jim's belly and groin.

Jim was hard again; Blair couldn't believe his recuperative powers. He sucked him dry again and this time Jim sounded close to exhaustion. Blair smiled up at him and said, "Time for a nap?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind. Jesus, that was fantastic," Jim said, smiling at his new love.

"Yeah?" Blair asked, uncertainly.

"Yeah," Jim said, pulling him into a hug. "It was great, Chief, thank you."

"Let's get out of here, man. You're tired and cold," Blair said, getting up and out of the tub. He dried off and got dressed quickly and went to get some things for Jim to wear. As he helped the man out of the tub, Jim kept kissing him. "You're a fucking romantic, aren't you?" Blair asked, smiling like a loon.

"Yeah, sue me," Jim answered as he let Blair lead him to the bed for nothing but much needed sleep.

As they fell into a deep sleep, Blair dreamed that things were always good, and life was always fair. He was kidding himself, but it was his dream-he could think whatever he wanted to.

In the next four days, Jim got stronger and stronger each day. Blair knew that he'd have to face taking him back soon. He didn't know how to mention that he wanted to try the meditation thing again. They would have to discuss it. Jim was in the shower. He wanted to take a shower by himself to show Blair that he could manage it.

Blair sat down at the table and signed in on his laptop. He needed to see what was going on with Simon. As expected, there was an email from Simon. Blair didn't like the subject line so he knew he'd like the email even less.

Subj: Where the fuck are you??????
Date: 3/30/01 10:35:12 PM US Mountain Standard Time
From: Skippy1@Tracer.com
To: Skippy2@Tracer.com

Little Skip,

I'm going to fucking kick your ass when I see you the next time. Jim's lawyer talked to the DA and the Judge today. I went to him with everything we've uncovered and then the attorney got a postponement. They both agreed to a postponement but only for ten days. You have ten fucking days to get him back here or I lose everything. Do you hear me? I want to hear that you'll be back and soon. What's going on anyhow? Did you get answers to any of the questions?

Little Skip, I know that I'm not always the best boss, partner, or friend, but I'm telling you, I'll never talk to you again if you don't write and let me know you're all right. Please?

Big Skip.

Subj: I'm fine, Big Skip.
Date: 3/30/01 11:03:24 PM US Mountain Standard Time

From: Skippy2@Tracer.com
To: Skippy1@Tracer.com

Big Skip,

I'm sorry that I haven't written in the last couple of days. I've been busy.. I'm getting Skip 3 ready for the trip. He's almost ready. So don't worry, we'll be there. OK? I miss you too, Big Skip. Don't worry so much. I'll be there soon. Things will be just fine.

Little Skip.

As he sent it off, he heard Jim coming out of the bathroom. "Jim, I need to talk to you about something."

Jim walked over to the table, slowly, but in pretty good shape considering. He leaned down and kissed Blair and said, "Hey, I could use a kiss before you get all serious on me."

Blair kissed him long and hard and ultimately pulled away. "Jim, I want to try the meditation thing again. We might be able to find something out."

Kissing Blair once more, he sat down and leaned back against him and closed his eyes. Blair was shocked at how easily Jim had given in. Suddenly, Blair realized that Jim loved him. * Holy fucking shit... *

"Jim, do you love me?" Blair asked out of the blue. Jim looked up at him, tilting his head back against his chest more and said, "Yeah, I do. You okay with that?"

"Oh yeah. I'm fine with that," Blair said, smiling.

"Okay, Chief, let's get this show on the road. Then we'll head back to Cascade and we can save your friend's business and all of that," Jim said anxiously.

Blair talked Jim through the relaxation exercise and before long Jim was breathing just like Blair did when he meditated. "Think back to that day, Jim. Think about how many voices you heard."

"I heard two," Jim said.

"Did you recognize them?" Blair asked.

"Yes, I knew who they were. One was Rita Marshall and the other was..." Jim sat up quickly and said, "Chief, I need to get back to Cascade, right now."

"Okay, that's fine. Want to tell me who it was?" Blair asked somewhat confused.

"Shit, Chief, it was me."

"It was not! Who was it, Jim?" Blair asked knowing damn well that Jim was lying.

"It was me, now take me and turn me in," Jim said and walked outside to the Durango.

Blair said, "I'll be out in a second." Picking up the phone, he dialed Simon's number and said, "Check and see what you can find out about Steven Ellison. Something happened when I tried to have him remember things and now suddenly he wants to turn himself in and he says he did it. So I know it has to be his brother. He has no other friends, right?"

"Not that we know of, kid. Man, you think he'd give up his life for his brother?"

"Oh yeah, I know he would. He's a great guy, Simon," Blair said all dreamily.

"Shit, you went and fell in love, didn't you?" Simon asked knowing the answer.

"Yeah, Simon, I did. And he's great. Wait until you meet him," Blair said getting all soft inside.

"Blair, I don't know how to say this, but what if he did kill the guy?"

"I know he didn't, Simon. Please believe me. Make sure that his attorney's the best that money can buy. Jim wouldn't have cared really, but I do."

Blair locked up the cabin with a sadness coming over him. He knew that he'd never have this quiet love again. He wasn't even sure if he and Jim would even be in love after they left here. But he, at least, had this to fall back on and remember. God, how he loved that man.

He climbed into the Durango and they pulled away from the cabin and he saw Jim looking at the cabin the same way he had. "Think we'll ever come up this way again, Jim?"

"I don't think so, Blair."

Having Jim use his given name scared the shit out of Sandburg. He knew that there was trouble then."

"Jim, talk to me, please?" Blair pleaded. "I don't want us to end this way."

"Chief, it's something I have to do. It's just something I have to do," Jim said with such sadness in his voice that Blair had tears roll down his face. Silent, damaging tears. Ones that didn't do a thing for his broken heart. He had finally found his other half and now he was going to lose him.

As they neared Cascade, Blair pleaded one more time, "Jim, please?"

"Chief, it's something I have to do."

Blair drove up to the police station, turned Jim into the department and got his slip and left. He drove over to their office and walked in the front door. He took one look at Simon and went into his arms and started to cry softly. Simon held him in a strong, close embrace. "Wanna talk about it, Blair?"

"No. I can't believe I lost him just as quickly as I found him."

"I have some things to tell you. I talked to Jim's lawyer and he said he'll try and talk Jim into being reasonable. Try not to worry, kid," Simon said, trying to calm him down.

"Simon, I love him so much and I never thought I'd fall in love," Blair said.

"Kid, I hate to do this but cops are looking for you for a statement. I'm surprised they didn't contact you while you were there today. They need a statement about shooting the two men."

"And? Maybe I can go to prison with Jim, eh?" Blair asked laughing with pain in every word spoken. Simon wondered if Blair would ever recover from this.

"Simon, there's got to be something we can do," Blair said.

"Well, I'm checking out Steven Ellison but as far as we can tell he was out of town that night. I don't think it can be him."

"What about any other family or friends?" Blair asked.

"Well, we did find out that he was dating someone named Carolyn Plummer. She seemed quite upset about him being missing. We might have to question her, too. She seemed to think that her Jim would never hurt a fly."

"We'll check her out, right?" Blair asked.

"Already started it," Simon said.

"Simon, I can't lose him. I can't lose the only person I've ever been in love with."

"And you won't. Stop worrying. We'll let the lawyers do the worrying. Now, go home and just rest."

"No, I need to do something to keep me busy. I have to help clear his name."

"It's good to have you back, kid," Simon said as he squeezed Blair's shoulder.

Blair started making phone calls and knew he was getting nowhere but he felt as if it was important enough to take care of personally.

Blair was getting nowhere with his phone calls. He was frustrated already and he had just started.

"Sandburg, can you do me a favor?" Simon asked.

"Sure, Simon, what's up?" Blair asked, looking up from his notes.

"I have a skip that needs to be picked up. It's a good one. A lot of money for both of us," Simon said.

"Man, you know, normally I would but I have to do this for Jim right now," Blair said as he drank his fifth cup of coffee of the day. If he kept this up, he'd be on the ceiling in another hour.

"That's okay, kid, I'll do it," Simon said, walking away from Blair's desk.

"Shit," Blair said, getting up. "I'll do it, Simon. Who is it? And how long's this going to take me?"

"Well, probably not that long. Here's his jacket. He's armed and dangerous, so be careful. While you're doing that I'm going to find out more about Steven Ellison and Carolyn Plummer."

"Thanks, Simon. I knew I could count on you," Blair said opening up the file. The man was one Lester Fry. Blair couldn't help it. He started laughing. Simon walked over and said, "You all right, kid?"

"Yeah, his name cracked me up."

Simon looked down at the name and said, "You think Lester's a funny name?"

"It sounds like Let Stir Fry," Blair said, yawning, and starting to put his jacket on.

Simon pushed him into the bathroom and said, "Okay, wash up, throw cold water on your face and get to work."

When Blair came out of the bathroom, he had no shirt on under his duster and Simon said, "Going for a new look, Sandburg?" Simon thought that not everyone could pull this look off but Sandburg did it with ease.

"No, just have to run home and get a clean shirt - and it's too damn cold to go without my jacket."

"Be careful with Lester Fry, Blair, okay?" Simon asked, concerned.

"Yes, Dad," Blair said, laughing, as he walked out the door.

Getting into his Durango, he thought of how great Jim would look sitting next to him working here. Side by side, tough guys. Blair smiled to himself and thought, *geeze, get a grip, Sandburg*.

Blair stopped home and got a clean shirt, checked his holsters and his guns and went back to the truck to find Lester Fry. The jacket said that he hung out with a man who ran a little diner downtown. So Blair figured he'd try that spot first. He walked into the diner and everyone watched him. Blair knew that he looked good. He wasn't tall, so he made sure that he accented what he did have. He had a great ass, shoulders and hair. He wasn't trying to be smug or conceited; he just knew what he had and what he didn't. The duster accented all of the above. It gave him an air of pure sex appeal. Smiling, he went in and took a seat. He left his jacket on because he was wearing his guns.

He ordered another cup of coffee. It was so strong it nearly knocked his duster right off of his body. * Holy shit - I'm going to be up for a week. *

He then ordered breakfast and while eating it, his skip walked in, plain as day. He looked over at Blair and Blair did the only thing he did really well in this situation. He smiled at him coyly.

The skip walked over and said, "What ya looking at, pretty boy?"

"You," Blair answered as he continued to eat.

"Pretty boy, I don't like getting looks from the likes of you," Lester said.

Blair started to get up and Lester said, "Sit back down, you little faggot."

Blair shoved Lester, fast, hard and unexpectedly and Lester found himself on the floor looking up at Blair. He got up and started to swing at Blair but Blair was way too fast. He took him down with two hits to Lester's jaw. Pulling out his handcuffs, Blair put them on Lester and then in a fireman's hold, carried him out to his Durango.

Three people from the diner tried to help Lester so Blair pulled his gun out and said, "Unless you want to join us at the police station, you'd best step back." Knowing that he meant it from the sound in his voice, they went back into the diner and Blair drove off.

* All right, Sandburg, this is the second fireman's lift you've had to do in the last ten days. Holy shit, you must think you're Arnold. Well, you're not. A man has got to know his limitations. I think my fucking back has hit my limitations.*

As Blair pulled into the parking lot of the Police Department, Lester woke up and started cussing up a storm. Blair got him inside and got his receipt and left to go to the station where they were keeping Jim.

While driving to lock up, his cell phone rang. "Sandburg." Blair answered, coldly. He was still in his cold and unfeeling mood.

"Cool it, this is me you're talking to," Simon said, laughing. "Any luck with that guy?"

"Yup, I got him signed, sealed and delivered. He called me a little faggot. Can you imagine?" Blair asked chuckling.

"Well, at least you've got a sense of humor about it," Simon said. "Got time for another one?"

"I don't have a sense of humor, Simon. I basically am," Blair said, laughing harder now.

"You're warped. You do know that, right?" Simon asked.

"Simon, I really want to see Jim," Blair said.

"First this and then visit Jim," Simon ordered.

"Fine, what the hell is it?" Blair muttered .

"Her name's Brenda Spread. She's an easy one but we still have to get her in here today. I'm sending the fax to you right now."

Blair started howling and Simon said, "What?"

"Nothing. I'm just a little slap happy today and all I could see when you said Brenda Spread was, bend and spread," Blair said, laughing all over again..

"Geeze, you're going to be like this until you get this all finished, aren't you?"

"Yes, Simon, I am. It's my job to be annoying until you help me get Jim out of there," Blair said with nothing but love in his voice. After all, he really did love the older man. He was his best friend.

"Well, I'm working on it, kid. Just go and pick this one up and we'll be caught up for a few days."

"Okay, talk to you later, Simon."

Blair pulled over and waited for the fax to get through and he read all about Brenda. Once he found out where he could find her, he headed in that direction, with one thing in mind. * When I'm done here I get to go and see Jim. *

While Blair was out doing his job, Jim was left to his thoughts in his cell. He paced, not liking the idea of being locked up at all. However, he had brought this on himself. He realized that the second voice he heard was his brother's. Steven was discussing what they could do with Jim and Roger's money. Pain throbbed in his head, making him see double. He finally had to sit down. Betrayed by his brother. Jim couldn't believe that Steven would use him like this.

God, what had he ever done to him to make him so hateful? Steven worked for Jim and William and made a lot of money. He hadn't gone as far as Jim had but only because he didn't have the passion for the work. Steven had his father's love though. Didn't he at least know that? Would Steven be capable of killing Roger? Oh having him killed? Worse, would he have Jim killed?



As Jim thought about all of this, he was growing more depressed. He would take the rap for this because he couldn't turn his brother in. He just couldn't. He sat and thought about things and suddenly remembered that he heard more than Steven in the house. Steven was with Rita. He hadn't been on the phone. It had been someone else. * Oh my god. It's all my fault. All my fault. * That was the last thing Jim remembered as he slipped into a zone..

Blair found Brenda Spread in record time, took her to the station to get his receipt, and went back to the office. "Any news on anything?"

"Not yet, kid. But don't give up hope yet. I have found out that Steven Ellison was here the better part of the day, so he wasn't gone all day as he had said earlier," Simon said.

"Good, because I'm sure that Jim's covering for him."

"Why don't you go and check on him?" Simon suggested as Blair almost flew out the door.

"See ya later, Simon."

Blair arrived at the station and they informed him that they had to call 911 and the paramedics were down there right now. They escorted Blair to the holding room where they were working on Jim.

Blair walked over, touched Jim's arm and hand and rubbed them as he said, "Come on, Jim. Come on back to me, tough guy."

The first EMT tech said, "We've been working on him for about 15 minutes and he's still not coming around. We're getting ready to transport."

"No, not yet," Blair said, "give me a few more minutes. He'll come out of it any moment now." Blair continued to rub on Jim's arm and said, "Come on, Jim. They're going to take you to the hospital. We don't want to go to the hospital. Do we?"

"What's this we shit?" Jim asked, grinning at Blair.

The techs started making a fuss over him, turned to Blair, and said, "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I just talked to him. The man's been charged with a murder he didn't commit, wouldn't you freak out, too?" Blair said as if this explained it. And the funny thing was, they bought it. Jim was in awe of being in the presence of a world-class bullshitter.

The cops came and took him back to his cell but the EMT's talked the cops into letting Blair go down to lock up with them. "You might want to stay with him for a while," the officer on duty said.

They put Jim back into the cell and brought a chair for Blair to sit on outside the cell. The officer said, "We don't normally do this but that scared the shit out of us."

"I imagine it did. He was just stressed out," Blair said, trying to sound calm.

"Well, murder does that to a person," the officer said, walking away.

Whispering, Jim said, "Chief, what the fuck are you doing here? I told you I didn't want you involved with this. I'm pleading guilty."

"Like hell you are. God, you can be such an asshole when you want to be. You're so arrogant. Are you being gallant for someone, Jim? Did you ever think about how I felt about this?" Blair asked with the hurt evident in his voice.

"Chief, you're not listening. I can't do anything else. I asked for this and I've got to take care of it."

Blair leaned into the bars and softly said, "Do you love me, Jim?"

"You know I do." Jim answered.

"If you did, you wouldn't be doing this. You'd be fighting for your life. You'd want to spend the rest of your days with me, not with some guy named Bubba in prison."

"Bubba?" Jim said, smiling at Blair.

"It's not fucking funny. You'll be someone's bitch. Don't you watch those shows? I watch Oz," Blair said, pacing and working himself up into a panic attack.

"Blair, calm down. I'm not going to be anyone's bitch," Jim said, touching Blair's hand as he walked by.

Blair pulled his hand away from Jim and said, "You don't get to touch me ever again. You don't deserve to. You fucking used me. I hate you!" Blair started to storm off but Jim's voice stopped him.

"Chief, please don't leave me like this. Please?"

Blair turned around and said, "I'm going to think about all of this but you've got to think about things, too. I won't visit you in prison."

"I'll do some hard thinking, Blair. I promise," Jim said sadly as he sat down and watched the love of his life leave the room.

All the way back to the office, Blair cried silent tears and wiped them with his sleeve, thinking, * gross. Toughen up, Sandburg. Real men do cry and then they wipe it on their sleeves. *

Jim lay down on his cot in the cell, closed his eyes, and felt the loss of someone he loved so much that it hurt. He knew he'd never be able to be with him again and that made him so sad he could hardly bear it. Why couldn't things have worked out better for both of them? * Why did you have to fuck up both of your lives? *

When Blair and Simon met two officers at the pub that night, Blair didn't know what to expect.

Simon shook both of their hands and said, "Mason and Mitchell, this is my partner, Blair Sandburg."

Both men shook Blair's hand and Mitchell said, "It's nice to finally meet you. You're quite the legend."

"Simon, why are we here again?" Blair asked rudely.

"Well, it's because these nice detective's are trying to figure out why your friend has lied and said he killed his partner when he didn't," Simon said, smiling at Blair.

"You guys think that Jim's innocent?" Blair asked with the first ray of hope he'd had all day.

Detective Mason said, "Well, we checked out his brother and he left town before Roger Marshall was killed. So then we started looking for other things."

"What other things?" Simon asked.

Mitchell said, "Well, for one, Ellison told us the reason he killed him's because they were lovers and he had dumped him. Well, we know this isn't true. Ellison had been dating Carolyn Plummer for about six months. I think she would've known."

"We're not saying that you always know if your lover's fucking someone else but I think she would have known if he wasn't into women," Mason said, "and Carolyn Plummer said that Jim had been with her that night. He just didn't want to ruin her reputation."

"This is like fucking Peyton Place," Simon said. "Anything else that we should know?"

"What's Fucking Peyton Place?" Blair asked, honestly puzzled.

"Oh shut up. I'll explain later," Simon said totally disgusted that Blair was so young he couldn't remember such a well-known show.

"We're investigating Ellison's father right now. He might have been behind Rita Marshall and Steven. But we're just guessing right now. We're taking our time on it," Mitchell said.

"If you need anything, please call me on my cell, home or business phones," Blair said handing them both a business card, "and thank you for believing in him."

When they left, Blair walked to his truck and said, "Simon, I have to go and see Jim and tell him we're still working the case."

"Okay, I'll talk to you tonight. Want to go out to eat? Daryl's in town." Simon asked.

"Yeah, that would be great. Why don't we meet at Antonopolous's. Daryl loves Greek food," Blair said.

"Okay, you're on. We'll meet you there at 7:00. Do I need to get reservations?"

"Wouldn't hurt, Simon. Tell Daryl I can't wait to see him," Blair said, climbing into his vehicle.

"Okay, we'll see you tonight and you tell Jim that we're standing behind him no matter what," Simon said, smiling at his partner and friend.

"Thanks, Simon," Blair said starting his truck and taking off. He was going to tell Jim exactly how he felt and see if that might help.

He filled out the paper work when he arrived at the station and they took him into a room where he could sit and wait to talk to Jim. Blair was waiting for one of those glass walls with the telephones but this would be much better. He was in a nice clean room with a table that had a clip on it to lock the cuffs. Blair hated to hear about Jim having cuffs on. When the officer walked into the room leading Jim Ellison, Blair was heartbroken to see what jail was doing to him. Gone was the proud, strong man he'd seen that night at the diner. Instead, he was replaced by a sad, uncaring man. His posture told you everything you would need to know about his feelings. Blair knew that one of the main reasons for his posture was the fact that he'd told him he hated him. He couldn't let him think this for very long. He didn't hate him. In fact, he had never loved anyone like he did Jim Ellison. Blair intended on making things right for both of them.

The officer locked Jim's cuffs to the bolt on the table and said, "If you need us you know where we are. I'll be right outside the door."

"Thank you," Blair said and never took his eyes off his love.

Jim still had not raised his head to look at Blair. Finally breaking the silence, Blair said, "Jim, could you look at me? I have something to say to you."

When Jim did look up, Blair saw the red-rimmed eyes of his lover and felt even worse than he did before. "Jim, I love you. I've never hated you and I shouldn't have said that to you. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"Yeah, baby, I can forgive you, but I can't give you what you want," Jim said sadly.

"What is it that I want, Jim?"

"You want me to give them names and go on with my life. Well, I ruined three people's lives and someone has to pay for it."

"So it has to be you? Why you, Jim? Why can't you let the one who killed him take the rap? Why?" Blair asked softly, knowing he would get no answer and probably only distress the sad man.

"Baby, please don't be angry," Jim pleaded with Blair, but at hearing the endearment, Blair only got angrier.

"Blair, sit down and let me talk to you," Jim said with a shaky voice.

"Jim, are you going to go to prison?" Blair asked just as shakily.

"Probably so. I'm sorry, Chief. I'm truly sorry. I fucked up so bad. I thought I knew what I wanted and I hurt three people. I have to stand up to the punishment."

"I understand, Jim. I'll still come and see you every day, okay?" Blair said looking at Jim and smiled for the first time since he'd come into this room.

"Blair, I would love if you came to see me each day. It'll be the only thing to live for." Jim said sadly.

The door opened and the officer walked in and said, "Times up, guys. Sorry."

"Thanks for letting us talk this long," Blair said to the man.

"See you tomorrow, Chief," Jim said and the look on his face was one of pure grief. Blair's heart was breaking in two. He vowed right then and there that something would have to be done.

Blair went home and got ready for dinner with Simon and Daryl. He hoped that one of them would have some ideas. Blair was out of his league. If you needed to find a skip, Blair was your man, but left to matters of the heart, Blair didn't know much about them. All he did know was his was breaking. * The look on Jim's face said the very same thing, Sandburg. Do you wonder if he could die of a broken heart? I believe he is, right now. He's doing it slowly. *

Blair realized he'd have to figure out something, and soon. With this in mind, he left to go to the restaurant. * Please god; help us. *

Antonopolous's was a busy Greek Restaurant. It was one of Daryl's favorite places. Unbelievably, Blair had his taste buds set for lamb. He wasn't that big on meat, but sometimes if it was cooked right, he loved it and he always ordered stuffed grape leaves for himself for later on.

Walking in, he saw Simon and Daryl already sitting down in a booth. Daryl saw him coming and got out to give Blair a hug. "Hey, Blair, how's it going?"

"Great, Daryl. How's school?" Blair asked him.

Simon gave Daryl a look that said, * mind your own business. *

They all ordered drinks and dinner and then sat and discussed school with Daryl. It was nice to have a normal night after what they'd been going through. Finally, Daryl couldn't stand it anymore, and said, "So why's Ellison taking the blame for someone?"

"Simon, I don't believe you told him that," Blair said with a look of shock on his face.

"I didn't say a word. He came and asked me what was going on."

"Daryl, why would you want to know about it then?" Blair asked.

"Well, contrary to what my teachers think, sometimes I actually pay attention to current events. I know all about JJ Ellison and his problems. We all do. Did you know that he's paying my scholarship?"

"Daryl, you don't know that for sure. So don't start saying that," Simon said.

"Well, I mean, my dad and I are paying most of it but there's a fund set up by him for college kids that don't have enough. It comes out of that."

"That's wonderful," Blair said.

Under the table, Simon kicked Daryl. "So Daryl, what's new at school?"

"Oh, I see. We're going to pretend that Blair isn't in love with this man? Okay, I can do that," Daryl said and started eating some bread sticks.

"How do you know about us?" Blair asked.

"Blair, you've got that just fallen in love look and my dad happened to mention the other night that it was a guy. He didn't say who. I put two and two together. I figured one of these days you'd fall in love with one of your skips."

"Well, you're right. As long as it's out in the open, can I ask a few questions? Maybe if I say them out loud, they'll make more sense," Blair said.

So, for the next two hours, they ate, drank and talked Jim and Blair. Finally, Daryl said, "Now tell me again, who are the players?"

Simon smiled at this and said, "William Ellison, Carolyn Plummer, Steven Ellison and Rita Marshall."

"Okay, let's figure this out the old fashioned way. It isn't William Ellison because no matter what, he couldn't have his son killed. If he were that ruthless, he'd have killed him long ago. I don't think he has anything to do with it."

"I guess that makes some sort of sense," Blair agreed.

"We'll see," Simon said.

"Next would be Steven Ellison. He's screwing his brother financially. If Jim's in prison, he won't be able to take his money like he is now."

"Daryl, I believe it to be the opposite. Wouldn't you think that it would be easier for him to take the money with Jim out of the way?" Blair asked.

"No, Blair, it wouldn't. First of all, he can't skim off something that isn't being made any longer. I think that Jim's the smarter of the two and knows how to make the business grow," Daryl said knowingly.

"Simon, your son's really smart," Blair said, smiling finally. "I never thought of that."

"That seemed really obvious to me. Rita Marshall's in the same boat. She's used to living off the money she's been skimming all of these years and she knows that she'll miss that. So I know it's not her either," Daryl stated.

"Okay, for the same reason, right? She wants Jim to make the money so they can skim it?" Blair asked.

"Blair, this is only my opinion. I'm sure that you'll have FBI, IRS and other agencies going through all of this and find out that it wouldn't have mattered one way or another. Either way, they were going to screw both of the Ellisons. And I don't mean Steven," Daryl said coldly.

"Daryl, I'm not sure I believe that of Rita and Steven. I think that they had planned on setting Jim up from day one," Blair said sadly.

"Well, I guess we'll have to do some checking on our own, won't we?" Daryl replied.

"But Daryl, that only leaves Carolyn Plummer and she said she's Jim's alibi for that night," Blair said.

"Exactly. Why would Jim say he did it if he had an alibi?" Daryl asked looking from his dad to Blair and back again.

"Holy shit, you think it's Carolyn Plummer?" Simon asked Blair.

"I don't know what I think now, Simon."

"Next thing that will bring it around to Carolyn is how messy it is. Jim wouldn't want to drag his dad or his brother into this fiasco because of him being gay. I bet they don't know. Or didn't."

"I don't think they do know, Daryl, but what difference would that make?" Blair asked.

Simon perked up and said, "What if poor Jim Ellison hasn't been attracted to women for a long time and he just dated her for looks. What if she thought it was more. Then what would happen if she found out he slept with Roger Marshall?"

"Simon, do you believe that Jim didn't know about her being a little off balanced, if it is her?" Blair asked.

"Blair, I truly believe that Jim felt so guilty that he would have done almost anything for her," Simon answered.

"Do you think we could find more out about Carolyn?" Blair asked, hope rising in his voice.

"Yeah, I would say we missed something major. I'm sure it's there. Unless, of course, it's one of those things where everyone says, 'My god, she seemed so normal'," Simon replied.

"Oh god, this is beginning to make some sense now," Blair said.

"Okay, now you two have to help me with this," Daryl started. "Why would Ellison take the blame for Carolyn?"

"All right, my take would be he feels guilty for using her as we decided before," Blair said.

Simon said, "No, he can't be just feeling guilty. God, he's giving up his life. He's giving up you. It's got to be something more."

"Do you think we have enough to go to the police with, Simon?" Blair asked.

"Not yet. We really don't have anything yet, Blair. Let's go and talk to his father and brother first. I think we should get them together for this. What do you think of that?"

"Sounds good to me. Wanna come, Daryl?" Blair asked.

"Oh man, can I take notes?"

"No, you can't take notes. And Blair, he shouldn't be around something like this," Simon said, trying to stay stern but not quite making it.

"Dad, I'm a grown man. I can do what I want," Daryl said defiantly.

"Yeah? Well, you still can't buy beer so you're not all grown up," Simon said, laughing.

They paid the bill and left the restaurant with new hope. Blair called William Ellison and said, "Mr. Ellison, this is the Skip Tracer who nursed your son back to health. I wanted to know if we could come over tonight to talk to you about something very important. We need to see you and Steven both."

"Well, you're in luck," William said, "Steven's here. Come on over and we'll have a nice long chat."

"Thank you, Mr. Ellison. We'll see you in about ten minutes. Thank you." Blair hung the phone up with a huge smile on his face.

"Well, we get to see Steven tonight, too. He's at his dad's house."

Steven sat at his dad's house wondering why his father had called him over. He knew something was up because his father never asked him to just stop by. Steven sat in the living room, nervously twitching his feet to and fro. His father saw the nervous actions and began to think he might have the right ideas about his younger son after all.

Finally William said, "You might think you're smart, Steven, but you're not smarter than your old man."

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

"I'll give you some time to think on all the things you might need to tell me. Then when you're ready to talk to me, let me know. We'll sit here all night if we have to."

"Dad, what do you want me to say? Something that will get Jimmy off? Well, I didn't kill Marshall. So I can't help you," Steven said defiantly.

"Like I said, I've got all night long to wait. So think on it a while." Steven didn't like the look his dad was giving him. Somehow, his father had found out and his ass was going to be in a sling. * Shit... *

Getting into the car, Daryl said, "This is going to be good."

Simon called a friend of his at the Police Department. "Hi Cole, how're you doing?"

"Fine, Simon, how're you? How's Daryl?"

"He's fine. Look, I need to ask a huge favor. I'm doing some checking up on the Roger Marshall murder. The older Ellison son has been arrested for it. You know Jim Ellison's fiancée? Carolyn Plummer? Do you know anything about her that would help in our investigation?"

"I have a few things," Cole said, "but, of course, it's strictly off the record, right?"

"Totally off the record, Cole," Simon said very seriously.

"She was Jim Ellison's fiancée for years and then he went missing on the mission in Peru. She was in a mental institution about ten years ago after she heard the news."

"So she lost it?" Simon asked.

"Yes. Her parents had her put away for her own safety. The doctors all said it was just depression. But there might be something else," Cole said.

"Something else, Cole?" Simon asked as he was writing down every single thing that Cole told him. Blair glanced over from where he was trying to drive to read the notes. He stopped trying when he almost ran into a parked car.

"Well, this might be nothing, but we're wondering why this man won't let his girlfriend be his alibi. We've checked up on her, and from what we've been told, she regressed to childhood - got hold of a doll, nursed it like a baby... But after a while she lost interest in it, seemed to recover, and went home. Then Ellison came back, but they still didn't marry. Now she says he was with her the night Marshall was killed, and he's indicating he wasn't. One of them has to be lying, and we're wondering why."

"Is that it, Cole?" Simon asked.

"Yeah, that's it for now, Simon. The rest is even more speculation than this was. So, try and find out something and bring it to us and we'll help," Cole said.

Simon hung up his phone and turned to Blair and Daryl and filled them in on what he'd just learned. They all knew that this wasn't something they could look into without causing trouble. Doctors' records were impossible to get and Ms. Plummer wasn't likely to give them anything to go on. They were all left to their own thoughts.

The rest of the drive was quiet; they were all making mental notes of what to ask. Finally, Blair said, "Daryl, maybe we should take notes. It might help. Do you have a tablet?"

"Of course I have a tablet. I'm majoring in criminal psychology, I have to take notes all the time."

When they arrived, Blair was really nervous but Simon said, "Sandburg, let me take over now. I'll start it going and we'll see how it goes. He doesn't need to know about you and Ellison."

"Simon, I'm not embarrassed about me and Jim," Blair said as he glared at his boss and friend.

"I know that, Blair. I just don't want this man upsetting you until we find out how he feels about it." Simon put his arm around Blair and hugged him quickly as they got up to the door.

Simon knocked and when William opened the door, Simon showed him his ID and introduced Blair and Daryl to him. William asked everyone in and they all went into the living room.

"Please sit down," William said and introduced his son, Steven, when he walked back into the living room. "This is my youngest son, Steven, who also works for us."

The three men stood up and shook hands with the man and then sat back down. "So what's new with Jimmy's defense? Do you know anything yet?" William asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, we've come across a few things and we need to find out from you if they're true. Then we can move on," Simon said. "The police are still working on the case. They don't believe your son did it."

"Well, that's good to know because Jimmy's being an idiot. Anyone who knows him knows he didn't do it. Do you know why he's doing this?" William asked.

Simon started off with, "Sir, did you know that your son, Jim, is gay?"

Blair almost choked and Steven stood up and said, "Bullshit. Stop the lies. Dad, they don't know anything."

Daryl sat and watched the younger Ellison and wondered why he would put up such a fight about Jim being gay. I mean, this was the 90's. It wasn't the dark ages. But yet, he was agitated, nervous and totally freaking out. Yes, there was something here that they needed to be looked into.

Daryl speculated about how a younger brother might feel about hearing his brother was gay. Would it affect his life? Would this be enough to change things in Jim's life? All things that the three of them would have to think about.

"So for some reason you think my son's gay?" William asked looking from one man to the next waiting for an answer.

"Yes, sir, we do," Simon answered. "He doesn't want to ruin your name so he's taking the heat on this. He slept with the victim."

"Bullshit!" Steven said. "Dad, this is total bullshit."

Again, Daryl watched Steven Ellison jump up, pace and behave irrationally. It was too much of a coincidence for Daryl to just ignore. Daryl made some notes to himself to ask questions when this was all over with.

"Shut up, Steven," William said, turning his attention back to Simon. Now do you want to tell me what makes you think this is true? How do you know he slept with that man if that man's dead?"

Blair said, "Because I'm his lover."

William looked confused and asked, "You were the victim's lover?"

"No, sir, I'm Jim's lover," Blair said with a shaky voice.

"You stupid fag! Get your ass out of our home and stop spreading lies about Jimmy!" Steven shouted as he went for Blair.

"Stay away from him," Daryl said, standing up in Steven's way. "Why don't you tell your father why you feel so adamant about hiding your brother's love life? While you're at it, why not tell him everything you know."

Ignoring Daryl, Steven said, "They're sent here to ruin us, Dad. You know that Jimmy isn't a fag."

Simon stopped him and said, "Mr. Sandburg doesn't lie about such things."

William walked towards Blair and said, "So why's he in jail now? What's this that my younger son's supposedly going to tell me before the night's over?"

"Jim said he hurt three people and someone had to pay. It might as well be him," Blair said. "The rest has to come from Steven. It can't come

from us, unless he refuses to help his brother."

William sat down next to Blair and said, "I wasn't aware of my older son's lifestyle, but I'm not that surprised. He was so lonely and sad. Always trying to make us happy but never quite doing it for himself. I hope that you and I will have time to talk about the two of you later on."

"That would be fine, sir," Blair said, "once we get things taken care of for Jim."

"Of course," William said. "And please - call me William."

"William, I think the best thing to do would be to start at the top," Blair said.

"Makes sense to me. Start at the top and fill us all in."

So that's just what Blair did. He told William everything that was going on with Jim. From his skipping bail to when those four tried to kill him. Blair told him how Jim knew who else was in the house. He had heard what they said and that's what he was keeping quiet. While Blair was telling William all of this, Steven got up and started pacing.

Daryl almost smiled when he saw this. He knew that Steven Ellison was on the verge of cracking.

William looked up at his son and said, "Steven, what do you know about this?"

"Fine, so now it's out. We didn't want you to know. He's such a fucking loser, Dad. Yet you always gave him more power at the office than me. Now you know the truth. No one will have a thing to do with our company when this comes out."

Daryl heard what he said but it made no sense to him at all. You don't disown your blood just because he's gay. Well, okay, maybe some do, but William Ellison didn't seem the type. Daryl finally thought he would say something. "Steven, is this the real reason you're upset or do you have other problems with your father, your brother and the company?"

"Well, now that you've made such a big deal out of it; he'll take our company down with him. He's a fag. Not worth even worrying over. But, of course, my father will probably suddenly think there's nothing wrong with fags!" Steven snarled.

"Steven, shut your mouth," William said. "You think they'll have more to do with us if he's in prison for killing someone? His partner, no less?"

"Mr. Sandburg," William went on, "what role does my youngest son play in this?"

"Well, I'd rather have him tell you," Blair said, acting as if he knew exactly what happened.

William looked at his son and said, "Do you want to tell me now?"

"Sure. What's the big deal, Dad? I was sleeping with Rita."

"It is a big deal, Steven. For some reason, Jim thinks he needs to protect you so you must have done more than that. What did you do, Steven?"

Steven suddenly collapsed. Hanging his head, he said softly, "It was Rita's idea. She wanted to teach Roger and Jim a lesson. We were skimming money off the top while she did the books. It wasn't just us. Carolyn came up with the idea. She wanted to teach him a lesson, too. Dad, she said they were going to get married and then he wouldn't sleep with her. What was she supposed to do?"

Daryl could not stay quiet any longer. "Sir, I wonder if I could put in my two cents?"

"Of course, young man," William answered.

"Well, first of all," Daryl started, "things are a lot more complicated than that. They had to have been skimming large amounts of money off your accounts for some time. Now, we all know that you are audited at least once a year, so now they need a scapegoat. Who could that be? Well, it had to be either Jim or Roger."

"Continue, Daryl. We're all listening, aren't we, Steven?" William asked quietly.

"We all know that Carolyn wasn't playing with a full deck. Everyone knows this. She wanted Jim. But more than anything, she wanted his money and his lifestyle. Finding out about Marshall and Jim blew that all out of the water. What would happen if Jim admitted to you that he and Marshall were lovers? Or worse yet, if he discovered the skimming and threatened to tell you about it?" Daryl said seriously."

"You're just grasping at straws, kid!" Steven exclaimed.

"Shut up, Steven. Please continue, Daryl."

"Well, Rita knew that her share of the business would be hers if her husband died. Steven knew that he might be able to take over Jim's business end if Jim was blamed for the death of his partner and friend. Carolyn sat in the background telling them what to do."

"But why did she give Jimmy an alibi when she went to the police?" William asked.

"I truly believe that she's in a make believe world where she thinks if she's good to him, he'll love her and give her the life she deserves," Daryl said.

"Oh fuck," William Ellison said as he looked at his youngest son. "Mr. Banks, could you please call the police and tell them they need to come here for questioning and to make an arrest?"

"Dad, come on. It wasn't that big a deal. Jimmy's the one who made the mistake, not me," Steven whined.

"Shut up, Steven. I'll call a lawyer for you now but it won't help if you keep 'running off at the mouth.'"

Steven sat down with an air of defeat and turned to William and said, "Dad, I can't go to prison."

"But Jimmy could?"

"You always loved him more," Steven said.

"Steven, get a grip, you're way too old to keep doing this," William said.

They were all very quiet until the police arrived. They talked to William Ellison and the other three men, too. Then William said goodbye to Steven as they arrested him. William would pay good money to have his son represented but in no way would he stand by for his son not paying for his wrong-doing.

Once he was gone, William turned to Blair and said, "Could you stay and tell me about you and my son?"

"I think he should tell you, sir," Blair replied more out of respect for Jim's feelings than anything else.

"All right. Young man, I don't hate you and you don't have to be afraid of me. I had a feeling he wasn't straight. He just wouldn't open up to us. Jimmy never did. I'm going to go to the police station and get my son and bring him home. Maybe we could go together. Would you mind?"

"William, do I have your word that you won't treat Jim badly when you see him?" Blair asked.

"I wouldn't hurt him, Blair. I really wouldn't. But you know what, better yet, you go and pick him up and then I'll wait here to see him. I want to see him tonight."

"That would work out perfectly, William. You certain you're okay with us being together?" Blair asked.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Blair. I'm not all that comfortable with my son being with a man. I don't want him being stared at. Didn't like it when he was younger for any reason and it doesn't change when they get older. But I'll get over it. I love him. He'll always be my son. Make sure and tell him that for me, all right?" William asked.

"Okay, William, I'll go and pick him up then and we'll come here first so you can talk to him."

"Yes, that would be fine. Tell him that I'm glad he's coming home." William walked into the kitchen, a very tired man. He could not help thinking that he'd made too many mistakes in raising his boys. He would do his best to keep Steven from having to serve any time in prison only because he knew that Steven couldn't handle it. Then he was going to get Steven into therapy. But if he had to do time, that would be something Steven would have to handle himself. He brought it on himself. As William's father used to say to his sons, 'Don't do the crime, if you can't do the time'.

As they drove to the police station, Blair said, "Don't you think he took it surprisingly well?"

"Yeah, a little too well. He wouldn't hurt Jim, would he?" Daryl asked.

"I think what he was doing was trying to keep a hold on reality because I'm sure he's feeling like he's lost something," Simon said, knowing how he would feel if Daryl would tell him he was gay.

"Dad, you'd be upset if I told you I was gay?" Daryl said, knowing what his father meant by that.

"No, I wouldn't be upset with you but I'd be frightened for you, just as I'm frightened for Blair. It's a scary thing to be gay," Simon stated and then stayed quiet all the way to the station. All three men were left to their own thoughts once again.

Blair decided that when things settled down, he was going to have to have a talk with Simon about all of this. He didn't want Simon worrying about him. He was a big boy. He could handle things himself.

Daryl decided that he needed to spend more time with Blair, since his father seemed worried, then he could tell him things were all right. Daryl hated to see his dad upset.

By the time they reached the station, the police had brought Carolyn in and she was screaming her head off saying she was framed. "What

did they say? They're lying. You can't trust them!" Carolyn said savagely.

The detective asked, "Ms. Plummer, do you want to get your lawyer here?"

"I don't need a fucking lawyer. I was just protecting my property. Isn't there some kind of law that says if you are going to get married that person should be only with you?" Carolyn ranted.

"Ma'am, it's something I don't know anything about. Why don't you wait for your lawyer?" he said.

"He was mine. Don't you understand? He was mine," Carolyn said over and over again.

Then Carolyn turned to Simon and Blair and said, "You're the ones who have done this to Jimmy, aren't you? You talked him into telling the police he did something he didn't do. He promised he'd marry me. He fucking lied to me from the start."

"Carolyn, he couldn't help it. He was confused. He didn't know what to do with his feelings," Blair said, trying to help her.

"He didn't give a fuck about me. He wouldn't sleep with me. Can you imagine what that made me feel like?" Carolyn asked.

"Well, he didn't love you, Carolyn," Blair said, trying not to be cruel, but he was losing all patience.

"Oh, fuck you - you're probably all sucking his cock"

"Carolyn, he tried. It just wasn't him. At least he didn't kill someone because of it," Blair said with as much patience as he could muster.

"That little cocksucker Roger was going to tell Jim's father. We'd all be ruined," she said.

"Carolyn, you don't kill people because they slept with the man you wanted to marry," Blair said.

"I wanted his child. He said he had to think about it. God, he must've been laughing about me from the start," Carolyn said, crying.

"I'm sure he wasn't laughing. Please try and understand that Jim was willing to take the rap for you. He must love you."

"If he had loved me, we'd be married and I'd be having this child right now," Carolyn said.

Blair looked at Simon and whispered sadly, "There is a god."

Simon couldn't help smiling. The kid always seemed to keep a good sense of humor, even when things looked their darkest.

A man walked into the room and said, "Carolyn, please tell me you've not said anything to the police."

Blair looked at Simon and whispered, "The attorney?"

"Yup," Simon said and moved away from hurricane Carolyn, who seemed to be getting her second wind.

"I'm Mr. Stan Baker, Carolyn Plummer's attorney. I hope you haven't been asking her questions without me."

The officer in charge said, "She wouldn't shut up. We haven't asked her one thing but she's given us more than enough to hold her for a long time."

"First things first," Baker said. "We'll have her examined by a doctor. Something isn't right here. She has some background history with mental health issues."

Blair turned to Simon and said, "I'm so surprised."

Simon realized what Blair was saying - they shouldn't let Baker know they already knew of her problems - but he smacked him on the back of his head anyway and said, "Be serious."

"I am," Blair answered. Looking up, he saw the officers from downstairs bringing Jim up to sign out.

Jim came walking down the hallway and she saw him and went after him but Blair stopped her and held her back in spite of her struggles for he knew Jim would have let her hurt him. Finally, the cops got her off Blair and then he turned to Jim and said, "Welcome back to the land of the living, as chaotic as it is."

Blair tried to figure out how Jim was but saw nothing in the look on his face. No hatred. No love, nothing. In fact, the look was so cold that it scared Blair.

Jim didn't smile; he didn't do anything. He walked up to the desk, signed the paper and then walked out of the building. Blair turned to Simon and said, "Did I miss something?"

"Don't ask me. He's your boyfriend." Simon couldn't help laughing as Blair stuck his tongue out and crossed his eyes at him.

"Simon, I'm serious here. Something's wrong and I've got to figure it out and then help Jim do the same."

"Did you ever think that maybe he needs some time to himself?" Simon asked.

"No, and I'm not giving it to him. I'm going to deal with him now," Blair said taking off after Jim, with Simon and Daryl close behind him.

When they got outside, Blair could see Jim walking down the street all by himself as if he didn't have a friend in the world. "Simon, I'll take it from here."

"Blair, you're supposed to take him to his dad's house. Let's deliver him there and then you can do whatever you want," Simon said, hauling him into the car as Daryl scrambled in, too.

They pulled up beside Jim and Blair said, "Jim, come on, get in."

Jim kept his head down and walked faster and faster, trying to get away from Blair and his problems.

Blair jumped out of the moving car as Simon slammed on the brakes. "Fuck you, Ellison. What's your problem? You'd rather stay in prison all your life than have a life with me? What's up with that?"

"Don't you see? They'll all know now. I can't go back to my business; I'll ruin my dad. So, where do I go now?"

"You're ashamed of us? Our love?" Blair asked choked up suddenly.

"I'm not ashamed, Blair. I just don't know if I can do this. But that's all out of my hands now, anyhow. Everyone will know. People will never look at me the same way."

"Excuse me, Ellison, but that's called ashamed in my book. I think you and I have two different versions."

"Blair, I like my life very private. I don't want anyone to know. Suddenly everyone knows and Carolyn will see to it that it's worse than that," Jim said sadly.

"Jim, what could be worse than this?" Blair asked, genuinely curious.

"She'll tell everyone that she tried to get me into bed one night and I couldn't get it up. She laughed at me. It was the worst night of my life," Jim said, head hanging low.

Blair pulled Jim's head up and said, "Stop it right now. You're a man, in love with a man. So? Big deal. Move on. I couldn't have gotten it up for her, either. I don't know how to tell you this, Jim, but she isn't a nice person."



Jim stopped hanging his head and just looked into Blair's eyes sadly. "I don't know what to do."

"Jim, first we have to go and see your dad. He's taking us being a couple fairly well. He told me to tell you to come over so you two could talk," Blair said, smiling, looking through his damp eyelashes. He hadn't even noticed that he'd begun to cry. Jim pulled emotions from him that he didn't even know he had.

"Chief, you talked to my dad about us? He knows?" Jim asked incredulously.

"Yeah, and he's doing pretty well with the news. He wants to see you, Jim."

"I guess we should go and talk to him then. Shit, why am I so scared?" Jim asked, head hanging down again.

Grabbing Jim's head, Blair pulled it up to meet his eyes and said, "Jim, there's no reason for you ever to feel anything but love for me, never

shame. And your dad seems to be all right with this news. So let's not complain."

"I'll try, Chief. I'll try."

Blair got Jim into the back seat and they just sat quietly and held hands.

"Jim, this is Simon Banks, my good friend and boss. And the young, good looking one, is his son Daryl."

"Hey, I resemble that remark." Simon said with humor in his voice.

"Nice to meet you both." Jim said quietly.

"Jim, why don't you come and work with us? We've been looking for another Skip Tracer. The pay's pretty good, ask Blair," Simon said as he drove them to William's house.

"You don't even know me, Banks. You don't know what kind of person I am. Why would you do this?" Jim asked, wanting the truth.

"Because if Blair loves you, that's good enough for me. I've known this guy since he was a kid and I know he has good taste," Simon answered truthfully.

Jim's head was looking at the floor of the car again. Blair slipped his arms around Jim's waist and he leaned against the smaller man. Jim wanted to absorb every single feeling he could from Blair. * God, Ellison, this is what you needed. This is what you wanted. This is what you have to have. *

Blair smiled into Jim's eyes as he realized that Jim was scenting him. * Well, this is a new one. *

"Chief, I missed you so much. Your scent helps ground me. I kept losing track of time when you weren't there."

"Well, you don't have to worry about it any more, Jim. You're going to go and see your dad and then you'll come home with me," Blair ordered.

"Yes, sir," Jim said smiling for the first time since this all happened.

"I'm feeling kind of frisky. Are you up to it yet?" Blair asked him smiling.

"You're a demon, Chief. I'm always up for you," Jim said as he put Blair's hand on his filling cock. Blair smiled immediately.

"We're still here," Simon said clearing his throat.

"Sorry," Jim said, "sometimes we get a little carried away."

"We'll pick this up at my place. I love you, Jim," Blair said, knowing they had a lot to talk about but also knowing that if they had love, they had almost everything they'd need.

"I love you, back, Chief. You're mine forever. No one else's. I need to stake that claim."

Blair smiled up at him and said, "As soon as we finish talking to your dad, we'll get home and you can stake all the claims you want."

"Sounds good to me," Jim said, with a shy smile on his face.

As they drove up to William Ellison's home, Simon said, "Okay, take the next few days off, Blair, but then I want you both in for the next cases. We have a lot of work."

"Thanks for the job, Simon. Now I just have to tell my father." Jim said as he got out of the car.

"See you in three days, Simon," Blair said, following his life, his love, to the Ellison home.

Jim rang the door bell with shaking fingers. His father opened the door and pulled Jim into his arms. He was holding Jim so tight, that he could hardly breathe. He wasn't going to complain. This was the first time his father ever held him... that he could remember, anyway.

Blair pushed both men back and said, "Let's get into the house, gentlemen, the neighbors will wonder if something happened."

William pulled away from Jim and said, "Come on in, Jimmy and Blair. Let's talk about what's going to happen from this day on. Jimmy, I really don't want you to leave the office. I would be lost without you."

"Dad, if I told you I really hated it and wasn't happy, would you be totally angry with me?" Jim asked, not looking into his dad's eyes.

"Jimmy, look at me." William said and when Jim finally looked at his dad, William continued, "I want you to be happy, son. You do what you want to make it so."

"Thanks, Dad. I've been offered a job with Simon Banks. It's a decent job. I might take it," Jim said hurrying with his little speech.

"Jimmy, if that'll make you happy, then by all means, go for it. I'll be here for you no matter what," William said. "Now, can I get you men something to drink?"

"No, thank you, Dad. We've got to be getting back to Blair's house," Jim answered truthfully. "Blair, want to call a cab?"

"Don't be silly, Jimmy. Take one of the cars in the garage. Here are the keys for the Jimmy."

"Thanks, Dad." Jim said.

Blair stood up and handed a card to William and said, "These are our work and home phone numbers. On the back, I wrote down the address. Please feel free to visit us any time you want to."

"Blair, it was nice meeting you," William said holding out his hand to shake. Blair took William's hand in his and shook it strong, hard and long. Blair wanted to let him know that he would be strong enough to take care of his son. * Sandburg, you're such a romantic. *

"It was great meeting you, too, sir. Remember that you're always welcome at our home," Blair said, and realized what he had said. "William, I haven't even asked Jim yet and here I am telling you about him living with me."

Jim smiled and said, "Yes." Blair's smile back to him would melt anyone's heart. He was so in love that it was mind boggling.

William grabbed Blair's hand again and said, "You take good care of him, you hear?"

"I hear it loud and clear. I'll see that he never hurts or wants for anything," Blair said, smiling, on their way to the front door.

Jim turned and went into his dad's arms again. Hugging him hard, he said, "I love you, Dad. I really do."

"I know you do, Jimmy. I love you too. Too bad we waited until now to let each other know how we feel about each other," William said sadly.

"It's never too late, Dad," Jim said.

William kissed his son's cheek and said, "Take care, Jimmy."

"Dad, I'll come by tomorrow and we'll go together to see Steven, okay?" Jim asked.

"Jimmy, you are such a good man. I did okay. I sometimes wondered if I did anything right. But you're a fine man," William said, suddenly proud of his oldest son.

"I'll be by at about noon. Will that be all right with you?" Jim asked.

"Noon's fine, Jimmy. See you then. Blair, you're part of the family, you're welcome to come along if you can stand Steven," William said.

"Sir, thank you, but I think it's something you should do with just Jim," Blair said walking, towards the garage.

"Bye, Dad," Jim said as he followed Blair out into the garage and unlocked the doors to the GMC Jimmy. It was black, with the limo tint windows. William had had it done for Jim after his older son complained that the bright sun hurt his eyes. Jim realized that his dad probably did a lot more for him than he actually gave him credit for.

William stood in the doorway and waved as Jim drove out of the garage. William saw Jim lift his hand up and brush Blair's cheek softly. William felt that he had just seen something that Jim would usually never have shared. * William, I think your son's boyfriend is good for him. *

All three men knew that tomorrow was going to be a hard day for all of them. But for right now, all three men felt good for tonight.

Blair cuddled up to Jim all the way to his place and couldn't wait to get Jim into his bed. Both men knew that this was the beginning of something new, but for some reason, they both also knew that it was right. It was good.

"I've always said that I always get my man," Blair said. "Well, this is one time I really mean it and you're not going back anywhere."

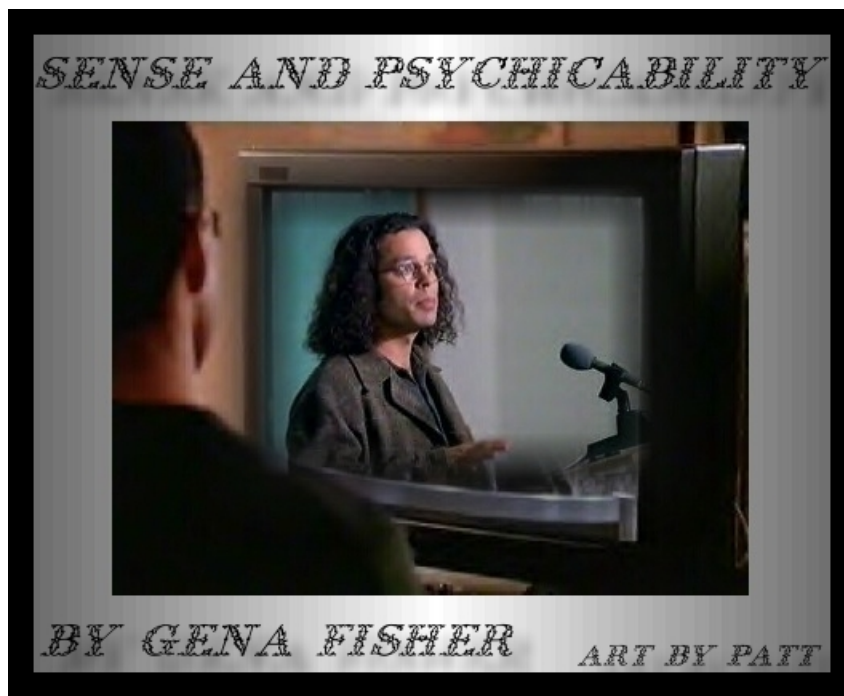
"Chief, this could get messy. You sure you're up to this?" Jim asked just to give him an out.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I love you."

"In that case, your Manhunter days are over," Jim said, kissing him as they climbed out of the GMC Jimmy to start their new life.

The End.

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Sense And Psychicability - gena fisher

What you are about to see is real. No information is given to Blair Sandburg about the people he reads.

That little disclaimer duly read by the two men gathered around the screen, the program began.

Welcome to Guiding Lives. I'm Blair Sandburg and tonight you're going to see some pretty amazing things. The camera pulled in close, catching Sandburg's winsome smile and deep blue eyes then swiftly cut to the crowd of people ringing him on rising seating. "I'm being pulled over in this area." He moved to the left, key lights adding lustrous red highlights to his curly brown hair as the camera zeroed in on an older woman. Sandburg launched into a remarkable demonstration of his psychic talents; telling her the name of her deceased husband, what he died of and where she secretly went to read his love letters aloud. The crowd gasped, the psychic beamed and the woman cried.

"This is the guy?" Detective James Ellison stared at the television screen a moment longer then shook his head. "Simon, you can't honestly want me to investigate a - a - what the hell is he? A psychic?"

"Dr. Sandburg prefers the term spiritualist," Simon said with a grin. "He's one of those New Age phenomena, a maverick psychic making a fortune on cable TV."

"And you don't believe the whole "talking to the dead" spiel," Ellison guessed.

Instead of answering right away, Banks opened the file folder lying on his desk and dug through it. "I have a complaint from the mayor's office. Seems an influential citizen is claiming a distraught family member is being bilked out of monthly sums by Sandburg's organization." He regarded Jim with a sheepish expression, "I can't spare anyone else right now, so it's got to be you."

"Why not FBI? They could assign that 'Spooky' guy," Ellison snapped, "more up his alley than mine."

"Jim, this is our problem. Sandburg might have a national audience but he's a Cascade resident."



"Oh, yeah, so give it to me, right?" Ellison picked up the Sandburg file and used his cane to push to his feet. He stood breathing a bit heavily as he steadied himself on the corner of the captain's desk.

"Come on, Jim," Banks soothed, "you aren't on active duty yet, and you really stink at paperwork. This will give you something constructive to do." Ellison continued to glare. "Jim, you were clinically dead less than two months ago," Banks reminded him. He dropped his gaze, and said casually, "How's the, uh, other problem?"

Ellison stared down at Banks, "Why do you ask, Simon? I thought two aspirin and a good night's sleep were all I needed." Banks froze, then lifted his head slowly to meet his detective's gaze.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but you know I needed you on the Switchman case."

"Yeah, Simon I know." Ellison sighed, running his hand over his forehead, looking a little shaky. "I'm just tired, guess my temper's on a short fuse."

Banks raked him with a hard look, "not sleeping again?"

"Yeah, can't get comfortable," Ellison said with a shrug. The constant ache from his lower back and left leg wore him down, sleep came only after hours of shifting around and then - then the dreams came.

"Can't the doctor give you painkillers?"

"No, can't take 'em," Jim said. "They tried in the hospital, even the most mild made me sick."

"Is that the only reason you can't sleep?" Simon asked gently.

"Why wouldn't it be, Sir? I mean everyone says I did my best, no one could have done more."

"Jim -"

"No! It wasn't my fault I didn't find the bomb in time, was it?" Ellison closed his eyes, refusing to see the images which never went away. "I couldn't find it," he whispered. "If they'd helped me look. If someone had just - helped me."

"It wasn't your fault."

Ellison nodded. "Tell me that in the middle of the night when it happens again and again, Simon. A whole bus load of people and I'm the only one alive. That seems to happen to me a lot."

"You almost died, Jim." Simon got to his feet, walking around the desk to place a hand on his detective's shoulder. Jim leaned into the touch, needing it.

"Maybe I should have," Jim whispered. Silence filled the space between them before Jim forced himself back a step. "Look, I'll take this home," he waved the thick file, "see what I can find out about Sandburg and let you know what I come up with." He could feel another headache gathering behind his eyes. They'd become a daily occurrence, and were taking their toll on his temper as well as his health. "Sorry about before, Sir. I just can't get a handle on what's happening to me." Banks, his dark face lined with concern, followed him to the door.

"Just check out this Sandburg character, Jim, then you can take some time off."

"I'm going to hold you to that, Sir," Jim said and turned away, unable to bear the brunt of his old friend's fearful gaze a second longer. He made his way out of the office, limping more as exhaustion caught up with him. Around him, other detective's smiled, or nodded, acknowledging one of their own, but they kept their distance. Cops were a superstitious lot, an injured man broke the illusion of invincibility, and no one wanted to be reminded that they, too, were only flesh and blood. Rather than invite misfortune to their own door by associating with him, Jim found himself on the outside of the circle his brother and sister officers drew around themselves.

Ellison got the cabbie to run in for his order at Carol's Caf^e and tipped the guy a fiver when the taxi dropped him at 852 Prospect. He automatically shot a look across the street to where his beloved pickup sat parked to make sure it hadn't received any random abuse. A 1969 blue and white Ford he'd bought on impulse a few months before, just the sight of it comforted him with its normalcy. But that feeling of the familiar died, becoming an alien landscape as he noted the tiny imperfections of the paint, the granule-like surface which meant rust over the left wheel. He sank into this strange world like a man falling asleep, not really sure when it happened but knowing it had.

"Mr. Ellison? You okay, Mr. Ellison?"

The tug on his sleeve acted to reconnect his mind to his body. Horror flooded through Ellison, he'd drifted again. "I'm - I'm okay, Ben," he rasped and pulled his arm out of the boy's grip.

"You look kinda sick," Ben said.

"Just tired. Thanks," he said and accepted the now grease soaked sack Ben picked up for him. His leg felt stiff, as it did when he stood too long and when he moved he couldn't stifle the small hiss of pain. Ben started forward, his thin face looking worried beneath its fringe of lanky hair, but Jim waved him away with an impatient gesture. "I got it." Thankfully the elevator was working and he took it up to the third

floor. Sheer strength of will got him to his door and through it to the sparse loft he owned. Ellison looked at the sack he carried, the smell of congealed fat made his stomach knot, so he tossed the whole thing in the trash. "Way to go, Ellison," he whispered, "you are so fucked up." With nothing else to do he shoved the video from Sandburg's file into his VCR and collapsed on the couch. His leg throbbed and his back took up the beat the moment he stretched out along the cushions. "Shit, shit, shit," he murmured and reached for the remote.

They'd only watched the opening moments of Guiding Lives there in Simon's office so Jim really had only the faintest idea of what to expect. It wasn't even close to what he saw. Sandburg moved around the audience like the electronic blip on the ancient video game, Pong; back and forth, up and back, side to side. His eyes, amazingly blue in close-up, would become unfocused as he paused, head tilted like he was listening to some distant communicat♦ from the dead. He never said anything big, no sweeping proclamations about murderers or lost treasure, nothing any self-respecting Hollywood movie could manufacture. Sandburg's messages relayed the minutia of everyday life, the 1001 details of just being a human being in the 21st century entailed. And because of that, made a startling impact.

"She says to ask if you still have the cracked cup?" Sandburg asked on screen.

"Oh my god! Yes, I do!"

"And I'm to remind you of the time you," Sandburg paused, his eyes crinkling behind his glasses, "I hope Sandy is a dog, because I'm suppose to remind you of the time you gave Sandy a bath at the carwash."

Jim Ellison stared at the screen, at the young man who might be a complete fraud, a con man making a fast buck. He picked up the remote, freezing the image on the screen. Sandburg stared at him, his gaze open and compelling and something inside of Ellison, something he didn't even know existed within him, believed.

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"I don't know what the hell you're trying to tell me, mom," Blair Sandburg snapped. His voice echoed around the room and one of the electricians, the newest, looked up with a bewildered expression. The others, all old hands, went on with their work, ignoring the star's outburst. "Mom," Blair tried again, "please."

Megan Conner bustled into the room. Five years experience as a personal assistant and all around dogsbody to a psychic had left her unfazed by her boss arguing with his dead mother. "Naomi being cryptic again?" she guessed.

Blair sighed, tossed his wire-rimmed glasses on his desk and rubbed his face with both hands. "Understatement. Why is it I can connect with thousands of spirits and my own mom is the one I can't figure out?"

"Could you when she was alive?" Megan asked. Her dark eyes raked him and Blair shrugged.

"No," he sighed.

"Is it - a bad one?" Megan asked with a hesitant glance. The "bad ones" were visions of pain and death. Spirits used such things as warnings and they left Sandburg in a fragile emotional state. Half an hour before the taping of their multi-million dollar TV show was not the time for the star to be feeling vulnerable.

"No," Blair shook his head, "not bad at all. It's been the same for a month now. She shows me a wolf in the jungle and it♦s running towards something. At first I couldn't make it out and then I saw this black shape. It was a jaguar, a beautiful black jaguar with the most incredible blue eyes."

"Maybe you're getting a new car," Megan suggested.

"No, I get the feeling of importance, of Destiny," Blair said, "She just keeps showing me how they come together. They - they race towards each other and then," he paused, eyes closed as the vision replayed inside his head. "They leap into each other - It's like a blinding light, so bright and pure when they meet." He wrapped his arms around himself, a dreamy smile on his face. He'd never felt anything like what surged through him at the moment the two animals merged. Warm, and fulfilling, it surrounded him in the vision, embracing him so solidly Blair felt as if he could touch it. The feeling stayed with him when he opened his eyes.

"Well, mate," Megan said with a grin, "it's going to have to wait. You have thirty minutes before show time and four private sessions afterwards."

"Meg, I'm tired. Can't you cancel the private - " Blair stopped in mid-sentence, eyes automatically seeking the strange in-between world where he communicated with the dead. But this time his usual symbols deserted him, no pink roses, no parallel lines, no big red numbers, all he saw was Naomi Sandburg shaking her head emphatically. "Never mind, Megan, I'll do them all."

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"Mr. Ellison?"

Jim turned, knocking his cane against a desk so that it clattered to the floor. The dark haired woman bent and when she handed it back, Jim felt the heat off her skin as her face warmed with embarrassment. He hated that, he hated people being embarrassed for and by him. Most people acted as if acknowledging his injury committed some great sin, and anything which broke the illusion and reminded him that he

wasn't just like everyone else was a heinous act. Jim could have told them he needed no extra reminders right now, the constant pain took care of that. He took the cane, careful not to brush her hand, and waited a moment.

"I'm Megan Conner, Mr. Sandburg's assistant. Would you like to sit down?" She asked. "It'll be awhile before Mr. Sandburg gets to you."

"Yeah, thank you." He followed her to what appeared to be a waiting room and sank down onto the couch.

"You can see the taping on this monitor," Megan explained. "Have you ever seen a television show taped before?"

"Yeah," Jim said, relaxing. "Vince Deal is a - friend of mine. I've watched him film a few things here in Cascade."

Conner looked impressed. "Vince Deal! You'll have to introduce me sometime." She got him settled then disappeared into the choreographed chaos taping a television show required. .

It went fairly quickly. Sandburg came out, chatting a little and explaining his system of symbols. "If I say above you I mean an older family member; father, mother, grandfather, grandmother. Below is younger, to the side is more like sibling, cousin, contemporary. The spirits use my experience to get me to say things, so I can be wrong. My interpretations can be off, just stick with me and we'll figure it out." Jim listened as the young man connected with an amazing array of spirits, validating his connection with intimate details and eerie insights. Without being aware of it, Jim began to focus solely on the psychic. His hearing honed in on the strong beat of Sandburg's heart and the rhythm of his breathing. There were small breaks in the pattern, times when Sandburg grew excited or frustrated but by and large his vitals remained steady.

Attention on the kinetic figure, it took Jim a few moments to realize that he could see something besides Sandburg, not a shape or a recognizable form, but wavering shadows just at the edge of the screen. He tried to pinpoint the cause, but each time he consciously sought them out, the shapes seemed to fade away. He struggled, staring closely at the area around Sandburg and it took a hand on his shoulder to rouse him from his scrutiny.

"Mr. Ellison?" Megan Conner drew her hand away. "We're ready for you."

"Oh, sorry, I was - thinking." She nodded, expression still bordering on concerned and led him to another stage set. It presented what must have passed as atmosphere on the small screen; smoked glass panels at an angle, two modern chrome chairs between them. Megan waited as Jim negotiated the steps and sat down before hurrying off again. He got the impression the woman never quit going.

Jim looked around, wondering just what it was he hoped to prove. If Sandburg really communicated with the dead how would that make him innocent of the charges? "You're a fool, Jimmy," he told himself but didn't care. He had to know if what he felt was true.

"Hello." Deep but with a ringing quality that made Jim want to smile, Sandburg took the chair opposite him. Ellison heard his sharp intake of breath and behind his glasses, Sandburg's deep eyes widened in surprise. But the spiritualist quickly recovered and he reached out to shake hands. "I'm Blair and you are," again his gaze became unfocused but an instant later he said, "James."

"Yes." Jim knew enough not to give away anything. He'd read how some psychics merely read body language and built on it with leading questions until he'd convinced some gullible schmuck to fork over the deed to the ranch.

"I'm sure you know my spiel so let's get started." Sandburg pressed his palms together and took a deep breath. "I'm getting a male figure above; father figure or grandfather. There are parallel lines between you and him so either he had the same name or something is the same. Was your grandfather named James?"

Ellison sighed, "No."

"There's something the same, he's insisting." Sandburg frowned, looking just passed Jim's right shoulder. "He says you see the same. Does this make sense?"

Jim froze. "We see the same?"

Sandburg nodded. "He says your," the psychic stumbled over his words, "tall, no, high - heightened senses. Your heightened senses are his legacy." Blair shrugged. "This is the parallel. I'm also getting.....is your father still here?"

"Yes."

Blair stilled, then gave a little shake of his head, "someone you thought of as a father then. Who is In-Incacha?"

"What? Is this a fucking joke, Chief?" Ellison levered himself to his feet, panting for breath as his heart hammered his ribs. "What the hell is this?" he asked, grabbing the smaller man's shirt front and jerking him to his feet. Oozing every ounce of menace he possessed, Jim practically snarled in the other man's face.

"Hey, whoa, man," Sandburg sputtered. He raised his hands, pressing hard against Ellison's chest. "Look, I just relay the message."

"Yeah, well who told you?" Jim stepped closer, satisfied by the widening of those deep blue eyes.

"He did!" Gesturing to a spot over Jim's shoulder, Sandburg went on, "I'm telling you, it's not a trick."



From a great distance Ellison heard the voices of Sandburg's people babbling and getting closer, he knew in a moment someone would appear and he'd have to explain his actions. But right then nothing mattered but obey the compulsion Sandburg's conviction instilled within him. Jim turned to look where the psychic pointed and the world seemed to die away. Dense silence settled around them like a fog, obscuring the hustle of the cheesy set, and Jim found himself standing once again on the edge of a cliff in a jungle where he had stood a lifetime ago. Agony, both of the body and the spirit, had sent him to that edge and only the peaceful eyes of Incacha had kept Jim from ending it all right then. For almost two years Jim had learned from the shaman, striving to understand his destiny and why he alone had lived when his men were buried beneath the trees. Wise and patient, Incacha had taught him true friendship, not the beer commercial version, but a soul deep connection he'd never even seen before. When death had come to the Indian, swift and unforgiving, Jim would have willingly followed save for the dream, a vision really, of that noble face twisted with sorrow. As it was Jim knew if the Army hadn't found him when they did, his will to live would have slowly slipped away. And now Incacha stood just as he had in life, his black hair and tan skin made more luminous by the glow which surrounded him. "You do not believe, Enquiri? What good are eyes which see a thousand miles if you do not look?" Ellison lifted his hand, needing, in a way he couldn't explain, for it to be real. He reached out, fingers stretched and for just a second he felt living flesh and then, like a soap bubble on a blade of grass, Incacha blinked out of existence.

"Boss?"

"Mr. Sandburg?"

"Blair!"

Their voices burst through the curtain of silence which had been drawn around them, demanding an explanation. Jim knew he couldn't talk, not now, not when he had seen see the Chopec Shaman who had saved his life and sanity five years earlier standing in the middle of a sound stage in Cascade, Washington. He didn't have to try, Sandburg stopped them all with both hands raised like a man hoping to avoid being shot.

"s okay. I'm fine, no problem." He flashed a wide grin, one which seemed to work to create another circle around them and the intruders backed away, still mumbling with sullen defiance, but doing as told. Ellison fixed his gaze on Sandburg and saw a kind of relief suffuse the indigo eyes as he studied Jim in return. "You saw him," he said slowly and then nodded to himself. "You saw him, too," he repeated and they stood staring at each other for a long moment. Finally Blair held out his hand just as Jim had done a moment earlier but Jim knew he wouldn't disappear, he couldn't, not now. "Come on."

Sandburg kept up a steady stream of chatter as he pulled Jim through the backstage area, out a huge set of sliding doors and across an open expanse of concrete. He ended their impromptu daisy chain at an old convertible, a Corvair and once Blair had helped him into it Jim remembered Ralph Nader's claim that this particular automobile was unsafe at any speed. He laid his head back, wondering if old Ralph had foreseen this moment when he'd made the claim, because right now he felt more unsafe than he ever had in his life. With his eyes closed, sunlight played over Jim's eyelids and those changing patterns of light and shadow wiped away the flutter in the pit of his stomach. He listened as city sounds faded, replaced by birds and wind and trees. Sandburg drove well, turning in smooth semi-circles as they left Cascade behind. The alternating patches of shadow and light on his eyelids finally gave way to total shadow and the car pulled to a gentle stop. Jim could hear the breeze stirring leaves and birds singing in all directions.

Blair didn't speak but Jim knew he was being watched, studied by that penetrating gaze. He opened his eyes but couldn't bring himself to break the silence for a long time. Finally, unable to prevent the conversation, he sighed and asked, "How do you stand it?" Ellison barely recognized his own voice, it sounded frail, like the wheeze of an old, worn out man or a paper cutout fluttering in the breeze, certainly not the voice of the best detective in Cascade.

"Jim." Sandburg's hand closed over his, warm and solid and anchoring him, "It's a gift." Jim turned his head to look at the younger man. There was no smile now, only a look of frank belief that shown in the set of Blair's mouth and solemn, unblinking gaze. Ellison shivered. Soldiers and civilians, clothes shredded, eyes black with hate and condemnation, mouths open in eternal screams, flashed through his brain until he gasped for breath. He started to say something, anything which would tell Sandburg how foolish he was but the sound which came from his throat was somewhere between a sob and a howl of pain and he could do nothing but cling to the arms which took him in.

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"They don't blame you," Blair whispered in his ear a million years later. Jim stiffened, his skin suddenly felt icy despite the warm day, and

would have pulled away right then if Sandburg hadn't tightened his grip. "I see them, Jim. They stand behind you and I can see them." Jim did pull away, staring at Blair with a kind of horror. "No, no, Jim," Blair soothed. He ran his hand down the side of Ellison's face as if his touch could wipe that horror away. It worked. Jim calmed, though his eyes darted from side to side as if only constant vigilance kept them from looking over his shoulder. "Jim," Blair drew his attention again, scooting across the seat and raising his free hand to the other side of Jim's face. Held like that, his gaze pinned to Sandburg's, Jim couldn't escape. "They are crying for you. They're begging you to let them go."

"But-"

"No," Blair cut him off, shaking his head and little residual movements made Jim do the same. "I can see them and hear them," he insisted, "and you could do the same if you tried. You have a gift, Jim, use it."

"No, it's - it's too much," Jim rasped. He was breathing hard again, trapped against the door with the handle digging into his back. It felt as if a fire had been kindled in his shoes and the flames were licking their way up his legs and back. Flames, too, seemed to be burning in Sandburg's eyes and these licked through his brain and seared his heart until Ellison felt like little more than a charred husk.

"It's part of you, Jim," Blair went on as if he'd never uttered one word, "and nothing's ever going to be right unless you admit that." And as his words, almost lost among the rustling of leaves, washed over Jim he could feel the cooling power they possessed and a hissing sigh escaped his lips. He felt almost boneless with relief, the pain which he'd carried since the day his helicopter crashed in Peru, pain which had grown more agonizing with each failure to protect those weaker than himself, pain which had nearly destroyed his soul when Veronica Sarris blew apart a loaded city bus, began to ebb. Like a sieve, guilt trickled away drop by drop. His heart felt lighter and even his body no longer burned with unrelenting agony just the normal discomfort of healing muscles and tissue. He closed his eyes again, Blair's hands were still on his face, still there to guide him. He let himself hear the leaves, the wind sighing as it raced through them and beneath that, animals in the woods, and farther still a plane overhead. Jim sank through the levels, searching inside for that place which had only come to him in nightmares, the place where the unintelligible screams waited and at first he couldn't understand the howling noise which assailed his ears and then, slowly, it came clear.

The gentle rustling of leaves separated into sounds, into words. "You tried to help us," a wavering voice said. "You risked your life for us. We don't blame you and you mustn't blame yourself." Jim looked then, opened his eyes and saw them moving among the trees; the passengers on that bus filed past him, "Let us go." Jim gulped for air, nodding with a short jerk of his head and they began to fade. But a new rank of figures emerged from the woods; his team, the men he'd lost in Peru. "We died with honor, Sir. Our duty is done." En mass, they snapped a salute and disappeared. Jim didn't even try to wipe away the tears on his cheeks, he just turned to Sandburg and Blair did it for him.

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Blair used his thumbs, wiping away Ellison's tears unaware that his own eyes were streaming. He offered a weak smile and cleared his throat, "You - you saw them pull back?" Jim nodded. "I told you they didn't blame you." Again Ellison nodded and this time he, too, offered a faint smile.

"I - I don't know what to say, Sandburg" Jim whispered, staring into Blair's eyes. Blair slipped his hands into Jim's hair, and as he did so the vision Naomi had shown him burst into his mind. Sandburg saw the wolf, felt its powerful stride as it raced forward. In Jim's eyes he saw the image of the jaguar, its hunger reflected in the pale blue gaze. He moved forward, met by Ellison and the kiss which bound them was a bright explosion of desire and need. It went on and on, feeding upon itself until oxygen deprivation guttered the flame to embers.

"Uh, well, let's count that as a thank you," Blair murmured and saw amusement in Ellison's eyes. "Want to talk about it here," he looked around the deserted spot where he'd pulled off, "or someplace more comfortable."

"I'm all for comfort," Jim said. Blair laughed and Jim did too and the heavy weight which he'd sensed around Ellison seemed to fall away.

"Comfort it is." They drove back to Cascade, Ellison directing him to a small neighborhood just north of the bay. They parked on a quiet, shop lined street and Jim indicated a door near a store called Colette's. When they went inside, Blair discovered it was an old warehouse converted into half a dozen loft apartments. They rode the elevator up to the third floor and Jim let him into apartment 307. It had a huge living room with tall windows overlooking the sparkling bay waters, a cozy kitchen with vintage appliances and, once he climbed the stairs, one of the biggest beds Blair had ever seen. "Yeah, this looks way comfortable." He sank down onto the yellow duvet and looked up at Ellison. All the rapport suddenly evaporated and both men glanced away. "Uh, so, nice place."

"Thanks." Ellison shifted his weight to his right leg, looking at the cane he'd been carrying instead of using. His mouth thinned to a slash and his brows drew together in a frown. "Look, Sandburg....."

"Okay, yeah," Blair bounced off the bed, both hands raised, "bad idea, right? I'll go." He started to move away but as he edged passed Ellison, Jim took his arm.

"No. No, it's just," Jim shrugged, "I don't know what to do - what's going on." He let go and sat down in the place Blair had vacated. "I like you," he said softly, voice filled with something Blair thought was wonder, "but what is going on?"

Sandburg sighed and sat beside him. "I've been thinking about that. Naomi, that's my mom," he told Jim, "showed me something I didn't understand but now I think I do."

"Why didn't you just ask her?"

Blair felt himself grow warm. For the first time since he'd become a nationally known psychic he found himself slightly embarrassed by what, to him, was an everyday occurrence. "It's not that easy. Naomi died about five years ago."

"Oh, sorry," Jim said. "That's when you became a - a -"

"Psychic? No, that's something I've always had. I just didn't do anything about it until after," he smiled when Jim's hand settled on his knee. "I was studying anthropology until mom got sick, then I quit to be with her and afterwards I just didn't go back."

"Anthropology, Chief?"

"Yeah," Blair grinned, warmed by how gentle the nickname could sound when Ellison wasn't spitting it at him. "My field was legends and folklore and one of the most fascinating dealt with something called Sentinels." He eyed Jim a moment, "sentinels were individuals who, because of their genetic makeup, protected the tribe, Jim. I think this would explain your ability to see the spirits."

"How do you know I'm not psychic like you?" Ellison challenged.

Blair mustered his most scathing look, "I would know. Just like I know you're a cop and you're trying to find out if I'm running a scam."

"Impressive," Jim admitted.

"Not really, Mr. Cop-Of-the-Year. Come on, Ellison," he chided, "you're the most high profile cop in Cascade why would you suddenly believe in spirits?"

"Maybe I was looking for an explanation?"

"Well, you've got one." Blair turned, studying the older man with open admiration. "You're a great guy, Jim, and I want to get to know you -"

"But first I need to know something, Chief," Jim cut in, "are you scamming anyone?"

"No. I'm not, Jim, and I'm going to do everything in my power to help you find out what's going on," he dropped his gaze from the crystal blue eyes to the thin lips, "but first let's see if we can find that incredible light again."

"You saw that, too?"

Blair leaned in to take Jim's mouth in a searing kiss. White light spilled through his brain and within it the wolf and jaguar playfully circled each other. He barely felt Ellison pressing him back across the mattress and was surprised when hot fingers slid down his zipper and reached inside to touch him. "Yessss," he hissed, writhing as Jim freed his cock to the cool air and then speech deserted him when Ellison's mouth closed over it. He rode a wave of ecstasy and felt himself flung far, far away when it crested over him. It could have been hours later when he woke to find Ellison arranged beside him on the bed, staring at him with a dazzling smile. "Whoa, that was something else. I think I blew a fuse."

"Yeah, I think you did too," Jim murmured.

"What about you?" Blair rolled over, leaning on Jim's chest and smiling down into his face. His hand was taken in a strong grip and pressed against the damp front of Ellison's khaki trousers.

"Watching you was quite exciting."

"So I feel," Blair said and grinned again. They kissed, slow wet kisses full of affection. "Mom's been showing me these images for a month," Blair confessed. "It was driving me crazy. And then you came along and almost the first moment I saw you I thought 'he has the jaguar's eyes!' . I think this is Fate," he stopped, pulling back. "Sorry, man, guess I'm moving a little fast." He sat up but was pulled back down an instant later.

"You're not moving too fast," Jim assured him, "don't ask me why or how but I feel like I've known you for a long time, Chief. Whatever this is between us is special." He placed a hand on Blair's chest, over his heart. "I want us to be friends, to be more than friends."



Unable to hide the pleasure those few words kindled in his soul, Blair kissed his lover again and whispered, "I knew that."

~~~~~

"Ellison!" Simon Banks almost dropped his coffee mug when his detective walked through the door. Three days earlier Jim Ellison had been a wreck; he'd shuffled along with the aid of a cane, pain etched visibly in lines on his too pale face, there had been an air of defeat about him, something Simon never would have thought to see associated with him. Now, Jim moved with his old grace, the cane no longer a fixture in his grip and only a slight limp to remind anyone of his accident. The biggest change, though, was his eyes. Gone were the circles of exhaustion beneath them and the dull glaze of a man who carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. His blue gaze sparkled with a purity Simon found took his breath away. "You look great, Jim! What the hell's going on?"

"Reporting, Sir," Jim said with a grin. Simon gaped. Ellison hadn't so much as smiled in months. "I closed the Sandburg case," he dropped a file on Banks' desk. "Seems his manager was tacking on a little fee when he found individuals with more money than he figured they needed."

"Sandburg wasn't involved?" Banks asked as he perused the report.

"Nope. He's 100%," Jim grinned again, "innocent, Sir."

Banks left him standing there a moment as he read and then asked, "You speak of this psychic in glowing terms, Jim. Is he for real?"

"He's for real, Simon," Jim assured him. "He's definitely for real."

Banks nodded and closed the file, his sharp eyes raked Ellison again. "You really look better, Jim. Is everything okay now?"

Ellison tilted his head as if listening to something then smiled. "Yes, Simon, everything is okay now." He shot a look out towards the bullpen, smiling. Simon followed his gaze and saw the television psychic getting off the elevator. Sandburg made his way into the bullpen like he'd been there a hundred times, gaze swinging around as if looking for something - or someone. The other detectives gradually swamped him, clustering around him like geese and a moment later the psychic stood among them talking and joking one of the gang. "I have to go, Simon."

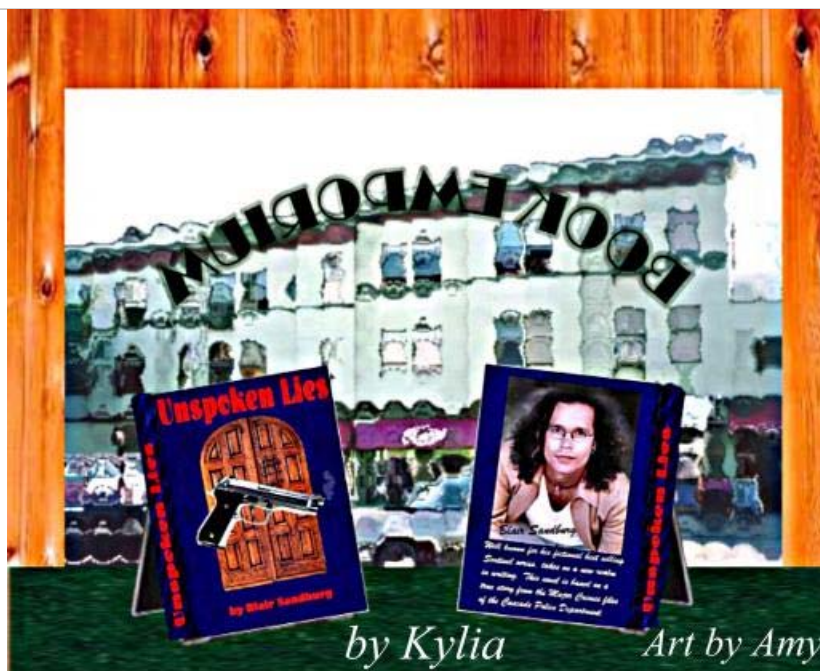
"Go? You can't go anywhere, detective! We're trying to keep the city safe, you know? There are cases stacked up and now that you're doing so well, I can't spare you."

"You gave me time off, remember, Sir?" Jim said. "I'm taking it now." He gave another blinding smile then waded out into the chattering group of officers. Simon watched him gather Sandburg to his side with one long arm and a few low words. The younger man grinned, and turned his gaze towards Simon's office, his eyes beamed with a strange, pure light.

The End.

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Unspoken Lies



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## Unspoken Lies - Kyla

Captain Simon Banks hung up the phone and walked around his desk to his office door. Opening it, he was pleased to discover his best detective at his own desk, apparently, doing much needed paperwork.

"Ellison." He called not very loudly, knowing the detective in question would hear him. Detective Jim Ellison looked up at the sound of his name and saw his boss, and closest friend, standing in front of his office door. At the captain's nod, he stood up and made his way across the room.

"What's up?"

"Have a seat." Simon motioned to the chair as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He turned slightly and raised the coffee pot in offering.

Jim shook his head and waited patiently for Simon to tell him the reason he'd been summoned to the Captain's office.

"I need a favor, Jim."

Jim looked up at that. It wasn't very often Simon asked for favors.

Simon dropped into his chair, bending down slightly to open one of his desk drawers. He pulled out a book and placed it on top of the desk.

Jim frowned as he looked at the cover. "The Sentinel?" The detective raised an eyebrow.

Simon nodded. "This is the first in a series of books. The title character is a sort of detective." He didn't offer any more information.

"And your favor?" Jim asked warily.

"Read the book first." Simon turned away from his best officer and looked out into the bull pen. "How's the Ramsey case coming?" He asked in a manner that made one think he was changing the subject.

Jim detected something odd in his captain's voice, but wasn't ready to question it. Yet. "He's still dead." Jim sighed. "The D.A. is still confident the case against Mark Tillford will stick."

"You're saying it won't?" Simon asked carefully.

Jim stood up and walked around the office carefully, trying to rally his thoughts. "Oh, the case will stick."

"But?"

"But he didn't do it." Jim answered simply.

"You're sure of that?" Simon asked curiously.

Jim turned around to face his captain once more. "As sure as I am that you didn't do it."

"That's pretty sure." Simon noted. "If Mark Tillford didn't do it, who did?"

Jim shrugged slightly. "The wife, the sister. Who knows, maybe the butler did it. All I know is Tillford didn't."

"The butler huh?" Simon chuckled. "You get that from Hercule Poirot?"

Jim grinned. "Maybe." He turned his attention back to the book on the desk. "Why do you really want me to read this book? This isn't another one of your attempts to get me to read that friend of yours, is it?" When Simon didn't answer but merely leveled an even stare at him, Jim sighed. "Simon. I told you..."

"I know, I know, you told me that you weren't interested in reading about some sensational supersleuth. Well, Jim these books aren't about that. If you'd take the time to read one, you'd realize that." Simon held up a hand to stop the protest he knew was coming. "But that's not why I want you to read the book."

Jim frowned. "Then why?"

Simon shook his head. "Just read it, Jim."

"Fine." Jim reached over the captain's desk lifting the book and taking it with him as he left the office.

Simon Banks watched his best detective leaving, book in hand, and smiled. He knew that Detective Jim Ellison was about to get the shock of his life.

\*\*\*\*

Blair Sandburg typed frantically, ignoring his ringing telephone. After about the twentieth ring, he realized the person on the other end,

whoever it might be, wasn't going to give up. He picked it up, his eyes still riveted to the screen of his laptop.

"Yeah?" He called into the line, not bothering with pleasantries. Only a handful of people had this number, none of which would be put off by \*how\* he chose to answer the phone.

"Blair?"

Blair grinned at the phone. "Simon, tell me you have good news."

"I think I might have, but it took you so long to answer I forgot what it was." Blair groaned exasperatedly at Simon's words and could hear Simon chuckling into the phone.

"Funny, old man." Blair shook his head taking his phone, and moving away from his laptop. Blair knew having his work in front of him would be too much of a temptation and this was one phone call he was hoping not to miss. "Well?" Blair prodded.

"The chief was rather pleased you wanted to use one of our cases for your next book." Blair could hear the smile in Simon's voice.

"But? I'm sensing a but here." Blair took off his glasses and began to rub at his eyes. He was really getting too old for all nighters.

"I was thinking... maybe hook you up with one of my detectives, get first hand information. The case you're interested in isn't exactly closed."

Blair ran a hand through his unruly curls as he flopped down on his couch. "It's not? I thought I read that someone was arrested?" He stood back up and made his way towards the dining room table, used more often for research notes than the actual eating of food. He flipped through some newspaper articles.

"It says here that a Mark Tillford was arrested and charged with first degree Murder in the death of Toby Ramsey." He paused a second. "Simon, are you saying that he wasn't arrested, or that he didn't do it?"

Simon sighed into the line. "I'm not **saying** anything. The case hasn't officially been closed. Therefore, my detective is still currently working on any and all leads."

"Hmmm." Blair furrowed his brows although no one was there to see it. "And this detective? That would be..."

"Jim Ellison." Simon answered as if the name was not important.

"Uh-huh, and would this be the same Jim Ellison who won honors the past two years? The same Jim Ellison who was declared a hero by Time Magazine not long ago. The same Jim Ellison that always seems to come up in our conversations?" When Simon didn't acknowledge any of his questions, Blair continued. "Simon, you aren't trying to play matchmaker, are you, because..."

"No, no, heaven forbid. I know you've sworn off men... and women." He took a deep breath before continuing, managing to sound like the very idea of playing matchmaker for his old friend was appalling.

"Look, Blair, you called me, asked if there was any chance you could get access to the Ramsey case files. I just thought, talking to the detective on the case would be even better. If I was wrong..." He let the words trail off, sounding wounded.

"No, no, Simon, you weren't wrong." Blair sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. I'm just... overworked. I'm finishing the last re-writes to the final chapter of the Sentinel series. They have to be turned in by this evening."

"Tell you what, why don't you finish your rewrites and get some rest, then come and see me in a couple of days, and we'll see where the case stands?"

"Sounds good. Thanks." Blair smiled into the line as he hung up the phone.

"What am I getting myself into here?" He asked the room in general.

His first novel, 'The Sentinel' had become a best seller almost overnight a little over three years ago and since that time he had written four other books in the same universe.

But now, he was ready to write something else, something new, maybe something real. Not that he didn't believe the subject matter of his 'fictional' books was real. He did. He had spent too many years of his life studying real-life Sentinels, searching for a real Sentinel.

However, his research had only turned up one possible Sentinel in all his lifetime of searching. When she died, further searching hadn't turned up even a hope of a real, live, breathing Sentinel, so Blair was forced to give it and his study of Anthropology up.

It wasn't that anthropology, in general, didn't interest him, but without his study in Sentinels, it didn't seem to be nearly as important. He had always felt that something had been missing, some part of himself. Some part of his very soul was missing this necessary piece.

A piece he wasn't likely to find. He had come to terms with that several years ago. Consequently, he withdrew from Rainier University and turned all of his research notes on the tribal sentinels of South America into a series of best-selling fictional novels.



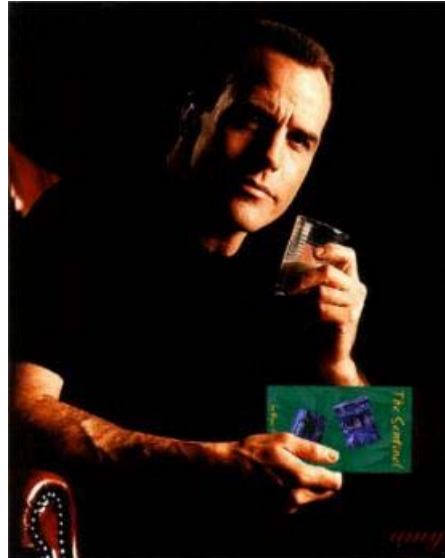
He had never regretted his change in career, never regretted that he had stopped searching. He had come to realize that if he were destined to find that which he sought, it would come to him. No amount of searching or wishing would make it happen.

And so, a little over three years later, he was finishing what would be the final book in the Sentinel series. He hadn't meant for it to go on so long, but he had spent so many years studying Sentinels. Using his research in a way that would tell people about these wonderful individuals, without letting the world know Sentinels really existed was something that he truly loved, but it was time to move on.

The Sentinel series was finished, finally.

\*\*\*\*

Detective Jim Ellison closed the cover of the book Simon had given him and stared at the picture on the back. The author didn't look anything like what he was expecting.



He looked just shy of thirty and had the most beautiful blue eyes Jim had ever seen. They seemed to draw him in, almost as if he could fall into the photograph itself. What was more amazing was the wisdom he saw in those eyes, as if contained within were untold amounts of knowledge just waiting to be tapped.

Which was silly, really, because this... person was an author, not a scholar, and how much knowledge could he have anyway?

No, it was just his subconscious projecting things, probably an effect of the glasses the author was wearing, but even they didn't dim the blue of those eyes.

Jim shook his head banishing his current train of thought. It wasn't healthy. Despite the fact that he was apparently a friend of Simon's, the detective would probably never meet this man. Even if he did, he'd probably be disappointed to find that the writer was some obnoxious person, arrogant from fame, or worse, he was a flaky hippie child as his hair and dangling earrings suggested.

Content with this new belief, the detected flipped open the inside back flap of the book, looking for information on the author. He didn't find any, instead there were a few paragraphs describing the sequels to the book Jim had just read.

Jim looked at his watch, and without really realizing what he was doing, grabbed his jacket, keys and wallet before heading out of his loft. It wasn't until he had almost reached a local bookstore that what he was doing penetrated through his brain.

It didn't matter. Aside from his seemingly sudden fascination with the author of these books, it was the novel itself which had really captured him. They were about a freelance detective, of sorts.

Not really a private investigator, but a man who was born with unusual sensory abilities, and used his gifts to help people as best he could. The hero had spent several years isolated in the jungles of Paraguay, where he had honed his 'gifts'. When he returned to civilization, he put them to use in the real world.

What fascinated Jim the most was the similarities between himself and this fictional hero. Not physically, they didn't really look anything alike. Although their builds could be said to be similar, Ian Kirpatrick had dark hair and green eyes.

Other aspects about Kirpatrick drew startling similarities as well. Kirpatrick was blessed with five enhanced senses. Jim himself had been cursed with such an abnormality, giving him a lot of problems in his life.

Although he had them somewhat under control these days, he still considered them more of a burden than a blessing. Some of the things Kirpatrick learned to control his abilities, Jim had also learned.



He couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, this Blair Sandburg actually **knew** what he was writing about. If that was the case, maybe there were more people out there with enhanced senses, like him, maybe he could have had a better life if he had stumbled on someone who knew what Sandburg obviously did.

Maybe he wasn't the freak he always thought himself to be.

\*\*\*\*

Blair Sandburg entered the Cascade Police department with an obvious bounce in his step, entering the elevator and riding up to the eighth floor in barely restrained excitement.

When he pushed open the doors to Major Crime, he went unnoticed until he reached Rhonda's desk, smiling brightly as the woman looked up. Her face transformed into a wide smile when she saw him.

"Blair!" She stood up and hugged him.

"Is Old Grisly in?" Blair asked tilting his head towards Simon's office.

Rhonda nodded and Blair turned to the office in question. He knocked once but opened the door before the Captain had a chance to answer.

Captain Simon Banks looked up from his desk with a scowl, which quickly mutated into a wide smile, "Blair. What are you doing here?"

Blair grinned and flopped down in a nearby chair. "I know I said I'd wait and call you this weekend, but I finished my rewrites and was in the neighborhood."

Simon raised an eyebrow. "The neighborhood? Blair, you live an hour away."

Blair shrugged. "So, tell me about your case."

Simon stared levelly across his desk. He hadn't had a chance to talk with Jim since he had been given the book. The detective had the previous day off and was now down at the courthouse on an unrelated case.

Before Simon could make a decision about how much to tell his friend, the captain caught movement out of the corner of his eye through the slats on his blinds. He turned his attention to the window and saw the detective in question walk through.

It was hard to tell, but it looked like Ellison was in a good mood. Court must have gone well. He picked up the phone and dialed Rhonda's extension. "Rhonda? Send Ellison in."

A minute later there was a knock and the doors opened to reveal the detective.

"You needed to see me, Sir?"

Simon motioned for him to come in. "Jim, meet a friend of mine. Blair Sandburg, this is Detective Jim Ellison."

Blair stood up to shake hands with the detective. He wasn't sure but he thought he saw something in the pale blue eyes that met his, but any speculation was cut short as their hands clasped and an odd sensation traveled up his arm.

He seemed caught in some weird haze as he continued to stare into those intense pale eyes. After a moment the connection was broken and Blair stepped back on unsteady feet. "It's nice to meet you."

Jim nodded but didn't say anything, his brain couldn't seem to form the words just yet.

"Blair wants to write a book on the Ramsey case." Simon broke through what was obviously, to him, an electrified moment.

Jim spun around to face his Captain. "Sir?"

Simon nodded, hiding his amusement. "The mayor's approved it. She's quite a fan of his."

Jim stared blankly. "Sir, the Ramsey case isn't closed."

Blair turned his attention away from his old friend who was quite obviously amused, although he wasn't sure by what. "Look, detective. I don't want to be a nuisance, really. If you don't want to talk to me, I'll get my information from the files and you'll never have to see me again."

Jim gulped loudly because that wasn't really something he'd like to see happen. "No. it's all right." He smiled at the younger man. "Maybe you can see something I haven't been able to, a fresh perspective."

Blair grinned and nodded excitedly.

"Well then, gentlemen, I'll let you get to work." Simon told them. When neither man moved he barked. "Elsewhere."

Blair rolled his eyes and turned towards the door. Jim followed him out wondering if this was really a good idea.

\*\*\*\*

Blair flipped through the files for the third or fourth time. Jim had lost track. His interest had moved from diligently going through the files, to watching Blair diligently go through the files, to just watching Blair.

"Is something wrong?" Blair asked without even looking up from his stack of papers.

"What?" Jim asked in confusion.

"Is something wrong?" Blair asked again as he looked up, his glasses perched crookedly on his nose. "You were staring at me."

"I was?" Jim asked dumbly. Blair raised in eyebrow slightly in amusement. "I was." He admitted. Blair continued to stare at him. Jim sighed. "I'm curious."

"About?" Blair pressed.

"Your books. This case doesn't really fall into the Sentinel series."

Blair narrowed his eyes slightly as he tried to figure out exactly what the cop was trying to say. "Why? Because they're more fantasy than fact?" The writer shrugged, "Maybe. Maybe not." Blair looked back down to the files.

A minute later, he felt those ice blue eyes staring at him intently again. "What exactly do you want to know?" Blair asked with a slight trace of amusement.

Jim stood. "Nothing." The detective started picking up the papers. "Come on, if we want to go talk to Tillford, we'd better leave now."

Blair shook his head in bewilderment as he followed suit, trailing the detective out. This was turning out to be more interesting than he had imagined, and they'd barely started.

\*\*\*\*

"I didn't kill Toby Ramsey." Mark Tillford stated seriously.

It wasn't the first time he had uttered those words, and would, most likely, not be the last. However, Blair Sandburg believed him. The author wasn't sure if it was just his desire to want this case to be more complex than it first appeared, or if it was some secret intuition. Nevertheless, Blair didn't think Mark Tillford was a killer.

The younger man nodded, showing his acceptance of the accused's statement. "What can you tell us about Toby Ramsey?" He turned his head slightly to where Jim was leaning against a far wall, seemingly comfortable to let Blair ask his questions. "You were lovers." It was a statement and Tillford didn't deny it.

Mark Tillford started to open his mouth but then hesitated slightly, not sure if he should continue. He stared at the long-haired man, trying to gauge if he could trust him. Finally... he nodded, "Yes."

Blair waited to see if anything else was revealed. When he was met with more silence he hazarded another guess, "You think you know who killed him?"

Tillford opened his mouth as if to speak but shut it immediately, only to open it once more. "Yes... No... I'm not sure."

Blair raised an eyebrow.

Tillford sighed. "His family. There's something... not right about them."

Blair frowned, casting a curious glance in Jim's direction. The cop's face was expressionless, but Blair thought he saw something in the pale eyes. Curiosity, maybe? Either that or his thoughts were not centered around the case and the current questioning. Blair didn't know him well enough to tell the difference.

"Not Right?" Blair asked as he returned his attention to Tillford.

Tillford shrugged. "He was always concerned about them finding out about us and about something else; something he wouldn't discuss with me." He hesitated, then looked up, staring searchingly at Blair for a moment, before speaking again. "They killed him. I don't know who or why, but they did."

Blair nodded his head as if he believed the suspect without question. "Thank you, Mr. Tillford, for speaking with me... us." He smiled a brilliant megawatt smile and turned to Ellison motioning his head slightly.

Ellison banged once on the door which resulted in it being opened almost immediately with a couple of guards coming in to escort the prisoner out. Nothing more was said until Blair and Jim were alone again.

"You believe him?" Blair asked quietly, staring at the spot in which the suspect had vacated.

"You do." Jim noted.

"That's not what I asked, Detective." Blair turned his head. The amusement in his blue eyes belied the crispness of his words.

Jim shrugged. "Doesn't matter what I believe. It only matters what I can prove."

Blair nodded his acceptance of this statement and sighed, wondering how they could prove any of the things Tillford had thought about the real killer of Toby Ramsey.

"How did you know?" Jim asked quietly, curiosity slightly coloring his voice.

"Know what?" Blair asked as he stood up.

"Ramsey and Tillford were lovers. That wasn't in any of the reports."

Blair turned his body slightly to appraise the detective. "You knew. Didn't you?"

Jim acknowledged this to himself. It was true. He had known, but he couldn't very well admit to that without explaining **how** he knew, or why it was **that** particular fact hadn't made it into any reports.

"Didn't you?" Blair pressed.

"Yes." He moved away from the wall. "How did you?" Jim asked.

Blair smiled slightly. "Same way as you. Experience." He walked around the table and towards the door. "We better get to work if we're going to figure any of this out before the attorneys get a hold of it."

Jim followed him out of the room, his curiosity about this man peaking. When they reached the parking garage, Jim stopped in front of his truck and turned to face the younger man when he seemed to hesitate.

"We have a lot of information to go through." Blair commented when he saw the cop was watching him. "You wanna grab a bite to eat?"

Jim smiled slightly, relieved that it wasn't something complicated, and secretly pleased that the question gave him the opening he was waiting for, even if he hadn't been aware of it.

"I make a mean lasagna. We can go over the files while we wait for it to cook." Jim let the offer hang, not insinuating anything more than the simple meal.

Blair's eyes gleamed as he smiled. "Sounds great, man. Lead the way."

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Blair Sandburg looked at the room's sparse furnishings as Jim moved around quietly in the kitchen. The detective had brought Blair to his apartment, which turned out to be a rather spacious loft. The loft was made more spacious by the complete lack of **anything** which would have indicated something personal about the detective.

The walls were bare, the floors impeccably clean. Even the tabletops and counters were empty with the exception of the occasional appliance. The room seemed less than lived in. From his vantage point, Blair could see into the spare bedroom which, with the exception of exercise equipment, was also empty.

It saddened the author to see a man as complex and interesting, as he sensed Jim Ellison to be, living such a lonely existence. He had only known the detective for several hours, but already he sensed great complexities in the man. He was a mystery. One which he was suddenly eager to unravel.

"Wine?" Jim's voice carried through the stillness of the loft, breaking through Blair's internal thoughts.

"That'd be great." Blair looked around the room once more. "How long have you lived here?"

"About eight years." Jim answered as he came into the living room with two wine glasses. "I bought it after my return from Peru." Jim wasn't certain why he felt so comfortable talking to this nearly complete stranger, although he doubted learning about his time in the jungle would come as a surprise. It certainly wasn't a secret, especially not if Simon was offering up information.

"Peru? You spent time in Peru?" Blair looked slightly surprised. His eyes went slightly out of focus as he thought back to anything Simon may have told him. He couldn't think of any mention about Peru from his old friend, but he did remember seeing a few magazine articles a few years back.

"Captain James Ellison. That's you." He said almost astonished. "I didn't make the connection."

Jim shrugged, not sure what to say. He didn't want to discuss his past, not really, but for some reason, he didn't want his life to be nothing but an idle curiosity either.

Blair must have sensed his unease, because after another second of their staring at each other, he turned away and picked up the file folders they had brought with them, spreading them out on the coffee table. "We better get to work. Simon said the arraignment in is two days. If we want to clear Tillford, we need to know who really did it."

Jim nodded his agreement and sat down on the couch next to Blair even though there was another one, not too far away, which would have been a better place to actually work.

"Tillford says that he thinks Ramsey's family did it. What do you think?" Blair began.

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Jim Ellison quietly moved through the loft, locking everything up, his mind still a swirl of information. He glanced back briefly to the couch where Blair had passed out after several long hours of work.

They had discussed the case, backwards and forwards, and finally came up with what they thought was a solid motive. Blair had remembered something he had heard about the Ramsey family when he worked at Rainier University.

The Ramsey's were a very famous, very influential family in Washington. Toby Ramsey's grandfather, Tobias, had been a sort of philanthropist, and his children and grandchildren had followed in his footsteps. They were financial backers to the university as well as other places throughout Cascade.

Blair had also remembered a rumor going around when he had first started Rainier. He had been young, and inquisitive, and had paid attention to the rumor mill. There was some talk about a Ramsey family scandal, involving Tobias Ramsey, the family patriarch, and the true nature of how he gained his wealth.

The rumors stopped when, a few months later, it was announced that Toby Ramsey would marry Kathryn Thomas. Nothing was ever mentioned again, but several people got the impression the marriage was some sort of ploy to keep their family secrets...secret. That had been almost fifteen years ago.

According to something Tillford had mentioned in an earlier interrogation, Toby Ramsey was seeking a divorce. He wasn't happy, and was planning on leaving his wife. Considering the fact that Toby was undoubtedly leaving her for a **man**, Jim hazarded that Mrs. Ramsey wouldn't be too pleased.

Both he and Blair believed that she might have had something to do with Ramsey's murder. In an effort to see if they could gain more information, they were going to speak with Ramsey's sister the following day.

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Jim awoke early the next morning, which was not unusual. But his reasoning for waking was not his unwavering adherence to a schedule but the man who was still asleep on his couch.

From his perch in his loft bedroom he could see Blair lying still in sleep and couldn't help but think about the incongruities of this man. At first glance he seemed energetic, enthusiastic, and the slightest bit odd. He also appeared to be nothing more than a hippie child, who you would expect to find spouting new age mysticisms.

All of that might in fact be true, but he was also someone with an analytical mind who had a unique way of seeing the world. An understanding of things Jim couldn't possibly grasp, and a kind of innocence that **couldn't** be ruined by the harsh realities of life.

It was refreshing, and unsettling.

Somewhere, in the midst of their conversations during the course of the evening, Jim realized he could so easily fall in love with this man. He could so easily share the secrets of his life, the things that made him both unique and an outcast, and somehow, he knew that he wouldn't be alone anymore. If he could only take that risk.

He wasn't certain he could, nor did he have any desire to deny himself the opportunity at happiness, finally.

As he stared at the younger man through the bars on his staircase, he heard Blair's heartbeat change rhythm as he moved slightly pulling himself out of the grasp of sleep. When the curly-haired man's eyes blinked open sleepily, immediately seeking out his own on the second floor, Jim knew he was lost.

"Hey." Blair whispered, not entirely certain if he was making enough sound to be heard.

"Morning, Chief." Jim climbed off of his bed and made his way downstairs, wrapping a robe around himself.

Blair sat up on the couch rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He looked around, trying to remember why he was laying on a strange man's couch. No, not a strange man, Jim. For someone he had known less than twenty-four hours, he sure felt comfortable around the detective.

That was unusual. He often got along with people, but rarely did he feel truly comfortable in their company. He had spent his entire childhood moving from place to place, following his mother on her travels. It had been a necessity then, to get along with people as much as was possible, for the short geeky son of a single, 'free-loving' Naomi.

When he had come to Rainier University, at the age of sixteen, making friends had been difficult. Acquaintances had been many, but true friends were a luxury he didn't have. He had lost touch with the few he did have when he gave up his studies in Anthropology after failing to find a Sentinel.

Since then, Blair had kept pretty much to himself. He lived alone and didn't go out much. He hadn't had a date in nearly three years, since the first book in the Sentinel series was published. He wasn't entirely certain why that was exactly. Maybe he was tired of the people who frequented the clubs he had gone to in his years at Rainier. Maybe he wasn't sure what it was he was looking for so he wouldn't know it if he had found it.

Maybe he was saving himself. For who or what he wasn't sure.

The only person he had kept in any sort of regular contact with, aside from his publisher, was Simon Banks. Simon had frequently spoken to him about Detective Ellison, in what Blair believed was an attempt to match-make. After spending several hours with Jim, the former student was beginning to think he should have listened a lot sooner.

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The two men made breakfast with an odd sense of familiarity. Odd for both men because they had spent the majority of the past few years keeping company with themselves, and considering they had only known each other for one day, it was quite unusual to find themselves so completely comfortable in each other's company.

As Blair stirred blueberries into a batch of pancake batter, Jim took the opportunity to observe Blair, trying to figure out what it was about him that he seemed to connect with so easily.

"How do you know Simon?" Jim questioned curiously after several minutes of watching the younger man.

Blair smiled as he tilted his head slightly, thinking back to all the years he had known the police captain. "He knew my mother a long time ago, before I was born." He laughed slightly. "Which is kind of funny because Naomi has serious issues about... police, among other things."

"Oh?" Jim asked as he pulled out a frying pan and set it on the stove's burner.

"Yeah. Of course, he wasn't a cop when they met." He turned around and brought the batter to the stove as Jim turned on the burner. "I imagine she'd be pretty surprised."

"You imagine? Is she..." Jim trailed off, not sure how to finish his question.

Blair looked up as he poured a small amount of oil into the pan. "What?" He asked. When he realized what Jim thought, he shook his head. "No, nothing like that. Naomi's... a free spirit."

Jim nodded his head as the pancakes were poured. They were silent for a few moments before Jim spoke again. "You said she'd be surprised. About?"

Blair shrugged as he watched the bubbles appear over the round batter in the pan. "She doesn't keep in touch with a lot of the people she's known over the years. Many of them she never sees or hears from again, after she's... moved on."

"And your father?" The detective asked with slight hesitation. He didn't know if he had gone too far but Blair didn't seem to be put off.

"Don't have one, not a real one at any rate. A lot of almost fathers and a few 'uncles', and then there's Simon." The younger man smiled as he thought of the captain.

Jim felt the corners of his mouth twitch up with the obvious affection Blair had for his friend. "It doesn't bother you?" Jim pressed.

"Not really." Blair stated as he flipped the pancake. "How about you?"

It was on the tip of Jim's tongue to be flip but then he realized that Blair had been nice enough to answer his questions so he should be able to do the same. "I haven't seen or spoken to my family in over twenty years, not since high school."

"You miss them?" Blair asked quietly as he tilted his head regarding the older man.

"No." Jim answered honestly. His head cocked to the side as he heard noise outside the door. He inhaled deeply, trying to detect who might be out there, completely unaware Blair was still watching him.

He could smell Blair more than anything else, an earthy scent, mixed with the smell of morning coffee and blueberry pancakes, but beyond that, he could also smell the faint hint of tobacco.

"Simon's here." He spoke without thinking as he made his way towards the front door.

Blair watched the detective speculatively from the kitchen, his mind moving rapidly at what he had just witnessed.

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"Blair." Simon Banks seemed surprised to see the young author at Jim's apartment.

"Hey, old man." Blair grinned at his friend, trying not to show his confusion at what he thought might have just happened.

"Any progress?" Simon asked, turning to Jim.

"Yes, sir." Jim answered as he pointed towards the coffee table.

"Well?" Simon asked, eyes going from one man to the next, taking in the way Blair seemed at home in Jim's kitchen.

"The butler did it." Blair chuckled as he placed some pancakes on a plate.

Simon bit down on his cigar to keep from laughing at Blair's remark, so like one that Jim himself had made the previous day.

"Breakfast, Simon?" Blair asked as he walked over to Jim's dining room table.

Simon stared stunned at the domestic picture they made as Jim made his way back into the kitchen to help. "Ah, no. I just came to drop these off." He flashed a packet of papers. "Search warrants for the Ramsey house."

Blair's brows crinkled together. "Wasn't that already searched?" he turned to Jim but it was Simon who answered.

"Toby Ramsey's house, yes, but not the family estate. I thought maybe Jim could go over it." He looked pointedly at the detective.

"Yeah, okay." Jim agreed as he sat down to eat breakfast.

Blair watched the two men, feeling as though there was definitely something else going on. He turned his attention back to Simon and eyed him speculatively.

Simon stared right back, his dark eyes open, and seeming to confirm the ideas that were passing through the young man's mind.

"I gotta go." Simon set the papers down on the coffee table and moved towards the front door. Just before he opened it, he spoke again. "You boys behave."

"I always do." Blair grinned as he sat down at the table.

Jim's snort followed Simon's chuckle as the police captain left the apartment and the two men to their breakfast.

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After breakfast was finished, and the dishes done, Jim and Blair found themselves in Jim's living room. Jim was looking over the warrants while Blair studied his new friend.

"What?" He asked when he noticed the younger man's scrutiny.

"How long have you been a Sentinel?"

Jim froze. If it hadn't been for the books, written by Blair, that he had recently read, the word 'Sentinel' would have meant nothing. But he did read the books and knew exactly what the younger man was talking about.

"How long?" Blair asked again. This time his voice was quiet, pitched only for Jim's exceptional hearing. He stood just behind Jim, and placed a hand on his back as he spoke.

Jim took a deep breath and was almost overwhelmed by the smell of Blair. It seemed to seep into him, calming his nervousness. "My whole life, I think."

"You think?" Blair asked calmly, although there was a slight hint of amusement.

Jim moved slowly over to the couch and sunk down into the cushions, suddenly certain his own legs couldn't hold him up.

"It's okay, Jim." Blair's soothing voice was next to him as he fought with himself over how honest he could really be.

"After Peru, I had these... episodes. Sensory overloads." He paused. "Zone-outs, I think you called them in your book?"

Blair nodded and the action caused some of his curls to brush Jim's sensitive skin. Jim sucked in a deep breath, eager to smell the scent that had already addicted him.

"I took some time off after the Army. I thought it was some sort of post-traumatic stress. After awhile the episodes became less. I joined the

force, and all was good for awhile."

"But?" Blair pressed gently.

Jim sighed, suddenly all too aware he would tell this man just about anything. So much for not needing anyone, ever. "I... got married. It didn't end well. It didn't begin well either, but..." Jim trailed off. "Afterwards, I spent a couple of weeks camping, alone. When I came back things seemed to get worse. The zone outs came back and I had sensory spikes. I didn't know what to do. I took some time off from work, saw a ton of doctors. Finally, I told Simon. He... suggested some things..." Jim turned his head to face Blair, a look of astonishment covering his features. "You. You told Simon what to do." It wasn't a question, and the certainty with which he voiced the words made Blair look away.

"Yeah. I think." Blair admitted.

"You knew?" Jim sounded hurt, betrayed almost, though he wasn't sure why.

"No. Not about you." Blair hurriedly said. "Simon asked some questions. I answered them." He paused for a second, then stood up and walked around the room. "They were detailed questions, I admit, but I didn't know anything about you."

Jim stared at the author for a moment, finally nodding, believe what he said. "Weren't you curious?"

Blair took a deep breath and plunged ahead with his own truths. "At the time, no. He called at a really bad time in my life. I... I didn't really want to talk to anybody, not Naomi, not Simon. I answered his questions, but honestly? I don't think I put much thought into it. I probably did you more harm than good." He turned towards the older man, who was sitting on the couch watching him, his face expressionless, but there was a warmth in his pale eyes.

"You saved my life." Jim spoke quietly, honestly. "Simon saved my life. Thank you."

Blair waved the appreciation off. "You can control your senses now?"

"Control?" Jim smiled ruefully. "If that's what you want to call it. Really. It's more like they control me. Usually I just have them turned down, like volume on a stereo." He looked up and smiled slightly. "I suppose I have you to thank for that, too? I recognized something similar in your books."

Blair grinned sheepishly. "I may have mentioned it to Simon."

"How did you know?" Jim asked. "What to do?"

Blair quickly looked away. "I... knew someone... like you. She... died."

"I'm sorry." Jim spoke quietly. "Was she your..."

"No. More like a sister."

Jim nodding, curious as to the fate of someone like him, yet at the same time, not really wanting to know.

"Um... we'd better get going." Blair nodded to the coffee table, which now held the warrants Simon had brought over.

"Yeah." Jim stood up and grabbed his jacket from the coat rack by the door. "Blair?" He asked just as the younger man opened the door.

"Yeah?" Blair stopped, hesitating.

"Maybe we could..." Jim stopped. "Never mind. Let's go."

Blair watched him for a second, holding the door open. The detective picked up his warrants and stepped out into the hall. When Blair followed him, the detective shut and locked the door. They stared at each other for a moment, in the hallway outside of 307, their eyes conveying things they couldn't. Finally, Jim looked away and walked towards the elevator.

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"So, what do we know about Jennifer Ramsey?" Blair asked as he climbed into the detective's truck and fastened his seatbelt.

Jim glanced at Blair before fastening his own seatbelt and starting the engine. "Well, according the background checks that were run when her brother was first killed, she's twenty-four and considered something of a family embarrassment."

Blair arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Jim smiled slightly and nodded. "Yeah. She's been in and out of hospitals since she was six. She was just released from Conover about six months ago."

"Really?" Blair sounded intrigued. "So, if she's such an embarrassment, why keep her around? Surely a family like the Ramsey's could have

moved her somewhere else?"

"Tobias Ramsey had a soft spot for Jennifer, it seems. There were some rather strict stipulations in his will regarding her." Jim maneuvered the truck easily through traffic.

"Ah." Blair nodded his understanding as another thought struck him. "If she's so unstable, won't she be a poor witness, should she give us any usable information?"

Jim shrugged. "Maybe, but we still need to talk to her. She probably doesn't know anything, but if she can point us in the direction of someone who might..." Jim trailed off as he pulled the truck to a stop in front of the security fence at the Ramsey Estate.

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"Ms. Ramsey? I'm Detective Ellison and this is Blair Sandburg. We were wondering if we could ask you a couple of questions?" Jim spoke calmly to the young woman who came to greet them after the maid had let them in.

It did not escape either man's notice that the woman seemed nervous, which, considering her brother had recently been murdered, wasn't unusual. Jim listened to the rapid beating of her heart with some interest, however, wondering what it was exactly that was causing that reaction. Was it simply being questioned by the police, or something in particular that was frightening her?

"Wh...what about?" Jennifer Ramsey asked nervously. "I thought you arrested... M.. that man?"

Blair glanced at Jim, curious at her reaction. She seemed more nervous than she should be. Jim kept his eyes on the young woman as he stepped a little closer to her.

"We'd like to ask you about your sister-in-law." His voice was quiet, but there was no misinterpreting the seriousness in his tone.

Jennifer gulped visibly before speaking. "Katie? What does she have to do with this?"

"Ms. Ramsey, is it true she and your brother were having problems?" Blair asked quietly.

"Uh..." Jennifer Ramsey hesitated. "No. They were fine."

"Mark Tillford says that they were getting divorced." Jim told her, his face expressionless, his voice even, not giving any indication he knew she was lying.

"No." Jennifer shook her head. "No. They couldn't. It would ruin... everything." She looked away, her eyes falling to the floor, her hands gripped tightly around each other. "He worked so hard to make up for it. Toby didn't care. He never did."

Jennifer Ramsey was mumbling now, more to herself than to either Jim or Blair.

"Who worked hard?" Blair asked softly placing a hand on her shoulder.

Jim watched the interaction with slight surprise. He hadn't known the writer for any length of time but he still hadn't expected him to be so **there** for the person they were questioning. Blair was just exuding calmness and understanding.

"Grandfather. He... he tried so hard to make up. But... Toby never understood. He never cared. And Katie... Katherine, she understood, she did." Jennifer stopped speaking, her eyes distant, as if she was off in some other place in her mind. She took a deep breath. "She understood, but Toby, he hurt her. If they split up..." She trailed off.

Blair waited several minutes, letting Ms. Ramsey compose herself, although it appeared to him that she wasn't aware of their presence anymore. It was almost as if she was just speaking aloud to herself. He turned to look at Jim, whose face was still an expressionless mask, but his eyes showed similar confusion as to what Blair was experiencing.

"Ms. Ramsey? Jennifer?" Blair asked softly. "What would have happened? If your brother and his wife had divorced?"

Jennifer took a deep breath before speaking, her eyes still unfocused. "She would have told. She would have told everyone. Toby didn't care. He just wanted M... that, that man! Don't you see?" She asked frantically as she turned her head to face Blair, her suddenly clear eyes seeing compassion and understanding in Blair's. "He had to die! He just \*had\* to!"

Blair stood frozen for a second, almost disbelieving of what he had just heard. This new revelation wasn't exactly what he or Jim had expected. Suddenly, Jennifer Ramsey lost it. Her entire body began shaking as she threw herself into Blair's arms, sobs racking her body.

Blair patted her back soothingly as he looked over her shoulder at the detective. He shrugged slightly as he stepped back out into the hall, taking out his cell phone and dialing.

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"Ms. Ramsey?" Blair began taking the seat next to Jennifer Ramsey. "You said your brother had to die? Why?"



Jennifer Ramsey wiped her face one last time before looking at Blair. "Toby never understood Grandfather."

"What didn't he understand?" Blair asked quietly, hoping to get the girl talking. Her eyes were watery and slightly glazed. He wasn't sure if that was entirely from crying or if it was something else altogether.

"Grandfather paid for his crime. How many more years is it going to be hanging over our heads? How many?" Jennifer started to get hysterical again, her words coming in near shrieks as her hands waved around frantically.

"What did he have to pay for?" Jim asked as he stepped into the room, depositing his cell phone into a pocket of his jacket.

Jennifer Ramsey turned away from Blair and began staring aimlessly out one of the large windows. After several long seconds, she began to speak again. "Toby left Katie. He left her for Mark. He ruined everything. I tried to reason with him, tried to get him to understand." She blinked once, but continued to stare out of the window, her voice speaking in a low, even monotone now, almost resigned. "I told him that we'd be destroyed"

Blair turned to look at Jim, who seemed about ready to speak, but when Blair shook his head silently; the detective shut his mouth and continued listening, hoping the young girl would get to the point soon.

"When I first found out that Toby was in love with Mark, I wasn't worried. I'd met him once at an art show, debuting his work. He was wonderful." She smiled as if in distant memory. "Nothing would happen. Mark **couldn't** be gay. Our family was safe." Jennifer's voice dropped another notch as she continued speaking, the pain in her voice plain to hear. "But then I caught them... together. And I knew that it was true. When Toby came home to pack, I tried to talk to him. He wouldn't listen. I knew what would happen. They'd get divorced and everyone would know. I couldn't let that happen. I had to kill him."

Her words were so softly spoken Blair couldn't hear them, but apparently, Jim had. The detective stepped forward.

"Ms. Ramsey? Are you saying you killed your brother, Toby Ramsey?" He asked clearly, allowing for no mistake.

Jennifer nodded. "Yes. Isn't that why you're here?"

Jim began to read her rights to her as Blair helped her to stand. The detective spoke softly with her, making she understood everything, giving Blair the opportunity to call Simon and fill him in.

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It was nearly three hours later when Jim and Blair returned to Major Crimes to make sense of what Jennifer Ramsey had told them and devise a motive from the information they had.

Jim had just sat down at his desk, with Blair perching on the edge, when Simon came over with a file folder. "Good work, gentlemen."

Jim looked up with a slight frown. "We still don't have a motive, sir."

"Wrong." Simon smiled broadly. "When you called earlier I had Brown speak with the widow. It seems that she had planned to file for divorce the day after her husband died."

"That doesn't explain why the sister felt the need to kill him." Jim shook his head.

"Not by itself, but she also admitted that had the divorce gone to court, she would have revealed the true reason for their marriage."

"Which was?" Blair asked, bouncing slightly on his perch.

"Tobias Ramsey was responsible for the death of Kathryn Ramsey's own grandfather, Randolph Thomas. The two men were involved in business together in the late fifties. Supposedly Randolph Thomas disappeared forty years ago, presumed dead, but a body was never found."

"Let me guess. Someone **does** know where the body is?" Blair asked with a slight shudder thinking about a forty year old corpse decaying in someone's basement.

"We're still checking on that now. But according to Kathryn Ramsey, her marriage to the victim was a way to keep the family's secret. If she had gotten a divorce, she would have aired the family's dirty laundry."

"There's your motive, detective." Blair handed the file folder to Jim after taking it from Simon.

"It seems like a waste. Killing someone over a forty year old murder." Jim shook his head sadly as he skimmed the reports.

"Yes, but a family like the Ramsey's is in the public eye. If something like this came out, who knows what it would have done to them?" Blair shrugged.

"Look, Jim, why don't you take off? This case is just about wrapped up. You can come back in the morning and finish the reports." Simon smiled slightly at the two men before turning and walking back to his office, not giving them a chance to argue.

"I guess that leaves you and me." Blair smiled easily as he stood up.

Jim watched him for a second, taking in the sight of his new friend, whom he didn't have any real reason see after tonight. The detective took in the scent of Blair which seemed to willing drift over to him, letting him take his fill. "You hungry?" Jim asked as casually as he could muster.

"Starved, but this time it's on me." Blair grinned wickedly, turning and walking through the bull pen towards the doors.

Watching Blair leave and suddenly entertaining a vision of their dinner **on** Blair, Jim stood up and followed his friend out. The detective wondered if maybe they should eat in private, although that was providing Blair was interested.

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"Your place is... interesting." Jim commented as he walked around the apartment. It wasn't quite what he was expecting but he wasn't sure why that was.

The apartment itself wasn't small, but it appeared that way due to the way the rooms were decorated. There didn't seem to be an area that didn't have **something** occupying it's space. It looked entirely too small for all of Blair's **stuff**.



There were books, masks, wall hangings, odd artifacts from places Jim could barely pronounce, and more books. Only one couch sat in the small living room along with a coffee table which was littered with papers and a laptop computer.

It was obvious that no one other than Blair had been there in quite some time.

"Sorry about the clutter. I don't get many visitors." Blair offered, but he didn't seem entirely apologetic.

"Why not?" Jim asked curiously.

Blair shrugged. "I guess I haven't found anyone interesting enough to invite over." He smiled as he cleared off the coffee table and sat down at the couch.

"Dinner was good." Jim said as he sat down, his leg lightly brushing Blair's, sending a flush of heat through both men. "I don't think I've ever had... tongue."

"Really?" Blair grinned. "I'd think a man like you might be familiar with a little tongue." He raised an eyebrow and then started to chuckle.

Jim laughed with him and broke the slight awkwardness that seemed to settle over them since dinner. "I guess we won't really be seeing each other too much... now that the case is solved." Jim spoke quietly, his pale eyes gazing at Blair.

"I don't know. I may still have questions, for the book, of course, and there's your senses. If you'd like, I can help you with that."

Jim nodded. "I'd like." He moved slightly closer to the younger man on the couch, close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating off of Blair's body.

"Good." Blair bent forward, his hair falling over his shoulders.

"You know what else I'd like?" Jim asked quietly.

"What?" Blair breathed out, his darker eyes lost in the pale depths of the older man's.

"This." Jim whispered before closing the distance between them and taking the younger man's lips in a kiss.

When they parted both men were breathing rapidly, surprised at the connection they still felt sizzling between them.

Jim moved away slowly, standing up. "I should go."

"You don't have to." Blair told him, getting to his own feet.

"Yeah. Yeah I do." Jim spoke, his voice husky with want and need and something else he couldn't name.

Blair turned away breaking their connection. "Okay." He stepped away.

"But," Jim stopped Blair's movement and brought the younger man's body flush with his own and planted another kiss against his lips. "I want to see you again. Soon."


"Okay." Blair whispered, his lips still tingling.

He watched as the older man left, flopping back onto his couch, his body still **humming** from that brief contact. He wondered how soon was **soon**? And how much this man was about to change his life?

It didn't matter. The journey was half the fun and Blair had a feeling he was about to embark on the journey of a lifetime.

The End

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 Thief of Hearts



### **Thief of Hearts** by Morgana

"Blair Sandburg?" The Dean looked in genuine sympathy at the youngster that had just settled into living on campus. Blair was one of the youngest students ever to start his undergraduate program here. "I'm really sorry, but I've got to tell you that..." His voice failed as he looked at Blair. Barely sixteen years old, many of his colleagues had already labeled Blair Sandburg a prodigy. Blair promised to be a delightful and challenging student.

Blair's fingernails dug deeper into the wood of the armrest. When the Dean had asked him to come to his office immediately, Blair had known there was trouble. However, he couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong. He'd only been at Seattle University for two months and was still trying to fit in. Studying had always been easy for him and the Law and Anthropology courses he was taking didn't present much of a challenge. So, what was wrong?

"Blair, I don't know how to say this." Dean Hendricks pulled up a chair and sat down beside Blair. This was possibly the hardest conversation he'd ever had during his time here as Dean. "We just received a phone call from an Ashram in India. Did you know your mother was staying there?" He'd only met Naomi once and she'd made quite an impression on him. Oh, he hated to be the bringer of such bad news.

"Yes, I know Naomi is in India." Blair decided to wait and see what was troubling the Dean. He liked the elderly man, but didn't trust easy. A few of Naomi's boyfriends had beaten his ability to trust out of him. "Is something wrong with her?" Suddenly, he noticed the expression of dread in the Dean's eyes. This was bad.

"Blair, there has been an accident," the Dean started, trying to sound compassionate. "She was killed in a car crash."

"No... No!" Blair yelled in disbelief. Naomi was all he had left! Naomi had told him countless times that they'd fled their home because of

his father. He'd started to drink after losing his job and had become violent. They'd left the trailer in the middle of the night and she'd been determined to never return. What Blair remembered of his early childhood wasn't pretty. His father had been abusive and Naomi had jumped in more than once trying to protect him.

"She can't be dead!" Blair whimpered. He was only sixteen years old! He needed his mother! Tears started trickling down his face and he quickly wiped them away. "It must have been someone else in that car crash. Naomi's still alive. I'll call her and..." His voice faltered as the horrible truth hit him. Dean Hendricks had certainly checked this information before calling him here. "Please, tell me that this isn't true."

"I'm sorry, Blair," Dean Hendricks said sincerely. "I can't even begin to comprehend how hard this is for you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No." Blair got to his feet, his movements mechanical. "I need to be on my own right now." Blair rushed out of the room, slammed the door behind him and ran. He didn't know where he was headed and he didn't care. He'd just lost his mother.

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Blair tried to attend Naomi's memorial service but things were a mess in India. Apparently, five people had been killed in the car crash and the ashes had been released near the Ganges. So there wouldn't be a funeral and the service had taken place before he had been able to make arrangements to fly to India. It left him in limbo, feeling lost, exhausted, and totally alone.

He spent most of his time in his room. The few friends he'd managed to make during his brief time at Seattle University seemed uncomfortable with the idea of offering comfort. The friendships were still too new and fragile, so he'd retreated from classes and social life. He needed time to mourn Naomi's death. Part of him still couldn't believe she'd really died in that car crash. It seemed so unfair. Not that he believed that the universe was fair in general, but Blair never expected to lose Naomi like this. Although she hadn't been around as much as he'd wanted her to be, she'd been a great mother and friend.

Sitting in his room, he wrapped his arms around himself and hid beneath the blankets. Almost everyone else was attending classes and he was alone. He wanted to be alone, wanted no one around. His shaky hand stole out from beneath the covers and pulled his journal closer. It had been Naomi's parting gift. Blair opened it and his eyes caressed the elegant handwriting on the first page.

To Blair, my son and treasure. I'll always be with you, Blair, no matter where we are. Naomi.

Even more tears trickled down his cheeks. He didn't know how to live without her. Naomi had always been a phone call away, and now... He felt lonely and cold. Naomi had been the one only who had known how to soothe him, how to make him feel at peace with the world. What was he going to do now? He could probably stay here since he'd been awarded a grant, but Naomi had been helping him when he was short on money. What about a will? Had she made one?

Although his hand was shaky, he managed to put the tip of the pen onto the paper. He'd discovered a long time ago that writing down his feelings made them less powerful, less scary.

It's been four days since Dean Hendricks told me that Naomi died and I feel helpless. I want to scream, kick and punch someone. She was so young, so vital. Why did it have to be her? I still need her. Naomi always wanted me to be strong and self-reliant, but... how does a sixteen-year-old cope with the world? I'm on my own now. Dean Hendricks assured me that I could talk to him if I wanted to, but... I hardly know the man. I want Naomi.

Looking at his writing his stomach cramped. The dry heaves were about to start again. He used to have panic attacks when he'd been little, but they had stopped after Naomi had left his father. But now they were back.

"Not again..." Blair placed the journal onto the bed and raced into the bathroom to throw up. He made it inside and wrapped his arms around the ceramic bowl. He almost felt Naomi's hands on his skin, pushing back his long hair. But she wasn't here and he struggled not to choke as he continued to throw up.

After emptying his stomach, he brushed his teeth and dragged himself back to his room. He crawled back into bed and stared at his writing. "I'm such a baby," he said, self-loathing apparent in his tone. He hated to admit it but he doubted he could make it on his own.

"Blair? Can I come in?" Dean Hendricks waited near the doorway, unwilling to intrude on the mourning youngster. "I want to talk to you."

Blair composed himself and nodded his head once. He clutched the journal to his chest, holding onto Naomi's last gift. "I'll be fine. I just need time." He felt the need to apologize for his weakness. Why, he didn't know. Had he suddenly become an adult now that Naomi had died? He still didn't feel like one, but the child within him was dying.

"You have a visitor, Blair," the Dean said softly. He felt incredibly concerned about this youngster.

"A visitor?" Blair raised a puzzled eyebrow. Except for Naomi, hardly anyone knew where he was. She'd always been moving about and he'd been pulled along, whether he'd wanted to or not.

Dean Hendricks wanted to tell Blair who was visiting, but didn't get the chance. In shock, he stared at Blair, whose eyes were growing big and unfocused at the sight of his visitor.

"No..." Blair whimpered in dread, as he stared at the tall man who was now slowly approaching. The elderly man was wearing a grey suit. He had short auburn hair and blue eyes, which seemed vaguely familiar. Blair shivered fiercely. He knew this man, he realized in dread. He'd seen him before. But where and when had that been? And why was the man here now? His stomach clenched with inexplicable fear.

"Hello, Blair. You probably don't remember me."

The voice woke a distant memory and the shivers turned into violent tremors that rocked Blair's body. That voice...? "Do I know you?" he whispered eventually. Suddenly, he wanted to run, wanted to put as much distance as possible between them. This man scared him. It wasn't like him to react like this. The man was only a visitor for crying out loud!

"I'm your father, Blair."

"No!" Blair yelled the word in despair. The ominous apprehension had been there since the man had entered his room. On the verge of panicking, Blair forced himself to meet the man's eyes, blue eyes that mirrored his own. Blair hugged the comforter tighter.

"You're not my father!" As he denied that possibility, he hung onto the journal. Blair hadn't seen his father in over thirteen years and this was a terrible shock. Something about this man scared Blair to death. He realized it was those eyes, those blue eyes that were bereft of all compassion.

"I've got the papers to prove it, son."

Blair cringed hearing that last word and looked pleadingly at Dean Hendricks. "Is that the truth?"

"Yes," the Dean said, confused. He'd hoped that a familiar presence would relax Blair, but all he saw was... what was it that he saw? Fear? Panic? Maybe he should have talked to Blair first.

"I'm Marc Moyet. I guess your mother never told you about me?"

Blair heard the angry tone and cringed. Naomi had run away because the bastard had been abusive and now he was showing up here? How did he dare? Enraged, Blair looked into his eyes. "I don't want you here. I want you to leave."

"Blair," Marc said in a sharp tone, "that's not your decision to make. Now that Naomi's dead, I'm your legal guardian. You're only sixteen." He placed his briefcase on the desk and opened it. After uncovering an envelope, he handed it to Blair. "This is Naomi's will. She wanted me to take care of you."

Blair stared at the papers, grabbed them and started to scan them. My God, it was true. This was Naomi's handwriting. Marc Moyet was now his legal guardian! Why had Naomi done this? She'd known from first hand experience what Marc was truly like! She'd had to sneak out of the house to escape his anger!

"Blair, pack your things. We're leaving," Marc ordered, as he retook possession of Naomi's will. He placed the envelope back into the briefcase and locked it. "In the meantime, I'll discuss the details of your departure with Dean Hendricks. I expect you to be ready to leave in 30 minutes."

"We're leaving?" Marc couldn't take him away from here. "I just started the graduate program! I can't leave like this!" Despair deepened his tone. He wanted to become a lawyer to help defend the innocent and put the guilty behind bars. He had worked his ass off to get this grant. Seattle University was the only stable factor left in his life. Marc Moyet couldn't take that away from him.

Marc waited until the Dean had stepped outside into the corridor and then addressed his son. "You'll be ready in 30 minutes. Don't make me drag you out kicking and screaming. You'll regret that, son."

Blair backed away when an evil grin surfaced on Marc's face. Oh man, he would recognize that grin anywhere! He'd seen it too many times as a kid! Marc would make him obey. Remembering some forms of punishment from his early childhood, he turned away and started packing. However, he would try to get away from Marc Moyet the first opportunity he had.

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One hour later, Blair sat in the back seat of Marc's Mercedes. His dislike of the man was still growing. Blair had felt like this after Naomi had managed to get them away from Marc. Every night had held terrors for him back then. He'd been scared to sleep alone so he'd crawled into Naomi's bed. In his defense, he could add that he'd only been three years old at that time. Naomi had always cradled him in her arms, holding him close and telling him that his father didn't know where they were and that she planned on keeping it that way. Blair sighed soundlessly, remembering how good it had felt when Naomi had wrapped her arms around him. But this time Naomi couldn't save him. He had to look out for himself.

Looking over his shoulder, Blair still managed to catch a glimpse of the huge building. Seattle University was a dream that was now part of the past. He would never go to law school or become an attorney. Naomi had shared that dream with him, had supported him every step of the way. And now... now he was falling hard into a deep darkness that threatened to consume him. What lay ahead of him? What plans did Marc have for him? Marc didn't have his best interest at heart. Taking him away from the University had clearly illustrated that. Blair had tried to protest, had tried to talk Marc out of it, but his father hadn't given in. He didn't even know where they were headed and he was hesitant to ask. Marc's eyes possessed a predatory quality.

"Listen up, kid. You're Blair Moyet from now on. Naomi always wanted you to have her name, but that's ridiculous. You're my son and legally, your last name's Moyet." Marc glanced at Blair. He didn't like the defiance that shone from Blair's eyes.

Blair almost told Marc off, but he held back just in time, remembering how easily Marc had turned violent in the past. Blair stayed quiet, but that was also the wrong thing to do because Marc stared hard at him.

"That's 'yes sir'," Marc told him. "Say it, kid." He didn't want any misunderstandings between them. Blair needed to know who was in charge! The kid was annoying and defied authority. Looked like nothing had changed. Blair had always been like that. It had irritated him thirteen years ago and it still did. "Loud and clear, son."

Blair was torn. His instincts were telling him to play along, but that meant betraying Naomi, betraying everything they'd had as mother and son. "Yes, sir," he choked out eventually. Angering Marc now was not a good idea. First, he had to find out if Marc was still as violent as he had been in the past. He had to act cautiously if he wanted to survive.

Contentedly, Marc nodded his head. The boy could be taught! This was his first victory and many would follow.

///

Blair raised an eyebrow when they arrived at a deserted trailer park. Nothing much had changed. Marc still tried to radiate importance and leadership, but deep down inside he was still a mean bastard. Blair sighed softly as Marc parked the car. Marc gestured for him to get out as well and Blair obeyed. He peeked at his surroundings, trying to find an escape route in case he needed one. Almost half of the trailers were abandoned.

Hesitantly, Blair picked up his two bags and followed Marc inside. Foul and pungent odors assaulted Blair once Marc had closed the door behind him. The place was a mess. Leftovers from several TV dinners emanated a sickening smell and Blair quickly covered his nose. It was obvious that Marc had neglected his home for several weeks.

//I can't live like this!// Horrified, he stared at the rat that ran over the food leftovers, quickly grabbing a morsel and disappearing again beneath a pile of dirty clothes.

"Make yourself useful, kid." Marc dropped onto the couch after shoving last night's dinner onto the floor. "Clean the place up."

Blair stared at Marc in disbelief. "I'm not your maid!" The words left his lips unintentionally. He realized that he should have kept quiet when Marc's eyes flashed dangerously. Old instincts, aimed at self-preservation, kicked in when he remembered that glare from childhood. Man, this was bad! At that moment, he realized that Marc hadn't changed at all. Evil stared back at him and Blair ducked too late. A fist connected with his jaw and knocked him onto the floor.

"Don't contradict me! You'll do as you're told! Naomi was much too lenient with you. You need a firm hand, Blair." Marc glared at the younger man still huddled on the floor. "Now get back on your feet and start cleaning!" Marc stalked into the bedroom to lie down.

Blair hoped that he would get a chance to sneak away, but Marc monitored his every move. Resigned, Blair started to throw away the leftovers. Naomi had saved him from this hell thirteen years ago and now his personal nemesis was back to make his life miserable.

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Four weeks later.

"I need you to come with me tonight, Blair." Marc leaned deeper into the comfort of his chair. Blair sat opposite him, eyes downcast and he was fidgeting with the cloth of his worn out sweater. The kid had learned to adjust to his new life. Marc had seen to that. It had taken him some time to break Blair's fierce will, but he'd always known he would win the battle. Blair had no place to go, no money to support himself and no one would hire a seventeen year old who didn't have any papers. They were in Marc's possession now.

Blair didn't ask for an explanation. He'd quickly learned not to ask for any information. It only annoyed and angered Marc. The first time he'd pushed for an answer, Marc had almost broken his wrist. It had happened on his birthday. For some absurd reason, he'd hoped Marc would loosen up a little because he was turning seventeen, but his father had ignored his fucking birthday. With Naomi, celebrating his birthday had been special.

These last four weeks had been hell. Blair had forgotten how bad living with his father had been. Years ago, he'd suffered at Marc's hands and now he was living it again. Rationally, he realized that Marc had taken all his security away, leaving him stripped and vulnerable. The bastard had even burned the journal Naomi had given him after taunting him and calling Naomi names.

Had they ever loved each other? Blair had wondered, stunned, when Marc had raved about Naomi's infidelity. But Naomi had never cheated on Marc and Blair guessed it had been the other way around. Marc had probably cheated on Naomi.

"I want you to dress nicely. You have an important dinner date tonight." Marc waited for Blair's reaction.

"Dinner date?" he repeated stunned. He'd learned to be quiet and rarely spoke. There was only Marc to talk to and his father hated it when he babbled.

"You're going to have car trouble and a man will offer you his assistance. You'll go along, telling him that you're hungry. He'll take you out for dinner." Marc eyed Blair closely. Blair had been freeloading for the past four weeks and it was about time that he earned his money.

"But I don't even have a driver's permit... or a car! And how do you know that..." His voice trailed off when Marc's angry eyes pierced his soul. This sounded bad and his alarms kicked in. Why was Marc going to arrange this 'car trouble'? And who was this 'man' that would help him?

"Shut up," Marc roared angrily. "Just do as you're told. Now, change your clothes and brush that hair! Don't tie it back."

Blair rose to his feet and walked into the small bathroom they had to share. He washed his face, cringing as he stared into his own scared eyes. How had it come to this? When had Marc gained this power over him? He barely dared to breathe, speak or move about in his father's presence. Old fears had returned and he felt like a helpless toddler again. If only he had someone to turn to! He'd tried to call Dean Hendricks on the phone once, but his father had stormed inside. Marc had snatched the phone from his hands and punched him. The bruised rib still ached.

After changing into his best clothes, jeans and a blue shirt, he returned to the living area. His heart was beating wildly in his chest, wondering what Marc was up to. It would be the first time that he left the trailer park in over four weeks. Marc had forbidden him to go outside.

"Now, listen carefully," Marc started as he threw Blair his coat, "you're going to be on your best behavior tonight." He opened the door and pushed Blair outside. "We're going to drive to a small place called Patton. We'll stage a car breakdown and you're going to stay close to the Mercedes. A man called Martin Bradshaw will pass by within the hour." He'd done his research. Bradshaw was a rich bastard with too much money for his own good. "He likes them young and you're just what he fancies."

Blair froze in his tracks. What the hell was Marc talking about? He hesitated to ask, but as Marc shoved him into the car he said, "Man, what's going on?"

Marc glared at him. The kid still had the audacity to question him. Well, after tonight, Blair would have no place to go, even if the kid should try to run. "Just play your part. When Bradshaw offers to help, you say yes."

"But why?" Blair trembled; feeling trapped. There was no way out.

"Bradshaw's gay," Marc continued ruthlessly. "I want you to keep him busy until midnight. Make sure he doesn't head home until after midnight!" Marc had planned this carefully. While Blair distracted Bradshaw, he would break into the rich bastard's home and steal some valuables. He already had some buyers for certain pieces of jewelry and paintings. By keeping Bradshaw busy, Blair would become accessory to the burglary. He grinned. It wouldn't take him long to train Blair as a thief. The boy was intelligent and agile.

"I still don't understand," Blair protested weakly. Marc was playing with him!

"You don't have to. Just give the man a good time!" Marc observed Blair closely and caught the shiver. "Don't tell me you've never been fucked, kid. With those looks..." Well, maybe, just maybe, he had a virgin on his hands. The boy didn't know how seductive he was and Bradshaw wouldn't pass up such delightful toy. Marc didn't really care how far Bradshaw would want to take this. If Blair managed to keep the guy at a distance, it was fine with him. "Just make sure he doesn't leave until midnight," he repeated and grinned.

Blair couldn't control his shaky hands when Marc pulled over and pushed him out of the car. Did Marc really think he was going to prostitute himself because his father wanted that? No way!

"And don't even consider running off, Blair. I tracked you down once before and I'll find you again." Marc took the car keys and walked over to the Dodge he'd parked there the day before. "The police will bring you back home, son." The last word possessed a venomous tone.

Stunned, Blair watched as Marc returned to sabotage the engine of the Mercedes. He couldn't believe Marc was capable of this criminal behavior. This man couldn't be his father! But as Marc drove off, he realized he was on his own. He could run, yes, but where could he go? Despair and resignation crept up on him and he sat down in the car, leaving the door open. Maybe Martin Bradshaw was just a figment of Marc's twisted imagination? And where was his father headed? Why leave him alone?

Minutes passed by quickly and Blair started when a firm voice addressed him. Looking up, he realized that a second car had pulled up next to the Mercedes. The man who was watching him was middle aged. Long blond hair had been tied back and the green eyes sparkled with confidence. Blair's heart thundered, realizing this had to be Martin Bradshaw. The man didn't look menacing and maybe... what if he told Bradshaw what was going on? That his father had sort of kidnapped him? Would Bradshaw believe him?

Martin Bradshaw, millionaire and notorious playboy, let his eyes wander down the boy's body. He had to stop himself from licking his lips. "Car trouble?"

Blair's throat constricted seeing the hungry expression in Bradshaw's eyes. This man was just as dangerous as Marc. "Yeah, battery went dead," he lied.

"Want a lift? I'm heading back home." Bradshaw was already planning his seduction. He wanted this delightful boytoy in his bed. "Or are you hungry? Looks like you've been out here for some time." The boy's blue lips seemed to demand to be kissed, but he held back.

"I'm kinda hungry," Blair admitted. Marc didn't believe in regular meals.

"Let's have dinner then? I know this great restaurant..." Bradshaw gestured for the boy to follow him. Watching the kid's ass, he gave in and licked his lips. //Gonna get me some tonight!//

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"Get into the car!" Marc hissed. After the burglary he'd driven to Bradshaw's favorite restaurant to pick up Blair. It had been ten minutes past midnight when the kid had stormed outside.

Blair quickly hopped into the car and swallowed hard. Bradshaw hadn't had the chance to touch him, but the creep had undressed him with his eyes. "Man, let's get out of here." He felt nauseous and the role he'd been forced to play revolted him.

"You're a quick study," Marc stated, "you'll learn how to play them."

"What are you talking about?" Blair was on the verge of a panic attack.

"I just stole his collection of Vermeers and some very rare jewelry. I already sold the stuff. We made some good money tonight... thanks to you." Marc enjoyed knocking Blair down a few pegs. The kid better get used to his new life.

"What?" Blair gasped and stared at Marc. "You did what?"

Marc pulled over and shut off the engine. "I'm a professional thief, son."

"You're kidding me!" Blair didn't know where he found the courage to continue, but he said angrily, "You made me your accomplice!"

"Quick study all right," Marc said sarcastically. "I need a partner and you're it, kid. You got the looks to distract them and I can break into their homes while you chat them up. Don't worry, I'll teach you the trade."

Blair shook his head. "You're lying!" The thought of being Marc's accomplice sickened him.

"I'm telling the truth, kid. Try to leave me and I'll tell the cops what you did. The inmates will love your sweet ass." Marc was ready to add the finishing touch. "I've been in jail for 3 years, kid. Trust me, you would find yourself married to some monster within the hour." Blair's big eyes told him he'd succeeded in scaring the boy. Good, Blair would be a lot more cooperative now.

Blair couldn't believe that this was really happening! Only a month ago he'd been a graduate student with a promising future and now he'd been reduced to a partner in crime? Marc wanted to use him to distract the victim so his father could clean out their homes? And did Marc really intend to turn him into a thief as well? Hot tears stung his eyes but he refused to cry. He was going to survive. He had to.

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4 years later

Blair methodically searched the bookshop for first editions. He'd already acquired a pile of study books, but now he was hunting for a first edition of War and Peace. As he studied the book covers, he mused about the turn his life had taken. He still wasn't thrilled to work with his father, but he'd resigned himself to it a long time ago. As long as Marc had evidence of him participating in the burglaries, Marc controlled him.

Oh yes, he'd tried to run once, but Marc had tracked him down. To prove his point, Marc had sent the police after him and they'd dropped him off at his father's doorstep. It had become pretty clear to Blair that he had no place to run. After that incident, he'd stopped to fight his father. Marc continued to use him to distract his victims, something that Blair hated. While Blair was talking to their chosen victim, Marc was cleaning out their home. A lot of their targets had been sexual predators, like Bradshaw, and Blair had quickly learned how to use his charm on them. Most of the time he got away untouched, but some had been determined to get him into bed. Until now, he'd always found a way out. Sweet talk or going down on them usually got him off the hook.

Disappointed because he couldn't find a first edition, he returned to the salesman and handed him his credit card to pay for the selected



books. Money was no longer a problem. They made a lot of profit in selling the stolen goods. He now had his own credit card and a few collectibles he'd always craved owning. But he still lived with his father. Marc refused to let him out of his sight for too long and Blair realized he would never get rid of his father.

It had also taken him time to discover a few things. Blair had been surprised to find that Marc was a rich man. The neglected trailer they'd lived in had only been a decoy. They now lived in hotel rooms, always the best and the most expensive. Another thing he'd discovered about Marc was that his father only got violent when he'd been drinking. So sometimes Blair hid or locked away the liquor and then Marc was almost friendly.

This certainly wasn't the life he would have chosen for himself, but after living it for four years, he'd made his peace with it. Blair still hoped to get away from his father one day and maybe to go back to the University, although life on campus almost scared him after everything he'd been through. Marc kept him isolated and Blair missed having friends.

The salesman handed him back his credit card and Blair picked up his books. His eyes lovingly caressed the leather covers. He'd found a few law books that he'd also been using during his stay at Seattle University and even an anthropology book that fascinated him. Blair started for the exit when someone bumped into him. His books were sent flying over the floor.

"Sorry."

"No harm done. Don't worry about it," Blair quickly whispered and sat on his heels to pick up his books. //Sorry//, the word still vibrated through his bones. When was the last time someone had apologized to him? Marc certainly never did. His father expected him to obey every command and loathed being contradicted.

Feeling curious, Blair looked up at the man who had bumped into him. His breath caught as he stared into haunting blue eyes. The man's brush cut emphasized his strong features. The stranger wore a suit and a long black coat. Blair cocked his head, wondering why the man was wearing such formal clothes. Jeans and a shirt would look much better on him!

"Let me help."

Blair accepted the man's offer to gather his books and he got back to his feet. Oh man, he loved the sound of that sensual voice and his cock jumped to attention. Blair sighed heavily. He'd discovered some time ago that he was attracted to men and women. But he preferred men and this man in particular. Marc had made sure that he didn't develop any relationships, as his father was too concerned that someone would find out the truth about them. But the conditioning stood no chance against this attraction. "Thanks, man. I never saw you coming."

"Do you come here often? I haven't seen you here before."

"No, just passing through." Blair's heart pounded madly and he lost himself in those entrancing blue eyes. "I'm Blair," he introduced himself, forgetting Marc's warning.

"I'm Jim." Ellison studied the young man, whose face was quickly flushing a bright red. He didn't come here too often, but the owner of the bookshop had told him by phone that he'd acquired a rare note by Sir Richard Burton. The note was about Sentinels, which was why he wanted to buy it.

Jim Ellison had spent nearly two years finding out what was going on with him when he'd suddenly started to hear, see, smell, taste and feel things no one else could. After reading the Monograph he'd realized what he was, a Sentinel. It had taken him another two years to learn how to control his hyperactive senses, but he could control and use them now.

As he looked into Blair's eyes he picked up a number of oddities. The younger man's clothes were dirty, soiled with mud. The long auburn curls were a mess and the blue eyes seemed reluctant to meet his. A fading bruise on Blair's throat implied that someone had held him in a chokehold. He also smelled another man on Blair and that scent set off his inner alarms. Hell, what was going on here? Why was he reacting like this? This kid was a stranger. //But a cute one...//

Feeling shy, Blair forced himself to return Jim's stare. The man looked like a sculpted Greek god and he wished he could stay a little longer, but Marc was waiting for him in the car. Marc had created an illusion of freedom for him and Blair found himself clinging to it.

"I better get going," Blair stuttered shyly and headed towards the door. If Marc found out that he was interested in someone they would move to another city. As long as they stayed here he could dream of bumping into this Jim again. It took him a while to identify the feeling that was running through him. He'd only felt like this once before, several years ago. He was falling in love.

"Hey," Jim called out. For some reason he wanted to get to know this younger man. "If you've got time we could go for some coffee? My treat." He studied his feelings and realized he was worried about Blair. //It's the bruise. Someone tried to strangle him!// His cop instincts kicked in. He'd seen too many battered victims.

"I..." Blair regretted telling Jim no. He wanted so badly to escape Marc for a moment, but Marc would come barging in if he didn't show up at the agreed time. "Sorry, no. I can't do that."

Jim read Blair's unease. The younger man kept stealing glances outside, his eyes focused on a grey Mercedes parked in front of the bookstore. Jim acted on impulse as he uncovered one of his cards and presented it to Blair. "Call me when you've got the time."

Blair accepted the card with obvious hesitance. He would have to hide it from Marc or answer all kind of questions should his father find it. "I don't think that I..."

Jim cut him short. "Just think about it, okay?" Not wanting to pressure the young man, Jim marched over to the owner to inquire about the note. He only had ten minutes before he had to head back to the station.

Blair walked outside, his knees wobbly and panting softly. //Talk about attraction...// No one had ever affected him like that! Brutal reality crashed in on him when Marc snarled at him. Sitting down on the passenger seat he quietly listened to his father's lecture.



"Ten minutes! I said ten minutes and you were gone for almost half an hour! I was about to go inside and search for you. When I say ten minutes I mean ten minutes. Don't pull these tricks on me, kid, or I'll send all the incriminating evidence I've got to the police. They'll throw that sweet little ass of yours into jail after getting a taste of it themselves first! How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Blair released a deep sigh. "Sorry, dad. I lost track of time when I was searching for a first edition of War and Peace." Marc loved it when he called the bastard dad and hearing it always relaxed Marc. "I even bought you a book on Rembrandt." His father was always trying to find information on valuable paintings, which he could steal. "I didn't do it on purpose." Using his soothing voice he managed to calm his father down.

"Don't do it again, Blair," Marc chided him. "And we've got to work tonight."

Blair so did not want to hear this. They'd only broken into a house yesterday. Marc had found out that the owners were on holiday in Italy and they'd gone in together. Although he hated to admit it, Blair realized that Marc felt proud of him.

"What role do you want me to play tonight? Do I have to seduce someone?" Blair hoped it would be a woman. Men always tried to sweet talk him into bed. Women tended to be more interested in his mind, his opinions. His fingers lovingly moved over the old books, already looking forward to unlocking their secrets.

"You're going to steal a book, Blair. I'm getting too old for these stunts. I'll keep my eye on our victim and I'll call you when he's heading home. You're going in alone tonight."

Alone? Blair didn't like the sound of that. Yes, he'd worked previously on his own a few times, but had hated it. With Marc present, he could always make himself believe that he was doing this because Marc was forcing him to do it. But when he was working alone he couldn't blame anyone else. Contradicting Marc would only anger his father. "What am I looking for?"

"An old book by Sir Richard Burton. The cover says 'The Sentinels of Paraguay'. I've found a buyer who wants it really bad and is willing to pay an absurd price for it." Marc observed Blair. After all these years the boy was still trying to fight him. "I'll be near the PD to make sure that the owner won't surprise you by showing up at home unexpectedly."

Blair's heart missed a beat. The PD? "Please don't tell me that this guy's a cop!" This was way too dangerous! No, this was plain stupid!

"He's a captain. Head of Narcotics." Marc grinned smugly. "Guess he won't be expecting this one! Can you imagine his face when he has to report the burglary?"

"Dad," Blair started, using every trick in the book he knew to convince his father, "this is insane. If the man 's a cop, a captain... he won't rest until he's arrested us!"

"We'll leave Cascade first thing in the morning. Don't panic, boy. You've faced more difficult situations. With the man gone, it'll be a piece of cake!"

But Blair shivered. Marc was getting too cocky. Until now they'd managed to stay one step ahead of the police, but this would change things. This captain was going to take this personally and hunt them down. After all, the cop's reputation would be at stake. "Please reconsider."

"No," Marc said firmly. "We're heading back to the hotel and I'll drop you off at his place at 2300. He won't be home until 0600 because he's participating in an important stakeout."

Again, Marc's detailed knowledge surprised him. Marc had never told Blair how he collected this kind of information. Objecting would get him nowhere. Blair had been reminded of that a few days ago when he'd screwed up during his 'date' with a victim. The young man had left the restaurant early and Marc had almost been caught in the act. Blair still remembered the tight chokehold Marc had put him in.

Resigned, he gave in. "Okay, I'll do it."

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Captain Jim Ellison's concentration was gone. There was a stack of files and reports he was supposed to study, but he kept thinking back to the young man he'd met at the bookstore. It didn't really surprise him that he still felt attracted to Blair. Those big eyes had found a way into his heart. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, really wrong with Blair.

Although he'd planned on joining Brown and Taggart from Major Crime on a stakeout, he was having second thoughts. They hoped to bust a drug cartel tonight and he had to be present, but he wouldn't be much good to anyone in his current state. Maybe he should call Banks and tell the man that something urgent had come up. He considered doing that, but then changed his mind. His men expected him to be there and this was the first time Major Crime and Narcotics worked so closely together.

Jim got up from behind his desk and pulled on his long coat. It promised to be a chilly night.

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Marc followed the police cars from a distance. He stayed behind when they pulled up to an abandoned warehouse. Using his binoculars, he monitored Ellison. It still puzzled him why this cop possessed such a unique and valuable book, but then dismissed the thought. If everything was going according to plan Blair was breaking into the loft right now.

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Blair cursed loudly. He didn't want to do this! Although Ellison had tried to secure the loft, Blair had had no trouble getting inside. He'd overridden the system and now stood in the living room.

"You've got good taste," Blair mumbled, as he cocked his head to study the book titles that lined the shelves. He was wearing gloves and couldn't resist checking out the copy of War and Peace on the shelf.

"A first edition, you lucky bastard!" Grinning for no particular reason, he carefully put it back. What was the title of that book Marc wanted? Something about Sentinels? What the hell was a Sentinel anyway?

Moving through the loft he found himself in the man's bedroom. Fascinated, he stared at the little jade jaguar with bared teeth standing on the nightstand. It was a beautiful piece of art. If Marc had been here with him, his father would have taken it along. But Marc wasn't here and after admiring it, Blair set it back. "Better find that book and get out of here."

He made his way back to the living area and felt envious of the man that lived here. The cop actually had a place to come home to after work. Blair hated spending his life in hotel rooms and run down apartments in order to outwit the police.

Methodically, he searched the living room, but he didn't find the book. However, he did find some photo albums, which he left closed, cookies and some free tickets to a Jags game. He placed those back, too.

Nervous, he moved on to the study situated next to the kitchen. Maybe he would get lucky here. A pile of papers covered the wooden desk and he sat down behind it. He wasn't going to stick his nose into the cop's personal affairs. The book was all he wanted. As his eyes scanned the desk they came to rest on a framed picture, which showed a dark skinned man who was smoking a cigar and proudly showing off a giant trout. Next to the man was...

"Jim?" he whispered as he recognized the man he had bumped in to earlier. Oh man, what were his chances that he would break into this man's home? Wait! Hold on! Hadn't Marc told him that the man was a cop? Jim was a captain with Cascade PD? Oh shit... he'd liked the guy!

Suddenly, the book no longer was a priority. He scrambled to his feet and was about to leave the study when his arm bumped against a pile of books. One fell onto the floor revealing its title, 'The Sentinels of Paraguay'. Blair's brow grew knitted. He didn't want to steal from Jim, but Marc would be mad as hell if he returned empty handed! Fighting inwardly, he reached down and picked up the book. It looked antique, rare and certainly valuable. The book opened revealing a picture of a tribal warrior. Fascinated, Blair sat down again and started to read.

He was so caught up in reading that he almost didn't hear the phone ringing. Shaking his head, he tried to get rid of images of tribal warriors guarding the border. The content of the book was fascinating and he understood why someone would want it so badly. His instincts told him that this might be the only copy in existence. It was priceless.

"The phone!" he berated himself. It could be Marc warning him that Jim was on his way home. He didn't want to run into the cop. Blair already felt bad for breaking into the loft. He would die if Jim caught him. That Jim was a cop didn't really scare him, but he liked the man

and he thought the feelings might have been mutual. Jim's card was still in his pocket, and although he didn't plan on ever getting in to touch with him, he kept it. Kept holding on to it.

Blair sucked in his breath as the front door opened. Firm footfalls announced the owner's return and panic overwhelmed Blair. Damn! What if it was Jim? He wished the floor would open and swallow him. Quickly, he placed the book back onto the desk and turned to the open window. He didn't really have a choice. Looking down, he realized he could land on the rooftops and make his way down. It would be dangerous, but it would keep his ass out of jail.

Captain Jim Ellison tensed up as he entered the loft. He knew he wasn't alone. Someone was in the study and the man's heart was beating madly. A burglar! Jim went for his gun and took off the safety. Sneaking closer, he shook his head. The burglar hadn't done his homework. The man had to be stupid to break into a police captain's home. He was about to identify himself to the intruder when he took in the man's scent. His nose twitched; he inhaled again. Wait, he knew that scent, had smelled it before! But where and when?

Jim used his heightened sense of sight to peek into the study. The burglar, dressed in black, was fleeing through the window. //What a dumb thing to do, // Jim thought. The rooftops were slippery from the rain that had fallen this evening and the intruder would probably break his neck.

The scent! Suddenly, Jim remembered the bookstore... the handsome young man he'd bumped into... Blair. It was Blair! A sudden panic washed through him as he put the gun back into the holster. What was the kid doing breaking into his home and...

"Look out! It's slippery!" Jim called out. But the warning caught Blair off guard and Jim cringed when the younger man lost his footing and started to slip.

"Great thing to do," Jim chided himself, "scaring the kid like that!" He didn't stop to wonder why it no longer bothered him that Blair had broken into his home. The younger man's safety had priority! Jim crept out on the rooftops himself and almost immediately lost his balance. Slippery was an understatement. Blair had to be remarkably agile to have maintained his equilibrium for so long! But where was the kid now?

Blair's fingers tried to dig into the metal. He couldn't lose his hold now. Blair looked over his shoulder and his heart missed a beat. Jim was coming after him! Shit! His left foot slipped away and he hit the lower roof hard. He managed to break his fall by landing on his left hand, but the wrist snapped back. Blair choked back a moan of pain and continued to make his way down. He was only a few feet away from making contact with the street when he recognized the grey Mercedes.

Blair jumped onto the ground, panting hard. His right hand steadied his left wrist. The pain was getting worse and he tried to move his wrist. He succeeded; thankfully, it wasn't broken... yet. Marc would be furious because he'd returned without the book and Blair flinched, knowing how terrible Marc's anger could be.

"Get your butt over here!" Marc called out from the car and gestured Blair to hurry up. His eyes quickly scanned Blair and Marc realized that Blair didn't have the book. Cursing heavily, he was about to get out of the car when he caught the shadow moving in closer. "Get into the car, you little shit! You fucked up! Man, you're in trouble!"

Torn, Blair first stared at Marc and then at the shadow that had almost covered the distance between them. What was worse? Facing Marc's wrath or going to jail? If he went to jail and did his time he might have a chance to start anew one day. But... Marc's words came back and frightened him. He would never survive prison! "Marc, I want..." What did he want? He felt lost and confused.

"Don't move," Jim said steadfastly as he landed on his feet behind Blair. He smelled the fear on the younger man and it had only started when this 'Marc' character had shown up. His heightened sense of hearing had picked up the name. During his escape over the rooftops, Blair's heart had thumped madly, but Jim hadn't smelled the fear. Ergo, the kid was afraid of the man in the Mercedes.

Blair lowered his eyes, unable to decide what to do. Then he noticed that Jim's gun wasn't aimed at him, but at Marc. But why Marc? Marc hadn't broken into the loft!



Marc didn't want to take any risks and fired up the engine, driving off full throttle. The kid wouldn't betray him. Right now he was Blair's only chance to stay out of jail. He would pay Blair's bail and then quickly leave Cascade. The book was lost to him now and he cursed

because the profit he'd wanted to make had gone down the drain.

Blair watched as the grey car disappeared into the darkness of the night. Marc's reaction came as no surprise. Deep down, Marc was nothing but a coward. Blair extended his hands expecting Jim to handcuff him. He didn't want to meet the cop's eyes, as he felt way too ashamed.

After holstering his gun, Jim cocked his head trying to catch the elusive expression in Blair's eyes. He didn't know what to say and simply put an arm round Blair's shoulders. The kid looked lost and ready to faint. "Come on, let's go back and talk." Blair intrigued him. Yes, the kid had broken into his home, but why?

Blair wondered if he'd misheard. "Hmm, what?" he whispered at a loss. Jim's reaction puzzled him. "Aren't you going to arrest me?"

"You know I'm a cop?" Jim guided him back inside and pulled him along as they climbed the stairs. He had to admit that Blair had done an outstanding job overriding the alarm system.

"You're a captain," Blair whispered weakly and found himself standing in the loft once more. Jim led him into the kitchen and Blair remained motionless as Jim started the coffee maker.

"Sit down," Jim instructed and pointed at the kitchen table.

Blair obeyed immediately. After living with Marc for the past four years he longer questioned orders. "Am I going to jail?"

Jim caught the terror in Blair's voice. He had to calm the kid down and get him to tell the entire story. "Here, drink this." He handed Blair a mug filled with hot coffee. Then he slipped out of his coat and sat down next to Blair. "What were you doing in the loft, Blair?"

"I'm sorry," Blair said hesitantly. He wasn't sure what to say or if he should mention Marc. Jim was a cop and Blair wanted him to take the lead.

"Why did you break into the loft? Tell me no lies, Blair. I want the truth." His Sentinel abilities would tell him when Blair was lying. Looking at Blair, Jim's heart missed a beat. Blair looked even younger, more vulnerable, than the first time they had met. Did Blair know how handsome he was? His own thoughts startled Jim as he wondered how Blair's lips would feel against his.

"The book. Marc wanted the book," Blair whispered, shocked that he'd actually spoken those words out loud. He should keep Marc out of this. Marc was the only one who would try to get him out of jail! The hot mug warmed his hands and he wondered why Jim was so friendly. Didn't the cop have to report the burglary and take him to the station to be booked? Instead, they were sitting here drinking coffee?

"What book?" Jim had reached some conclusions. One, Blair hadn't broken into his home voluntarily. The few lines Marc had spoken to Blair indicated that the man had some kind of hold on Blair. Secondly, Blair was scared shitless. The kid didn't strike him as a criminal and his instincts always came through.

"The book on Sentinels," Blair whispered in a guilty tone. "I didn't want to take it, but..."

Jim nodded his head. He had to be really careful now. "Do you know what a Sentinel is?"

"I read the first few pages of the book," Blair admitted. "Some kind of watchman?"

"Yeah." Jim leaned back in his chair. It looked like his secret was still safe. Blair had no idea that he was a Sentinel.

"Am I going to jail now?" Defeated, Blair raised his head and locked eyes with Jim. His hands shook as he tried to sip from the mug of coffee.

Jim noticed the shivering and realized why Blair was scared. Jail. He'd been in jail during one of his undercover assignments and he knew only too well that the inmates would instantly hit on the younger man. Maybe he could use that fear as a means to extract the rest of the story from Blair. "Who's Marc?"

"My father... I think," Blair admitted in a strangled tone.

"You think?" Jim didn't like the sound of this. "You aren't sure?"

"My mother left him when I was three. I don't remember him. Four years ago my mother died and..." he swallowed hard. Naomi had passed away four years ago on this very day. "And she made him my legal guardian."

Jim nodded his head, hoping to hear more. He had already made up his mind. He wouldn't report the burglary and he would look into this matter himself.

"I had just started the graduate program at Seattle University when Marc took me with him. He... he's been using me to pull off his burglaries."

The self-loathing in Blair's voice was obvious and Jim asked, "How old were you when your mother died?"

"Sixteen. I'm twenty-one now," Blair fidgeted nervously with his sleeve. "You still haven't answered my question."

"I'm thinking it over, Chief... " Jim knew Blair wasn't telling him the entire story and pushed. "How did you get those bruises?" he asked, pointing at Blair's throat. Old bruises were already fading, but new ones had appeared. He suspected it had to do with Marc, but he wanted to hear Blair say it.

"Marc gets angry when I fuck up."

"What did you do?" Jim's hands clenched into fists, his anger at Marc building.

Blair's hand went to his throat to cover the ugly bruise. "I got this one because I stayed too long at the bookstore. At first, Marc wasn't mad at me, but later he drank some vodka and... he gets abusive when he drinks."

//I'm going to kill this guy... really slowly.// Jim got to his feet. He needed to do something that would take his mind off Marc. "Are you hungry, Blair?"

"Yes," Blair answered without thinking. "But why...?" Since when did cops take care of burglars?

Jim fixed them some sandwiches and handed Blair his share. "Eat," he ordered and watched Blair, trying to make up his mind. "Do you want to go back to your father?" //Father,// Jim thought disgusted. //The man's a sick bastard to treat his son like that!//

"No, not really," Blair said between two bites. "But he has proof that I... helped him, you know? He'll tell the police and..." Then he realized the police already knew because Jim knew. "I guess that no longer matters..." Wringing his hands, he waited for Jim to speak up. He tried to ignore the stinging pain in his wrist and bit hard on his lower lip.

"What's wrong?" Jim had been monitoring Blair's vitals and realized the younger man was in pain.

"It's my wrist..." Blair admitted shyly. "It'll get better."

But Jim didn't dismiss it that easily. "Let me have a look at it." Again he encountered old bruises. "It's not broken," he sighed and got to his feet to retrieve the first aid kit. "But it'll cause you a lot of discomfort." He bandaged the wrist and noticed how Blair immediately cradled it against his chest, using his other hand to support it.

"You're going to stay here tonight. You can sleep on the couch, which is fairly comfortable." Jim gathered their empty plates and leaned against the wall, admiring the beautiful young man sitting at his kitchen table. He'd been attracted to men before, but Blair... Blair was different. He could love Blair... wanted to love him. Blair looked like he needed to be loved badly. "We'll discuss this further in the morning,"

Blair stared at the cop in disbelief. "What?" he stammered.

"You'll sleep on the couch, Chief. Tomorrow we'll figure out what to do. I'll get you some blankets and a pillow... if you want to use the bathroom, go ahead." Jim climbed the stairs to his bedroom to retrieve the items. Blair's heartbeat hadn't picked up speed, which proved that the kid wasn't lying. It looked like Blair really wanted to get away from Marc and that was why Jim was helping him. This could be Blair's second chance... if he wanted it.

Blair's eyes traveled to the front door. Why wasn't he trying to escape? Instead, he was sitting here waiting for Jim to return. This was madness! Mechanically, he walked into the bathroom and splashed some cold water onto his face, fully expecting to wake up any second now. When that didn't happen he knew that he wasn't dreaming. Jim was giving him a chance to prove himself to the cop! He quickly relieved himself and washed his hands. He ran his fingers through his tangled hair and wondered what the hell he was doing staying here. Marc would kill him!

"Chief?" Jim peeked inside. Blair hadn't locked the door. The blue eyes that stared back at him were filled with panic. "It's almost 4 o'clock in the morning. Let's try to get some sleep?" He had to be back at the station at noon. "Come on and sit down on the sofa."

Blair did as he was told, wondering how a dream could be this vivid.

"Take off your shoes, Chief." Jim placed the pillow on the sofa and picked up Blair's feet. "Lie down, Blair, and close your eyes."

Blair started to tremble, knowing with uncanny certainty that Jim was worried about him. About a thief! "What if I run off?"

"You won't," Jim stated. "You're safe here."

And yes, God help him, Blair felt safe as the cop loomed over him. He curled up and allowed Jim to cover him with warm blankets. "Why are you doing this? You're a cop. Shouldn't you turn me in?"

"I've got my reasons," Jim said evasively. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yeah, but..." Letting go of his fears Blair gave into exhaustion. Facing Jim and not knowing what would happen to him had drained him. At least he would be safe tonight. He closed his eyes and as his body shut down, he fell instantly asleep.

Jim sat down and caressed a tangled lock. The kid was quickly growing on him and he was falling hard for Blair. It had been a while since he had loved, really loved, someone and he wondered if he had a chance to win Blair's heart.

As he made his way to the upstairs bedroom, he tuned in to Blair's heartbeat. That way he would know if Blair was awake, moving about or sneaking out of the loft.

Something that Blair had told him had set off his alarm bells and it had to do with Marc, but he couldn't label it. Tomorrow, he was going to investigate Blair and Marc's past.

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Opening his eyes, Blair had no idea where he was. The last thing he remembered was... was Jim. Jim had come after him and Marc had driven away. Had Jim really taken him home? He remembered sipping coffee and telling Jim his history, but... Yes, this was the loft and he was hidden beneath warm blankets. Sitting upright, he wondered where Jim was. A glance at the clock told him that it was 10 AM and he couldn't remember the last time he'd had this many hours of peaceful sleep.

He decided to stay put a little longer, uncertain how to act. But 30 minutes later he started to wonder. Carefully, he slid the blankets off his body. He was still wearing his clothes and he tiptoed into the kitchen to get a drink of water.

Where was Jim? Was the cop still here or had Jim reported the burglary and was he bringing back some uniformed officers? Blair considered walking out that door and never looking back, but realized that Marc would track him down.

Finally, he reached a decision and he walked over to the staircase, remembering that Jim's bedroom was upstairs. Should he call out or stay quiet? "Jim?" he said hesitantly, scared to disrupt Jim's sleep. "Jim?" This time he called out louder and climbed the first 3 steps. "Jim? Can I come upstairs? I need to talk to you, man."

He didn't get an answer and proceeded carefully. Once he had climbed the stairs he found Jim still in bed. The cop lay face down, asleep on his stomach. Blair's breath caught. The sheet had slipped down revealing the magnificently built body. Jim was only wearing some silk shorts and they didn't hide his perfect ass.

"Oh, man." Blair breathed the words, willing his arousal to die. Looking at Jim had made him hard within seconds.

But shouldn't Jim be waking up now? Weren't cops trained to be light sleepers and wake up at the first sight of danger? "Jim?" he tried again. Maybe Jim didn't think he was dangerous? After gathering his courage, he sat down on the side of the bed. "Jim?" But the cop remained motionless and Blair started to get scared. He checked Jim's breathing, which was normal. "What's going on, Jim?"

But Jim didn't answer him and Blair fought down his panic. He rolled Jim onto his back and gasped at the sight of the cop's open eyes, which stared blankly at the ceiling. "Jim? You're scaring me here," he admitted, shaking Jim gently. "I don't know what to do, Jim." He continued to talk, asking, and then begging, Jim to talk to him, to acknowledge his presence. Finally, Jim's eyes blinked.

"Shit," Jim cursed. It had been a while since he'd last zoned out. He'd been 31 at that time and had believed he'd mastered his senses. This time, however, it felt like he'd been zoning for hours, but on what?

"Jim? Are you all right?"

That voice. That voice had brought him back. Focusing his eyes, he looked at Blair who was obviously frightened and almost panicking. "It's okay," he said reassuringly and allowed himself a moment to take in Blair's beauty. The kid could have left during the night, but had stayed. //He's got a good heart.//

"You scared me," Blair admitted, and realized that his fingers were soothingly caressing Jim's brow. He wanted to pull back, but Jim took hold of his hand. "What?" Blair stuttered confused. What was he reading in Jim's eyes?

"Don't go. Stay." Jim struggled inwardly. He was falling in love with Blair and it wasn't fair to Blair to keep him in the dark. //But then again, Blair's so young!// The age difference made him uncomfortable. Blair was 21 and he had just turned 32.

"I..." Blair's voice trailed off. "What happened?"

Jim decided to trust Blair right then and there. "I zoned out."

"You did what?" Blair's brow grew furrowed, but then he remembered something he had read in the Monograph Marc had wanted him to steal. "You must be kidding me! You can't be a... What did Burton call it? A Sentinel?"

"I'm a Sentinel," Jim clarified, "and I zoned out." But why had he zoned out?

Blair decided not to contradict him, uncertain of Jim's reaction. "Sure, if you say so."

And then Jim realized what he had zoned out on was Blair's scent. The kid was sending out pheromones! He could smell the arousal that clung to Blair and... hope stirred in his soul. Could it be that Blair was attracted to him as well? This development was going to complicate everything! He raised his right hand, cupped the back of Blair's head and pulled him in for a kiss.

Stunned, Blair felt how Jim's lips took possession of his. Jim traced the inside of his lips and Blair moaned his desire. He parted his teeth and allowed Jim's tongue to slip inside. This had to be a dream. That was it. He was still asleep in his bed in the hotel and would wake up any moment now. Jim's fingers tangled in his hair and Blair quivered as Jim suckled his tongue. Blair's cock throbbled painfully and he felt

helpless... at Jim's mercy.

Jim ended the kiss as abruptly as he had started it, and searched Blair's eyes. The smell of pheromones on Blair was even stronger now and Jim had his answer. "Is there something you want to tell me, Chief?"

Blair started at the sound of Jim's voice. Had they really kissed? Had Jim really pulled him in for a kiss? He'd dreamed about kissing Jim when he'd been asleep last night and now it had really happened.

"Just be honest with me, Chief."

"I think I'm... I think I'm... Blair choked up and closed his eyes. "I think I'm falling in love with you," he confessed embarrassed.

"I'm in love with you too, Chief," Jim replied warmly, relieved that the feeling was mutual. "Blair, I need you to be honest with me now."

Blair nodded his head, unable to lie to Jim. "What do you want to know?"

"What's Marc's last name?"

"Moyet, why?"

Jim filed the name away. He would run it through the computer later. "Do you know for sure that he's your father?"

Blair shifted uncomfortably on the bed. "Naomi named him my guardian. I remember him from when I was little..."

"Did you ever run a DNA test to make sure?" Jim pushed. This would be a lot easier if Marc wasn't Blair's father.

"No," Blair replied after a moment's thought. "What has this got to do with..."

"Us?" Jim supplied. "Listen, I need to check on some things at the station. Don't leave the loft."

"What if Marc comes back?"

"Don't open the door." Jim was even considering placing a guard at the front door. Blair had told him that Marc was abusive and he couldn't take the risk that Marc had gotten loaded after the heist had failed. Jim took a deep breath and dialed down his sense of smell. Blair's scent was too intoxicating. "You'll stay here until I get back from the station, do you hear?" Blair looked miserable and Jim put his arms around him. "Hey, you're no longer alone, Chief."

"I don't get it," Blair admitted in a tiny tone. "I'm a stranger! You hardly know me."

//But I know your soul, Blair,// Jim thought, suddenly realizing that absolute truth. He released Blair and got to his feet. "I'm going to take a quick shower. Maybe you can start breakfast?" He watched as Blair descended the stairs, depression evident in each step. //Just hold on, Blair.//

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"I knew it!" Jim exclaimed with excitement. He'd checked Marc Moyet's file and the bastard had never been married nor did he have any registered children. The man was a fraud. He had to return to the loft to tell Blair the good news. His men were already searching for Moyet and when they arrested the bastard Jim planned on carrying out a DNA test to make sure. Moyet would probably agree to a test if that meant the judge would go easy on him.

Jim ignored the looks he got as he hurried back to the parking lot. He marveled at the effect Blair had on him. They had only met 48 hours ago and he'd fallen head over heels in love with him. Blair would stay with him because the younger man loved him and he would make everything up to Blair, even encourage him to go back to the University. Maybe Blair could enroll at Rainier?

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He parked the car and then froze. In front of the loft was a grey Mercedes. "Shit, Moyet's here!" He ran up the stairs dialing up his sense of hearing. Blair's heart was pounding wildly and he also picked up Moyet's angry voice.

"What the hell are you doing here, Blair? The man's a cop! A police captain! Of course he'll report the burglary and arrest you! He just wants your ass first!"

Jim growled infuriated. Moyet was a dead man; he just didn't know it yet.

"No, Marc. Jim seems to genuinely care about me and I want to... to stay."

Blair sounded scared and confused. Jim kicked open the front door to get to the men. Two pair of blue eyes fastened on him and Jim grew even angrier when he saw fresh bruises on Blair's face. "Moyet, you're under arrest."

Blair flinched. His last name was Moyet as well.



"Marc Moyet, you're under arrest," Jim added, sensing Blair's fear. He grabbed his gun and aimed it at Moyet. With his other hand he hit redial on his cell phone and called for back up. After his men confirmed that they were on their way, Jim tried to handcuff Moyet, but the desperate man made an evasive maneuver and Jim landed flat on his back. Moyet punched him, but Jim quickly got to his feet again. He smelled the fear on Blair and wondered how Marc's abusive behavior would affect Blair in the long run.

"This is for telling Blair lies!" Jim backhanded Moyet and used the man's momentary disorientation to put the cuffs on him. "Tell him the truth. Blair deserves that!" He dragged Moyet closer to Blair and made him look up. "Tell him!"

Blair trembled violently. What the hell was happening? What was Jim talking about?

"Tell him who he is and who you are!" Jim ordered, increasing the pressure on Moyet's wrists.

"I'm not your father!" Moyet spat eventually. "I was a close friend of your father's and Naomi hated my guts! I forged the will!"

Blair leaned heavily against the wall, his hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically. "You're not...?"

Moyet stayed quiet. Jim would have loved to put the pressure on just a little more, but two uniformed cops stormed into the loft to help him. "Take him away and book him," Jim instructed and glared at Moyet. "And don't forget to read him his rights!" Pleased, Jim watched as Moyet was dragged from the loft. After closing the door he turned to Blair, who was shaking his head.

"I believed him! Four fucking years!" After his anger cooled down a little, he grew scared again. "He'll tell them, Jim. Tell them I helped him."

"He forced you to cooperate. That's something completely different, Chief. Don't worry about it. If necessary, I'll get us the best lawyer money can buy."

"Us," Blair whispered, taken aback by the fierce love in Jim's eyes. "You can't want me, Jim. I'm a thief!"

Affectionately, Jim folded his arms around Blair. "Yes, you're a thief, all right. You stole my heart, Chief."

Blair blushed hearing those words. "Man, you're really sure about this, aren't you?" Determination shone from Jim's eyes. "Why?"

"Chief," Jim led him to the couch and sat him down. "I've been married before and it didn't work out. I'm not even sure I was in love with her. But the things that I feel when holding you are... beyond words. I never considered myself a romantic, but this is love at first sight... at least for me, it is."

Shyly, Blair allowed Jim to hold his hand. "You know... I can't believe this is really happening. Marc's gone and... I'm glad the bastard isn't my father. But why did he forge Naomi's will?" Blair considered his own question and realized Marc had answered that one. "He wanted a partner he could control."

Jim leaned back and pulled Blair into an embrace. Although this was happening fast, he didn't feel awkward holding Blair. //The things love does to you,// he mused. "Are you going to stay with me? Here?"

"If you'll let me... I'd love to." Blair finally met Jim's eyes. He still had some questions left, but didn't feel comfortable asking them.

"What is it?" Jim sensed the quickening of Blair's heartbeat. He dialed down his sense of smell to prevent a zone out. //The pheromones!//

"This Sentinel thing," Blair said hesitantly. "You've got..." he tried to remember the exact words the Monograph had used, "heightened senses?"

"Yeah, I was 27 when they kicked back in. I remember having them as a little boy, but I think I repressed them so successfully that they went offline."

"How did you find out? I mean, it must have been pretty scary when they came back online..." Blair held Jim's stare and wondered about the tenderness in the man's gestures, something he'd never expected. Jim was stroking his curls and it felt good, amazingly good! He'd hungered all these years for a little affection and Marc had never tried to be his friend.

"Luck," Jim replied. Now that Blair knew he was a Sentinel he better tell the younger man everything. "A consultant to the PD told me. Her name was Selena and she worked mostly with Major Crime, but when she heard that I was behaving oddly she wanted to talk to me. She was a psychologist turned Profiler and had an interest in anthropology. That's how I found out. She owned the Monograph and left it to me after she died."

"She died?" Blair had seen the affection in Jim's eyes when he talked about Selena.

"Yeah, she died in an explosion. Some madman tried to blow up the PD. She was a good woman."

"I'm sorry about that," Blair offered sincerely. "But why are you telling me this? Why trust me? I mean, I could still steal that Monograph and disappear tomorrow."

"But you won't. You're not like that, Chief."

The trust in Jim's eyes took Blair aback. "I've never met anyone like you," he admitted. Feeling a little more confident, he added, "What's going to happen next? With us, you know?" This was frighteningly new to him. What were Jim's intentions? Was Blair just a fling or did Jim want a committed relationship? And how to ask these questions?

Jim's stomach growled fiercely at that exact moment and they both laughed. "Let's eat out," Jim suggested. "I'm too beat to cook."

"I cook," Blair offered weakly.

Jim's laugh changed into a grin. "You can cook some other time. I want to show off my new lover." He realized how insecure Blair had to feel right now and wanted to reassure him. "You can pick the restaurant."

But Blair hated restaurants. The only time he ever visited them was when Marc had wanted him to keep their victims busy. "I want to go to WonderBurger."

Jim was surprised, but gave in quickly. "I'm overdressed then. Give me a moment to change."

"Uhm, Jim?" Blair stared down at his black outfit. "I need clothes, man." He had slept in these clothes and they were starting to smell.

"All right, we'll go shopping later... after dinner." Jim got to his feet and pulled Blair along. "What?"

"Maybe we can pick up some of my stuff from the hotel where I was staying?"

"I'm afraid we can't do that. Police is searching that place for evidence," Jim said honestly. "But we'll buy the things you need, all right?"

Blair disappeared into the bathroom and tied back his hair, which was a mess. He needed to wash, condition and brush it. //I want to show off my new lover, // Blair mentally repeated Jim's words. Did that mean Jim really wanted him to stick around? Blair hated feeling this insecure.

"Come on, Chief, or my stomach's going to implode!" Jim said jokingly, as he descended the stairs after changing into jeans and a shirt. He had never before been this intensely in love and it slightly frightened him. Determined to take this slow, he glanced into the bathroom and found Blair staring at his reflection. "Let's get going, Blair."

"Sure," Blair replied quickly. He'd been lost in thought.

"Before we go," Jim tossed Blair the spare set of keys to the loft. "It's your home now too." Blair's face was an open book and so many different emotions washed over those features.

"I haven't had a home since Naomi died," he confessed in a shaky tone. The metal keys pressed deeper into the palm of his hand and he cherished Jim's trust. He wouldn't betray it.

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It was almost 11 PM when they returned home and Jim nudged Blair ahead to open the door. //And I need to update my security system. Maybe I can ask Blair to test it? If he's still able to break into the loft at that point, I need to buy a new security system.//

He watched as Blair fumbled with the keys. Blair had been remarkably subdued during dinner. When he'd asked what was wrong, Blair had shrugged his shoulders. Then Blair had hesitantly admitted that he was used to Marc being around keeping an eye on him. Freedom was a new concept to Blair, but Jim felt confident that it would quickly grow on the younger man.

"Man, I'm beat," Blair whispered as he dropped onto the couch. Jim's concern and love were almost palpable and Blair sighed. Except for Naomi, no one had ever loved him like this. He cradled his bruised wrist against his chest. In spite of resting it, the wrist still throbbed. Peeking at Jim, he realized how easy it was to trust the cop. A cop! Marc and he'd been running from the cops for over four years. "Can I read the Monograph?" Blair asked eventually.

"Sure, you know where to find it." Jim stretched his body, feeling tired. He walked over to Blair and looked down at him. "Where do you want to sleep tonight? The couch or our bed?" He hoped Blair would pick the bed. The entire evening he'd been fantasizing about holding Blair in his sleep.

Blair lowered his eyes, uncertain what answer Jim wanted to hear. It felt odd, making a decision and knowing that no retribution would follow. With Marc, he'd never been sure of the man's reaction. "The bed?" he said weakly and sought out Jim's eyes. The smile on Jim's face assured him that he'd made the right decision. He yearned to be held, to be cherished.

Pleased, Jim nodded his head and dropped off the bags with clothes and personal items he'd bought Blair. "I'll take a quick shower. Make yourself comfortable upstairs."

Blair released his breath as Jim disappeared into the bathroom. What had he gotten himself into now? Had he unknowingly made a mistake? What did Jim expect would happen once they were in bed? Nervously, he uncovered the sweats they had bought and changed into them. He didn't feel like taking a shower now and would do that in the morning.

His nervousness increased as he started to climb the stairs. Although some of his dates/ victims had tried to get him into their beds he'd

always found a way to get away in time. Did he have to tell Jim that he had never really dated before?

Yeah, he'd had a girlfriend before he had left for Seattle University but they'd never gone beyond the point of kissing and caressing. They'd been too young and he'd wanted to make sure that his first time would be with someone he really loved.

And Jim was the real thing...

"Hey, Chief, did you already make yourself comfortable?" Jim smiled, finding Blair seated on the side of the bed. Usually, Jim slept in the nude, but now he was wearing boxers and a tee shirt. He wanted Blair to feel comfortable. There was so much they still needed to talk about, but he wanted Blair to feel safe first.

"I don't know what side of the bed you want," Blair said evasively.

"Why don't you take the side closest to the wall?" Jim suggested and made himself comfortable in bed. He watched Blair hesitantly lie down and slip beneath the comforter. "Can I hold you?"

Blair swallowed hard. He'd been afraid to ask that very thing and now Jim offered it? "Yes... please," he whispered, and moved a little closer. Turning onto his side, he moved into Jim's open arms. He rested his head on Jim's chest and his body started to relax. His tense muscles finally loosened up. "I like this."

"So do I," Jim admitted and inhaled Blair's scent. "You're comfortable like this?"

"It's nice," Blair whispered softly. "Can I ask you a question?" Now that they were this close he felt more confident. It was obvious that Jim wanted him to be part of his life, but... "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Jim said firmly. "I can't explain it, but I feel like I've known you my entire life."

"I feel like that too," Blair admitted shyly. "I can't believe how good this feels. We only met a few days ago." He snuggled up to Jim. "Naomi used to hold me too."

"Naomi's your mother?" Jim was still trying to put all the pieces of this puzzle together.

"Yes, and I still miss her. I was at Seattle University when I got the message that she'd been killed in a car crash."

"I went to Seattle University for one year," Jim said thoughtfully. "What was your major?"

"Law. Can you imagine that? I wanted to be a lawyer!"

"And then Marc showed up," Jim realized and held him tight. Tremors rocked Blair's body.

"Yeah and he turned me into a thief. I hated myself for giving in to him." Blair tried to control the tremors, but failed. He'd kept this inside for too long. "I kept the victims busy while he cleaned out their homes. He always threatened to call the cops on me if I ran."

"You'll have to make a statement, maybe even testify when he goes to trial, but you're not going to prison. I promise." Relieved, Jim noticed that the tremors lessened in intensity. "Would you like to go back to the University? Maybe Rainier?" he suggested.

"I don't know. That's not me any longer, man." Blair felt lost and wrapped his arms around Jim's waist. "You know, I never had time to mourn Naomi's death. Marc burned the journal she gave me the last time I saw her."

"Marc's a bastard," Jim spat, as his anger returned. "Things will be different from now on."

Blair was stunned by how easy it was to open up to Jim and he said, "Three weeks after Naomi died, I turned seventeen. Naomi always tried to call me on my birthday or she gave me a small present, but Marc... I thought he was my father, you know? I hoped he would remember."

"When is your birthday, Blair?" Jim asked mischievously.

"In three weeks," Blair said puzzled. "Why do you want to know?"

But Jim didn't reply, he just gave Blair a beaming smile. "What date, Darwin?"

"The twentieth, why?" Blair looked Jim in the eyes. No way... Jim couldn't be planning something!

"The twentieth?" Jim repeated wickedly. "Want to get some sleep now? I don't know about you, but I'm tired." He concentrated on the warm and pliant body in his arms and considered himself fortunate that Blair had broken into his home. Blair's gasp of relief didn't escape his attention. "I love to cuddle," Jim said reassuringly. "We'll take this slowly, Blair."

"Thanks, man," Blair whispered reassured. It was time for his big confession and embarrassed he said, "You should know that... I've never been with anyone before... Marc didn't like it when I got too close to people so..."

This time it was Jim's turn to swallow hard. "Are you telling me that I'm your first lover?"

"Well, yeah." Embarrassed, Blair cleared his throat.

"I hope I can live up to your expectations, Chief," Jim said affectionately.

"I'm sure you will." Blair closed his eyes, marveling at how great it felt to talk to Jim, to be held by him.

A moment later, Jim listened to Blair's steady breathing. He tightened his hold on his new lover and pressed a gentle kiss on Blair's brow. He'd caught this thief of hearts and planned on holding on to him as long as they lived.

///

October 20th

"Uhm, Jim? You need to make some serious alterations to your security system," Blair called out teasingly. Jim had asked him to test the new and improved system, but it still presented no real challenge to him.

In mock despair, Jim clutched his face between his hands. He loved seeing the sparkle in Blair's eyes. "Why don't you make those improvements? You know a lot about this stuff." Jim remembered the first time he'd suggested that Blair test their security system. A hurt expression had appeared in Blair's eyes and Jim had mentally kicked himself for reminding Blair of his troubled past. But after explaining his reasons for asking, Blair had agreed. He wanted to feel safe at the loft as well.

Jim leaned back into the comfort of the sofa and patted the space next to him. "Come here, lover," he said softly. It still amazed him that Blair tended to blush whenever he used that little term of endearment. Blair moved into his arms and Jim sighed contentedly. So many things had changed since the night Blair had broken into his home. For four weeks now they'd slept in the same bed and Jim's heart always woke up with a loud thump when he found Blair in his arms. They hadn't moved past the kissing stage yet and that was okay with him. Blair needed time to get his life back together.

A few days ago a uniformed cop had dropped off some of Blair's personal belongings, which had been left behind at the hotel. Blair's face had lit up when he'd carried his things upstairs.

Marc Moyet eventually pled guilty. After hearing Blair's testimony, the judge had sentenced Moyet to fifteen years in prison. Blair had gotten off fairly easy because he'd supplied the evidence and information, which had put Moyet behind bars.

Blair had also changed his last name and was now registered as Blair Sandburg again. Jim had even found some brochures from Rainier in the living room. Blair was getting his life together again and that was a good sign.

"Jim?" Blair whispered against Jim's chest. "These last four weeks have been the best of my life." It had taken him some time to adjust to the changes in his life. Jim wasn't a controlling individual as Marc had been and Blair had had a hard time getting used to having his freedom back.

One of the first decisions he'd made was to visit India next year. Jim was going to accompany him. He wanted to see the spot where Naomi had died and maybe even visit the Ganges where they'd released her ashes.

Today was his birthday and Blair was careful not to bring it up. He didn't want Jim to feel like they had to celebrate it. Blair was content to let the day pass by in silence. Resting in Jim's arms, he stared at his lover's hands that were stroking his skin through the fabric of his shirt. "I love you, Jim," he said softly.

Jim grinned madly and kissed Blair's hair. "I love you too, Chief and... happy birthday, Blair."

"Man, I hoped you'd forgotten about that!" But secretly he was thrilled that Jim had remembered. Looking up at his lover, he pressed a hesitant kiss on Jim's lips. The love Jim gave him healed his wounds. His hands rested on Jim's shoulders and he pulled his lover closer.

"Damn, I thought you'd be curious about your presents, Chief," Jim said teasingly. Seeing the surprise in Blair's eyes he felt his own water. Marc had destroyed part of Blair and Jim was determined to resurrect it. His fingers snuck inside Blair's shirt and he stroked the smooth skin beneath the fabric.

"You've already given me your love, Jim. That's all I want." Blair fought his own tears. "I don't need material things."

"You wait here for me," Jim ordered and released Blair from his embrace. He hurried into the study and retrieved one large, gift-wrapped box. "Open it, Blair."

Blair swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "You didn't have to do this, Jim."

"I wanted to." Jim laughed warmly as Blair cautiously removed the paper. He'd assumed Blair would tear it off, ripping it to shreds, but Blair's fingers moved almost reverently.

Blair nervously licked his lips as he picked up the first item he uncovered. It was a leather bound journal. "Oh man," he whispered emotionally.

"Open it. I wrote something on the first page." Jim waited patiently for Blair to compose himself. He placed his right hand on Blair's to

reassure him.

Blair opened the journal and read the words aloud. "Blair, you told me that you lost the journal that Naomi gave you. I want you to have this one instead. Hopefully, it'll always remind you of my love, Jim."

"Oh," escaped Blair and he quickly wiped away the tear that was sliding down his face. "This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Thanks, Jim." He leaned in to capture Jim's lips and kissed his lover passionately.

Jim pulled back reluctantly. "There's more," he hinted, hoping the other gifts wouldn't overwhelm Blair.

"What's this?" Blair examined the credit cards with both their names on them. After Marc had been arrested his account had been closed and Blair had been penniless. Next, he uncovered a set of car keys. "Jim?"

"I know you've got a driver's license." Blair had told him that he'd driven Marc's car on occasion, but Marc had never let him own a car. "I saw this old Ford... it's nothing fancy, but dependable." He wanted Blair to be mobile. It would help Blair to regain his self-confidence.

"It's too much, man. I can't accept this," Blair stuttered.

"I want to do this for you, baby." Jim reached inside the box and uncovered his last present. He handed Blair the envelope. "And I want you to have this as well."

Apprehensively, Blair opened the envelope. It was a check and the amount of money written on it startled him. "What's this?"

"I want you to use it in case you're going back to the University. You'll need to buy books and stuff. I do hope you'll continue to live here with me though." Jim had seen the expression of longing in Blair's eyes whenever he'd read a brochure about Rainier.

It was obvious that Blair was itching to get back to school and that pleased Jim. He wanted Blair to fulfill his dreams. If Blair wanted to be a lawyer, he would support his lover. "Please don't think that I'm trying to buy your love, Chief. The truth is that my family's quite rich and I never knew what to do with the money."

"I'm not sure I can accept all this," Blair repeated. "I know you're not trying to buy me, but... It's too much, man."

"I understand that, baby," Jim assured him and claimed Blair's lips again. This time his lover parted his lips and Jim's tongue slipped inside. Blair suddenly moved and now straddled his hips. Lost for words, Jim simply continued the kiss. Holding Blair close, he sighed blissfully.

"Thanks, Jim... for everything..." Blair whispered after releasing Jim's lips.

Jim nodded his head and his index finger traced Blair's lips. "No, thank you for stealing my heart, Blair. I finally feel alive again. I now know what it means to love, truly love." He cradled Blair in his arms and whispered, "You'll always be my very own thief of hearts, baby."

Blair relaxed completely in Jim's arms and accepted this love, this passion. "I'm glad you caught me, Jim. Don't ever let me go again..." He was right where he wanted to be; in Jim's arms.



The end



### **Virtually Yours** - dolly llama

Within minutes of getting online, the alarm sounded on Blair's computer, alerting him to an attempt by some would-be hacker to try to gain access into his system. Effortlessly, he clicked on the icon for the firewall and brought up the log, identifying the attacker and type of attack. Noting quickly it was an 'RPC port probe,' which was of no consequence since he was running Windows, Blair nevertheless, from habit, plugged in the associated IP number to the trace software. It only took moments for the mystery intruder's location to be pinpointed...the United Kingdom.

"Don't you kids have anything better to do?" he muttered to himself as he closed the window and began to download his email. "Apparently not..." The alarm sounded once again. And once again Blair traced the attacker, all the while knowing his firewall prevented anyone from gaining actual access to his machine. This time the trace indicated the signal originated in San Diego.

The alarm sounded for a third time before all the email had successfully downloaded onto Blair's computer. "That's it! I'm not jumping through your hoops tonight." Blair forcibly switched off the volume control on the speaker above his monitor. One hand began to massage his aching temple, while the other maneuvered the mouse into position to click on his favorite newsgroup - alt.anthropology.

Rather than waiting for the new posts to filter in, Blair headed to the kitchen to fix some tea, hoping to relieve his headache. A short while later he was blowing on the steaming liquid as he reclaimed his seat in front of the monitor.

"Oh man, you are so missing the point I was trying to make here," he screamed at the screen as he read one of the newsgroup posts. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he angrily typed out his response.

A half hour later, Blair's mood hadn't improved as he continued to read and summarily respond to posts on the newsgroup by the same individual who seemed to enjoy engaging him in this duel over semantics.

"You Asshole! I said the prevailing opinions of ... Jeez, why do I bother?" Blair removed his glasses and set them on the table and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Lifting his cup, he found it empty and went to get more tea.

Returning, he replaced his glasses and switched screens, preferring to check his email instead of further engaging in an apparent never-ending battle on the newsgroup.

A message from Naomi caught his eye and he became engrossed in it, never noticing the persistent flashing icon of his computer's firewall alarm.

Blair re-read the message he'd just written to his mother, catching her up on his new position as a programmer with a local communications company in Cascade.

*...the people seem nice, Naomi, and I think I'm gonna like it there. It's not what I'd really like to be doing, but it's the second best thing I know how to do.*

*Love*

*Blair*

Satisfied, he clicked on the send button and watched as the message uploaded. It was then that the blinking orange icon caught his attention. "No way, man. Not tonight," he said, realizing it was the firewall alert.



Given his deteriorating mood, Blair quickly dispatched with the remainder of his email messages and decided to forego returning to the anthropology newsgroup. Instead he chose to mindlessly surf the Internet, losing track of time as he did. The constant flashing light at some point turned from orange to red but Blair never noticed it. Likewise, he missed the notice of the incoming IM message and subsequent email messages that arrived.

Dark curls went flying as Blair shook the cobwebs from his head. Positioning the cursor to click off the computer he noticed all the flashing icons. Swiftly he brought up the IM message and realized it was actually a short series of messages from the same person - - 'SusieQ', a friend from work.

*Hey, Kiddo - We really need to talk*

*Blair, are you there? This is important*

*Blair??? Where are you?????*

She'd gotten offline at 10:12 p.m. Blair glanced over at his computer's clock; it read 11:05. "Damn!"

He quickly shut down his computer, picked up the phone and dialed her number, praying she was still awake.

"Suse? I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Blair?" the voice on the other end became instantly alert.

"Yeah, it's me. What's so important?"

"I thought you should know I've gotten a few phone calls tonight from friends of mine who've seen your posts over on the hacking newsgroups. Not very subtle, guy."

"Wha??? What newsgroups, Suse. I don't have anything to do with any hacking newsgroups....," he sputtered.

"Well, somebody using your email address is posting on all of them."

"It's gotta be some kind of prank. Let me check it out. I'll talk to you tomorrow at the office and let you know what I've found out." At this point, he didn't know what else he could tell her.

"Okay, sounds like a plan. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Suse, I appreciate the heads up," Blair said wearily.

"No prob. I wish I could do more," she offered sincerely before hanging up.

Blair quickly reconnected online. With a minimum of effort he soon was beginning to understand the severity of his problems. Over the course of the last week some one had apparently posted a series of messages using Blair's own email address to various newsgroups devoted to computer hacking. The messages themselves offered advice on activities that ranged from borderline legal to downright against the law. Furthermore, some even went so far as to hint at potential passwords for some of Cascade more prominent businesses. There were six messages posted tonight to three different newsgroups...and all while Blair himself was actually online.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Blair intoned louder and louder. "This is so not cool."

Slowly he rose from his chair and walked towards the kitchen to get some tea. It was gonna be a long night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing that caught his eye as he walked through the door way was the man intently studying the computer monitor sitting on his desk, a frown punctuating his otherwise calm exterior.

"Something up, Jim?"

"Oh hey, Rafe," he called out without looking away from the screen. "I'm just checking out the newsgroups and it seems they've gotten pretty active lately."

"Tell me about it. I've gotten three calls this afternoon about attempted hacking activities. It's like all the area business have unexpectedly become fair game."

Abruptly the phone rang and Rafe quickly picked it up. "Cascade Police, High Tech Crimes, Detective Rafe...."

Jim took the opportunity to leave the room to get a cup of coffee. When he returned, Rafe was just hanging the phone up.

"Another one," he sighed. "Apparently some wannabe hacker is posting all over the Internet providing helpful hints on Hacking 101, complete with legitimate passwords into several tech companies."

"Great, just what we need," Jim said shaking his head sadly.

After more than an hour of reading the wide variety of posts on the multitude of newsgroups devoted to the topic of hacking and hackers, Detective Ellison still couldn't believe what his eyes were showing him.

"Is this guy a rank amateur, or what? I mean who uses his real email address to do something like this? It's too easy."

"Maybe this guy isn't the one actually doing it," Rafe suggested.

Jim looked over at his partner. "You got something?"

"No," he sighed. "But this does look like the work of a rank amateur; leaving a trail like this. Maybe somebody..."

Just then a young officer walked into the room and handed a piece of paper to Detective Ellison.

"What's that, Jim?"

"Dunno yet. Something I requested earlier..." Jim quickly scanned the paper. "Dammit!" He jumped up from his chair.

"What?" Rafe trailed rapidly behind his partner.

Jim was already on the move, headed straight towards his Captain's office. He barely waited for permission to enter before walking in.

"Simon, I need a favor. I tried to check priors on our would be hacker here and it looks like there's something, however, it's sealed in California. Any chance you can do some digging around and see what's going on here?" He put the paper on the desk as he spoke.

"You realize what this probably means don't you, Jim? Probably a juvey offense. I don't know if I have any pull in..." peering down at the sheet "Palo Alto anyway. I'll see what I can do in the morning though."

"Thank you, Sir."

Rafe approached his Captain's desk and extended his hand. "May I, Sir?"

Simon handed the report to the other detective. Opening the leather case, he pulled his last cigar out and gently caressed it.

"Anything else?"

"I think we've got enough to go on right now, Simon, that we should get warrants to search this kid's home and confiscate his computer."

"How soon will you need it?" Simon said, quietly lighting the cigar. He'd been anticipating the request.

Jim glanced over at his partner. "The sooner the better but tomorrow is fine. Rafe?"

"Um, sure, Jim."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I assume you'll be wanting a warrant for his old office and computer at the University as well, right?"

"What?" they said simultaneously.

Simon pointed at the report still in Rafe's hands. "Since your hacker was a teacher at Rainier prior to going to work at Communication Systems, there might be something there."



"It says here he quit a couple of months ago. You really think that's necessary. He probably cleared everything out." Rafe kept his eyes on the paper in his hand, not daring to look at the other men.

"Simon's right. Probably wouldn't hurt to check it out."

"Looks like you've got your work cut out for you. Well, I'm going to call it a night. I'll see both you in the morning." Realizing they'd been dismissed, the detectives turned to leave. "Uh, Rafe?"

He turned and faced his Captain. "Yes, Sir?"

Simon held his hand out. Rafe walked back over and placed the sheet of paper on the man's desk. "Sorry, Sir." He quickly made his exit.

Jim followed him and went back to his own computer. He began scrolling through the new messages in the targeted newsgroups, but found nothing new from their academic hacker and was strangely disappointed.. He re-read all the previous posts trying to familiarize himself with this person in preparation for the confrontation tomorrow.

"Damn!" Rafe muttered under his breath.

"What was that?" Jim looked over at his partner.

"Nothing, Jim."

He studied the man for a minute. Reluctant to press him further, Jim stood up and grabbed his jacket. "Aren't you about ready to call it a day?"

"Yeah, I'll be outta here shortly. See you in the morning, Jim," he called as he went back the paperwork spread out in front of him.

"Later."

While Jim was waiting for elevator, he heard Rafe on the telephone. "I'll tell you tonight. Yeah, tomorrow. I don't..." The doors closed.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Why would somebody want to do this to me? Who would want to do this...?' His thoughts trailed off as the tea pot began to whistle. As he poured the water into his mug some names began to surface in his mind. 'But they're in...!' Blair rushed over to the computer, spilling tea from the mug as he went.

It took Blair exactly ten minutes to discover that his nightmare was probably just beginning. On the computer screen was an excerpt from the local Palo Alto, CA paper, dated over two months ago.

*Wyatt Clark was released from the Palo Alto federal prison today after having served the full fifteen years of his sentence as part of a conspiracy to commit criminal computer crimes against various communication businesses throughout the community. As was previously reported, Tim Preston and Paul Martin were released, after serving their sentences earlier this week.*

*Mr. Clark, along with his associates, Mr. Preston and Mr. Martin, was finally brought to justice after a year long effort by the Palo Alto Police Department who were investigating these activities. It is believed there was a fourth member of this conspiracy, however, no charges were filed against him because of his cooperating testimony. Because the suspected fourth member was a minor at the time of the arrests, his name was never revealed to the press.*

Blair's hand was shaking violently as he lifted his cup to his lips. It was all he could do to hold it with two hands in order to take a sip before setting the mug back down.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" This was quickly becoming Blair's mantra.

He went back to the newsgroup messages, printed them all out and lay them out before him.

"All right Wyatt, what's your game here? It's pretty obvious you're trying to set me up, man. But you've got something else in mind too, I just know it..."

Hours later, Blair was still studying the printed messages when the alarm clock began it's incessant buzzing. Shaking his head, he walking into the bedroom and turned it off. Grabbing a change of clothes, Blair headed slowly for what he hoped would be a revitalizing shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

The call came in at 9:00 a.m. sharp, and as luck would have it, Jim received the call.

"No sir, we've been waiting on further information in our investigation before taking action. Yes, sir, I understand, sir. But we... Yes, sir. We'll be there as soon as possible. Yes, sir, I've got the address."

Jim was reaching for his sports coat as Rafe walked back in the room. "We've got to get down to Communication Systems. Mr. Patterson just called. He wants to file formal charges against this guy."

"I thought we were gonna wait to get the...", Rafe protested.

"We were, but this guy insists we get down there now, so we go"

"Fine." Rafe put on his jacket, straightened his tie and followed Jim out the door.

The officer lay the report on Ellison's desk, face up, the photograph of the young man with the long brunette curls, paper clipped to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair had a bad feeling when the call came to his desk requesting his presence for a meeting with the President of the Company. It didn't improve as he approached the secretary's desk and she refused to make eye contact with him.

"I must say, I'm rather surprised you actually showed your face around here today!" the man said loudly as soon as Blair entered the room.

I guess he heard,' Blair sighed heavily as he debated momentarily playing dumb. "Sir, I had nothing to do with any of this."

"What kind of fool do you take me for, young man? Those messages are from your email..."

"Mr. Patterson, sir," Blair quickly interrupted. "Yes, they appear to be from my email address. However, I can assure you, I didn't write any of them. I don't subscribe to any of those newsgroups. I just found out about all of this myself last night. I..."

Patterson just glared at him. "Some of our confidential passwords were compromised in those messages. Passwords that you are quite familiar with. If it wasn't you, as you claim, do you have any idea who it was?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Patterson. I have some suspicions, but I don't know for sure."

"You have some nerve trying to pass the blame for this on others. You've been caught in a lie, Mr. Sandburg, why don't you just admit your guilt without further compounding the damages."

The formality of switching to his last name began to unnerve him. "I...I...don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Don't you?" Patterson walked behind his desk before continuing. "Those particular passwords were only known to you, me and my son. Now I know that I didn't post them on the Internet and I most certainly resent any implication you might be making that my son might have done it. Therefore, that leaves only you, Mr. Sandburg."

"Mr. Patterson, I..."

"I also took the liberty of speaking to one of your former colleagues over at Rainier, Mr. Sandburg. You lied on your application. You didn't quit. You were fired! I can only surmise that it had something to do with your illicit computer hacking activities over there as well..."

"That's not true! I..."

"Enough, Mr. Sandburg. Your employment with Communication Systems is terminated, effective immediately."

"Mr. Patterson, if you would please give me a chance to explain."

"There is nothing you can say that I care to hear, Mr. Sandburg. Although you probably should consider carefully what you tell the police when they contact you." Seeing the look of surprise on Blair's face, Patterson continued. "You didn't think we'd simply sweep this under the carpet did you, Sandburg? You've compromised the security of this company and, at the very least, cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars with your actions. Now get out of here before I have to have you forcibly removed."

Realizing he was temporarily beaten, Blair quickly cleaned out his desk and headed toward the door. As he walked by Susie's desk, she didn't look up, but placed a piece of paper in his hand. He didn't break his stride as he walked out of the office. He pressed the button, summoning the elevator.

The elevator doors opened to reveal two men inside. The shorter of the pair glanced quickly at the young man blocking their progress, but just as rapidly looked away. Blair's eyes lit on the other man but he lowered them as he stood aside to let them pass. He found himself staring at the taller of the two men as they walked briskly down the hall toward his former office. The man turned his head momentarily and caught Blair's eye before turning back around.

'Come on, Man. This is not the time for sightseeing,' he mentally chastised himself as he quickly entered the waiting elevator before the doors had a chance to close. 'Jeez, what's wrong with you? They're cops, Man...' He continued berating himself during his rapid descent.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the detectives left the offices of Communication Systems, two things were certain. They had a very confused picture of the man

who had supposedly been posting messages to the hacker groups and Jim had a raging headache.

Until the discovery of the messages attributable to Blair Sandburg, he'd been a dedicated employee who worked very hard and was very good at what he did. He made friends easily and in fact, was well liked by his colleagues, most of whom were having a difficult time believing that he did such a thing.

Since the detectives arrived without a search warrant they informed the President that they would be back to take custody of the computer used by Mr. Sandburg, however, Mr. Patterson had insisted that they take it with them.

Arriving back at the office they discovered that information had started to trickle in.

"I knew it"

"Jim?"

Jim pointed at the photograph attached to the file on his desk, "that's the guy I saw at the elevator when we were getting off. That was Sandburg."

"We're gonna get the guy," Rafe stated simply, barely noticing the picture.

Jim glanced over at his partner, puzzled at his recent behavior.

"I think I'm gonna head over to the University and see what I can come up with. In the meantime, see if you can dig up those search warrants and then meet me over there."

"Okay, I'll probably see you shortly then," he called after Jim's retreating back.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Headache still bothering you, Jim?" Rafe asked when he approached the detective on the steps of the University's Library.

"Yeah, it's been one of those days, I'm afraid.. Did you get the warrants?"



"Right here," he responded, patting his breast pocket.

"Good, let's get this over with."

They walked over to the building where Blair's office use to be and they met the Dean of the School of Anthropology. After showing her the search warrant, she scowled and escorted the men to a nearby office. Opening the door she motioned for them to enter.

"Detective Ellison, Detective Rafe, this is William Fairchild. He's a teacher in the Anthropology Department. Mr. Fairchild, would you please show these detectives Mr. Sandburg's old office and where his old computer is located? They have a warrant to confiscate it along with any pertinent materials."

"Yes, Dean Simmons," he responded automatically. Rising from his chair, he moved toward the door. "It's this way."

Jim was somewhat surprised that Fairchild didn't seem to have been caught off guard by the Dean's request, but he rationalized that perhaps the Dean had arranged with him in advance to lead them around. He was more startled, however, to discover that his partner seemed to be unnerved by the presence of the teacher.

When they reached the office, they found it to be almost completely empty save for the computer and an unopened box of computer disks. With the assistance of Mr. Fairchild, the three of them carried the computer and all its components out of the building and loaded it into Rafe's car.

"There are still a number of people on the list we need to interview." Pulling the list from his pocket, he indicated two names for Rafe to visit. "I'll speak with Professor Taylor and Dean Simmons."

"Right. I'll meet you back here in say an hour?"

Jim raced to catch up with Fairchild, unaware he was being watched by his partner. The two men were chatting as they entered the building. Rafe groaned softly as he walked off towards another part of the building.

An hour later, they met back at their cars.

"Did you learn anything interesting about this guy?"

'Yes, but I don't think it affects this case,' Jim thought. "Not sure yet; let's see what we find on the computer," he stated flatly. "Well, let's head over to Sandburg's apartment and get this over with. No point putting it off any longer."

"Okay." Rafe looked puzzled.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Susie opened her door she found Blair standing there, looking somewhat shell shocked. Pulling him inside, she quickly glanced to her right and then left before closing the door and bolting it shut.

"Nobody followed me; I'm sure of it," Blair assured her as he put down his backpack and laptop.

"What are you? A secret agent all of a sudden?" she giggled, in spite of her trepidations.

"Not likely. I think the cops are looking for me though so I didn't want to take any chances getting you messed up in this."

"They came in the office right after you left asking a lot of questions about you and the kinds of stuff you were working on," Susie volunteered, as she moved into the kitchen. "Hungry?"

"Starved, actually." Blair followed her to the kitchen. "Two guys, right. One tall buff looking ex-military type and the other a little shorter, right outta GQ?"

"You got it," she said as she pulled everything she needed out of the refrigerator and placed it on the counter. "Here, you want to make the salad?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, Kiddo, any ideas how you're gonna be able to convince people and specifically the cops you didn't do this?" Susie looked over at Blair as she put away the last of the dishes he'd washed.

"Believe it or not, that's the easiest part. I think this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg and that something's going down and I'm trying to figure out what." He moved back over to the dining room table and opened up his computer.

"So how did this person post this stuff as you?"

Blair pulled a stack of papers out of his backpack and handed them to her. "Here's all the messages that have been posted on the hackers newsgroups so far."

"And you've never been over to these newsgroups?" She read each message carefully and studied the headers, looking for clues.

"Nope. Never even had any desire to check them out," he responded as he plugged the computer in and got online.

"What IP address did you have last night?" she asked as she read one of the previous night's messages?

"Huh? Um...hold on let me get connected here." Logging in, he immediately went into the anthropology newsgroup and pulled up one of his messages from the previous evening. "Here it is 168.191.230.150."

"That's the same IP number listed in this message posted to alt.hackers.malicious last night. What time did you post your message?"

"At 7:37 p.m. Why?"

"Just checking something. That doesn't match. This one was posted at 10:18 p.m."

He quickly looked over all his posts of the night. "Nope, none at 10:18."

"Well, it's not possible for there to be two at the same time from the same IP address from two different places, right?"

"Not technically...except..." Blair clicked on the icon for his firewall log. When it came up he looked it over quickly. "Shit!"

"What?"

"I've been getting hit by a lot of wannabe hackers lately so I've been turning the sound down so I wouldn't get disturbed. The alarm was

apparently going ballistic last night and I missed it."

"What are you talking about, Blair?" Susie moved her chair closer to his to get a better look at his monitor.

"See these entries 'DNS spoof successful'? Somebody's been spoofing my IP numbers when I'm online." He continued to scan down the log entries. "Apparently, this has been happening quite a bit. Dammit!"

"There's your proof. You didn't do it," she smiled broadly.

"Yes and no. Problem is, they're good. They've covered their tracks so well, it's gonna be difficult to find out where they really are. Without another suspect, I'm still left holding the bag. I know these guys are planning something. I just can't figure out what."

"Isn't it enough that you've been set up to take the fall? What a minute, guys? Blair, do you know who this is who's doing this?"

"I'm not positive, but I'm fairly certain, I know who it is. If I'm right, then the reason I'm being set up is payback for something I did to them a long time ago."

Wordlessly, Susie got up and went to the refrigerator. When she returned, she was carrying two beers. "You looked like you could use one of these," she said as she handed the bottle over.

"Thanks," he grinned over at her as he unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow.

"You know, maybe you should consider talking to the cops about this. Maybe if you tell them all this stuff they just might listen and might help catch the real guys."

"Yeah, and pigs'll fly," Blair snickered as he returned his attention to manipulating the various search engines he brought up on the screen.

Three hours later Susie was rudely awakened from where she had fallen asleep on the couch as Blair yelled. "Gotcha, you Bastards!"

"Wha?...What's the matter?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry Suse. I found them. I knew if I kept trying I'd find them sooner or later. One of them screwed up. Here, look."

She moved back over to the screen to see what had markedly improved his dark mood so dramatically. What she found was an address, phone number and email address for a Paul Martin. "So?" she questioned.

"This is one of the guys," he explained. I checked around in deja.com archives and found that this guy posted in one of the hacker newsgroups over a month ago."

"How can you be so sure it's him?" She still wasn't convinced.

"I did a little checking. This listing is not quite six weeks old. The timing would be about right for the earliest they could have arrived in Cascade.

"Blair?"

"Hmmm" He continued to stare at the information listed on the monitor.

"Just what are you planning on doing with this information?"

"Huh? Doing? Um...I don't know yet."

"I'm serious. About what I said before. Talk to the cops. Those two guys that came to the office today? They weren't half bad. They could probably..."

"Suse, of course they seemed nice to you. You aren't a suspect here."

"Blair, listen to me, please. I don't know why these guys are so pissed at you and feel they have to pay you back for whatever it is you did to them. Hell, I don't even want to know. But I have a really bad feeling that things are only gonna get worse before they get better. Talk to the cops. Let them go after these guys."

"You have a lot more faith in them than I do."

"What if you told them anonymously?"

"But..."

"Think about it, Blair." With that Susie got up and left the room. She returned moments later with a pillow and blankets for him and then retreated into her bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair sat in his Corvair and stared at the cell phone in his hand. He'd parked his car across the street from the police station and sat there for the last half hour trying to get up the courage to make the phone call.

He knew the drill. He'd rehearsed it over and over in his mind for hours this morning. 'Quick call. Give names, address information about prior arrest. Limit call to...Damn how long? Shit! I can't remember! Okay, okay. Take it easy, Sandburg. Talk fast. Keep it under a minute. They can't trace a call under a minute, can they? God, why can't I remember?'

\* \* \* \* \*

"You wanted to see me, Simon?"

"Come in, Jim. Coffee?"

"Sure." Jim accepted the cup and sat down facing his Captain.

"I want you to know I had to call in a lot of favors to get this information for you." He held up the paper and Jim immediately reached for it. Just before his fingers touched it Simon jerked his arm back. "For all intents and purposes, the information in this document is confidential and is still officially sealed by the Court."

"I understand, Simon. Now may I see it?"



Jim sat at his desk reading and digesting the information contained in the court document. He read the testimony of a sixteen year old Blair Sandburg, who, because of certain unique computer talents, happened to stumble across a group of computer hackers in the process of breaking into top secret military computers. What was unclear from the evidence, however, was whether Sandburg himself was ever a part of this conspiracy group. 'So did you turn State's evidence willingly or were you coerced?' Skimming through the material once again, Ellison realized there was very little information on the three men who did the actual hacking. 'Wrong place at the wrong time again, eh, Sandburg,' he thought as he stood and walked towards Simon's office.

Knocking twice on the door jamb, he looked in. "Simon?"

"What is it?"

"You didn't by chance get any information from the Court and the local PD on these men...um..." Ellison glanced down at the papers in his hand trying to find their names.

"See if this helps, Jim."

Ellison looked back up at his Captain and found him holding a folder. Just then the phone rang and Simon tossed the folder on the desk.

"Excuse me... Banks here. Hold on a minute." Quickly he held his finger to his lips as he depressed the speakerphone button. "Okay, go ahead. What were you saying."

Jim winced slightly from the tingle in his ears. Rubbing them gently, he moved forward, honing in on the source of his discomfort.

"I...I s.s.said. You're looking for the w.w.wrong person as the hacker. It's really three people. Wyatt Clark, Paul Martin and Tim Preston. Paul Martin's address is 256 Scott Court. They just...Damn!!...."

"They just what? Hello...hello? He's gone. So what do you make of that, Jim? Jim?"

Jim was standing next to the large window, staring down at Corvair parked across the street. Simon moved next to his friend and nudged his shoulder. "Jim? What is it?"

"Huh? Oh nothing, Simon. Listen, I'm gonna play a hunch here and check something out. I'll check in with you later." He moved away from the window and headed quickly towards the door.

"Jim, what's going on? Do you want me to have Rafe check out that address for Martin?"

"No!" he said a little more emphatically than he intended. "Not yet, sir. Let me check out a couple of things first. I'll stay in touch."

\* \* \* \* \*

Turning onto the street running through the warehouse district, Ellison slowed his approach as he neared Sandburg's apartment. There were no vehicles anywhere in the vicinity and a cursory glance towards the windows confirmed the detective's suspicions that the young man wasn't home. Spying an inconspicuous parking spot, Jim maneuvered the Expedition into it. Knocking on the door, more as a formality than anything else, since he didn't expect anyone to be home, Jim let his hand come to rest on the door knob. 'Good, no heat. I beat you here, Sandburg,' he mused as he turned and headed the short distance to his vehicle.

Content for the moment to wait for Sandburg's inevitable return home, Jim reached over and grabbed the file folders resting on the passenger seat. Opening the first one, he pulled out the photograph, studying it as he committed the man's features to memory's. "How'dya get mixed up in this, Sandburg?" Jim asked the picture, then paused, almost expecting an answer. With a sigh, he placed the photo on the seat beside him and shuffled through the papers inside the folders. "This just doesn't make sense," he said shaking his head slowly, as he re-read the report. He glanced back over at the picture. "What was in it for you, huh, kid? Money? Notoriety?" Ellison looked back over in the direction of the apartment and chuckled. "Guess it wasn't the money."

Gathering up the loose pieces of paper, he placed them back in the appropriate folders. Opening the last folder, Jim retrieved the photo and inserted it. Absentmindedly, his finger began to trace a pattern down the side of the angular jaw line. "If you were mi..." 'Jeez, Ellison, don't even go there.' He forcibly closed the file folder, purposely placing it between several others, before tossing all of them in the back seat. Closing his eyes tightly, Jim leaned his head back against the headrest. Running his fingers through his hair, he was torn between mentally chastising himself for his lack of judgment or analyzing to death why this particular hippie geek evoked such stirrings, long ago buried..

He was spared from making any such decision when moments later he heard the sound of a car engine growing louder as it approached. His eyes snapped open and Jim slid down further into the seat, even knowing his vehicle was well hidden from view. He allowed a small smile to pass his lips when the Corvair drove past his hiding place and pulled up in front of the apartment entrance.

Ellison waited just long enough for the solitary figure to gain entrance to the apartment before he exited the Expedition. Removing his shield from his jeans pocket as he quietly crossed the road, Jim mentally prepared himself for the confrontation he faced on the other side of the steel door. Reaching his destination, the detective knocked on the door. Abruptly, it sprang open and Jim stood frozen, staring wide-eyed at the man before him.

"Suse, I wasn't...." Blair backed away and moved to shut the door.

The sudden movement broke Jim's trance. Straightening his arm, he braced it against the heavy door, refusing to allow it to shut him out. After positioning the side of his body against the steel mass, Jim shoved hard, knocking the younger man off-balance. In doing so, the detective finally gained entrance.

"Blair Sandburg? I'm Detective James Ellison with the Cascade Police. I have a warrant to..."

"Oh man, this is so not cool." Blair ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it away from his face. Frantically, he began pacing around the room.

"Sandburg..."

"Am I under arrest, Detective?" Blair stopped his agitated movements long enough to momentarily make direct eye contact with the taller man.

"No, I'm..." Ellison had to spin around because he found himself talking to the kid's back again. Something caught his attention and Jim paused, attempting to focus on its source. "What's that smell?"

"I don't smell anything," Blair stated emphatically after quickly sniffing the air around him.

Jim tried again to focus but lost his concentration as the blur in denim and flannel whizzed by him again. Striding purposely over to him, Jim grasped Blair's shoulders and forced him to cease all motion. "Listen to me, kid..."

Abruptly, Blair twisted his body and Jim was left holding air. "I'm not a kid," he spat out defensively.

His eyes, locked on the firm body encased in the tight jeans moving away from him, only served to confirm that statement. 'You're telling me, Sandburg!' "Um, I apologize, Sandburg."

Jim felt a warm flush creep over his face and he turned away abruptly, not wanting to give Blair a reason for speculation. With his back towards the younger man, Jim began to scan the room, hoping to locate the object of his search. "As I was saying, Sandburg, I have a warrant to search the premises. Specifically, I'm looking for your computer, all hardware, software, computer disks, CDs." Feeling his control returning, Jim turned to face him. "I think you know the drill."

Blair dared to look at him, a split second later his meaning became all too clear. "Damn!" He lurched forward as the realization of his

predicament became all too clear. 'Breathe, Sandburg,' Blair ordered himself. 'So what if this guy knows about your past? It's not worth a major panic attack. Breathe, Dammit!'

Noticing the slight wobble in the gait, Jim became concerned. "Are you all right, Sandburg?"

"Yeah, I guess," he responded quietly. Blair moved over towards a large room fan resting against the far wall. .

"There it is again. Don't you smell it?" Jim lifted his face slightly as he moved his head back and forth.

Through his peripheral vision he saw the younger man bending to retrieve the power cord. The creases in his brow multiplied as he struggled to solve the equation. Blair plugged the cord in and turned the fan on. The wave of dizziness washed over him again, driving him to his knees in front of the cool air.

Ellison took in the scene before him. All at once, the pieces began to fit together. "Oh Shit!" He ran towards the hunched over figure, dragging him to his feet.

"What the hel..." Sandburg recoiled in terror as the larger man's finger's dug into his sides.

"Sandburg, we've got to get out of here. Now!" Jim continued to drag the man across the room, his efforts hampered by Blair's struggles.

Reaching the front door, Jim managed to turn the knob and pull it open while still maintaining some control over his squirming hostage. He'd just barely gotten Blair through the doorway when the violent explosion rocked the foundation of the entire building. Both men were thrown backwards into the road.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Owwwwwww," Blair moaned as he tried to turn over on his side. Opening his eyes cautiously, he discovered part of the reason for his discomfort. He was effectively trapped beneath the much larger body of the detective, who had shown up at his apartment just before it exploded. "Detective Ellison?" he called out as he tried to wiggle out from underneath the man. 'Great! Just Great, Sandburg! And here you thought he was so buff. Turns out he's all dead weight!' he chuckled softly. Bringing both hands up to the man's shoulders, Blair tried to shake him, without success. Desperate now to get out of the road, he shook the man as hard as he could. "ELLISON!!"

"Wha? Where am... Sandburg?" Jim opened his eyes and discovered amusement in the blue eyes that stared back at him. Quickly assessing the situation, Jim pushed himself off of the younger man. "Sorry, I..."

"No big deal, Man," Blair shot back as he sat up and looked around. "Oh, Shit! Everything I had was in there!"

Jim looked over at the still burning apartment and silently sympathized with him. "Listen, we've got to get out of here now."

"What are you talking about. Didn't you hear me? Everything I..."

"I heard you just fine, Sandburg. You need to listen to me. We have to get out of here. The Fire Department is on their way now. We don't want to be here when they arrive."

"I don't understand." 'Did you hit your head or something, Big Guy?' He was seriously starting to worry.

"I'll explain it all later. For now, let's just say this wasn't an accident, okay? I need to get you out of here."

"And where are we going? To jail?" Blair started to move further and further away from the man.

"No! I'll think of something. Come on, we'll take my truck and leave your car here." Jim grabbed Blair's arm and started to lead him towards the Expedition.

"No!," Blair yelled as he twisted away. "I'm not leaving my car."

"We don't have time for this, Chief. Leave the car here. Let whoever did this think they got you. Maybe it'll keep them off your back so we can find them." Putting his hand on Blair's shoulder's he firmly nudged him in the direction of the truck.

"Does this mean you think I'm innocent?" Blair looked over at him.

"I don't know what it means yet, Chief. Just get in and we'll try to figure some of this out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair just looked around as Jim closed the door behind them. "Nice place."

"I think so. Wanna beer?" he offered as he walked over to the refrigerator.

"Sure." He wandered over to the large sliding door to the balcony and stared out at the view, unsure of what was expected of him. Turning back around he faced his unexpected host. "So when do I get to meet Mrs. Ellison?"



"There is no Mrs. Ellison, Chief," he said nonchalantly. "Here" Jim pushed the cold bottle into his hand and walked over to the couch and sat down. Picking the cordless phone up off the coffee table he started to punch in numbers but abruptly stopped and disconnected the call. After a moment, he repeated his action...with the same result.

Blair walked around the couch from the other side and sat on the opposite end of the couch and watched the same scene play out repeatedly. "Um, did you forget the number?"

"No, I didn't forget it. I'm just not sure what I'm gonna say."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, 'Oh'. Bringing you over here probably wasn't one of the smarter things I've ever done, Chief. I mean there's leaving the scene of a crime, interfering with an official police investigation..."

"How about protecting a witness?" Blair offered helpfully.

"Is that what you are? A witness? I've gotta tell ya, Chief, a couple hours ago I could've sworn you were the primary suspect in a series of felony computer crimes."

Taking a sip from his beer, Blair began to play with the paper label on the bottle. Finally, he was able to look back over at the man on the other end of couch. "I didn't do any of it. I don't even subscribe to those newsgroups. I know who did it though."

"Yeah, I know. Wyatt Clark, Paul Martin and um..."

"Tim Preston." Blair supplied the missing name.

"That's the one. Those were the names you gave us when you called the station this morning."

"I wanted to make sure...hey, wait a minute. How do you know it was me that called?"

"I saw you sitting in your car across the street from the station while you were talking to my Captain."

"Dumb move on my part to park across the street, huh? Figures your Captain's office would be on the lower floor."

Tenth floor, actually, Chief, but you don't need to know that' Jim just smiled at the young man as he took a sip from his bottle.

"So now what, Ellison? Are you gonna check these guys out, or what?"

"First of all, I need to figure out what I'm gonna do about you? At the time, it seemed like a pretty good idea to get our asses outta there."

"And now?"

"Now, I'm not so sure," he sighed, before finishing off his beer. "You don't know my Captain."

Retrieving the empty bottles from the table, Ellison went into the kitchen, returning with two fresh bottles. Setting them on the table, he picked up the discarded phone and started dialing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jim, what the hell were you thinking bringing that kid here?" Simon bellowed

"Um, excuse me, sir..." Blair stopped himself when he noticed Jim's hand go up in warning.

"Simon, he's not a kid. And I had to make a judgment call based on the information I had at the time."

"What information?" Simon asked suspiciously.

"Sir, that explosion was no accident. Just before it blew, I detected faint traces of certain chemicals. I believe it was deliberately set inside the wall and it was triggered when Sandburg here plugged in his fan. The electrical current provided the spark to detonate the chemical reaction."

"So why bring the ki...uh, Sandburg, here?"

"Whoever went to the trouble of placing those chemicals obviously wanted to kill him. Let's let them think they succeeded."

"And just how is this related to the rash of computer crimes?"

"That's what I haven't figured out yet, Simon. But it's gotta be connected somehow. If Sandburg's right and it's these three guys he claims it is, they were trying awfully hard to set him up. Now they wanted him dead? With him not around to take the fall, they'd have to be operating without a net."

"So you believe Sandburg when he claims he didn't post those messages?"

"Excuse me, guys, but I'm right here. Sir, I can prove I didn't post those messages. The evidence is on my computer..."

Simon looked down at the young man and smiled sympathetically. "That might have been true, Mr. Sandburg, but I'm afraid that your computer was destroyed in the explosion. The clean up crew found the remains of your laptop in your apartment.."

"Shit! Dammit! All that work for nothing..." Blair stood up and began to pace the room at an uncontrolled rate.

"Sandburg, will you give it a rest. We'll figure out some other way to prove it wasn't you."

"You don't understand, Ellison. I had years of work and research on that computer. That stuff was irreplaceable."

Jim couldn't come up with anything to say to console him or make things right, so he wisely chose to stay silent. Looking over at Simon, he noticed that his Captain was started to rise from his seat. Simon headed toward the front door and Jim followed him over.

"So how are you gonna play this, Jim?"

"I'm gonna keep Sandburg here, Simon. Beyond that I haven't figured anything out. I think that Rafe and I should pay a call on these guys tomorrow though and see what we come up with"

"Fine. Then I'll expect you bright and early in the morning." Simon was smiling as he pulled a fresh cigar from his pocket.

"Bright and early...yes, sir," Jim smiled back wanly.

"Um, excuse me, uh Captain, sir," Blair said sheepishly.

"Sandburg?"

"Could you please make sure that nothing happens to my car? We left it at my apartment."

"Jim? Why..."

"I thought it would add to the illusion that Sandburg had died in the apartment, sir," he shrugged.

"Very well. I'll alert the boys in the impound lot to keep an eye on it." Simon turned toward the door and grabbed the knob.

"It's a '62 Corvair convertible, Sir," Blair added hastily. "It's a classic, you know."

Simon didn't bother turning around, merely waving his hand, acknowledging the statement as he left.

Jim shut the door behind his Captain and turn to face his unexpected houseguest. "Classic, huh? More like a classic death trap," he chuckled.

"That is so unfair, Man. The Corvair was a ..."

"Give it up, Chief. You can't win this argument." Jim openly laughed as he returned to his seat on the couch and finished off his previously forgotten beer.

"What'dya mean I can't win the argument. I can quote you statistics and..." Blair said indignantly as he moved closer to his debate opponent, preparing to do battle.

"I'm sure you can. However, my place...my rules. Comprende?"

Blair threw his arms up in defeat. "Fine, Man. Whatever."

Glancing over, Jim had to stifle a laugh. Blair was pouting. "How 'bout a pizza, Junior?" he asked, hoping to gain some composure.

"Hey, Man, what is it with you and these nicknames? I mean you've been throwing 'em out all day long."

"You got a problem with it, Sandburg?" he said defensively.

"I guess not. Well, except for the 'junior' and 'kid' ones that is."

"Good. Now that it's settled. Can you please answer the question?"

"What question? Oh, the pizza... Yeah, that's cool."

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair peered over the detective's shoulder as he typed a series of commands on his computer. "Looking for anything in particular?"

"Possibly," he responded as he changed screens effortlessly. "Have a seat, Chief. I have a feeling we've got a long night ahead of us here."

"So, you gonna let me in on what you're doing here?"

Turning the laptop around slightly so Blair could see the screen, Jim pointed at the newly downloaded newsgroup messages. "First, I wanted to see if 'you' were still posting on any of the hacker newsgroup."

"Hey, Man, I told you I don't..."

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Chief. I'm talking about whoever is pretending to be you."

"Oh. Sorry." He looked over the screen again, trying to see if he could find anything useful. "What's this?" Blair swivelled the laptop more toward him to get a better view.

"Sandburg!" Jim grabbed the computer and positioned it directly in front of him. "Do you mind? I'm trying to work here."

"This would be much easier if we both had computers."

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock. However, you seem to be forgetting one minor detail. Your computer blew up."

"Um, yes, well...I suppose that, technically, that's true..."

Jim's head snapped up and he looked over at Blair suspiciously. "Technically true? Am I missing something here, Chief?"

"Well..." Blair began to squirm slight on the couch.

"Sandburg!"

"All right! All right! The laptop that was at the apartment was my old one. I mostly used it for my research when I worked at the University."

"And the other computer? Come on, Chief. Don't make me rough you up here." 'On second thought, Chief...Shut up, Ellison'.

"Bring it on, Tough Guy!" Blair smiled tentatively. 'Dream on, Sandburg...and there's a Tooth Fairy, too.' He quickly stood up and went in search of more beer. Handing one to Jim, Blair began to nervously pace the room.

"Problem, Sandburg?"

'No, just trying to remember what Miss Manners said was the acceptable waiting period before jumping the bones of a total stranger.' "I, um..."

"Trying to decide if you can trust me?"

'And that was the other thing...' "Well, can I? I mean, I know I'm innocent here." Blair sat back down, his knee accidentally brushing against Jim's. "I can prove it by what is and isn't on that hard drive."

"Not necessarily, Chief," he said quietly, glancing over at him. The intensity Jim saw in those wide eyes momentarily caught him off guard.

"But..."

"Sandburg, I know what you're gonna say. Look, just because I looked at your hard drive and didn't find those messages there...." A heavy sigh punctuated Jim's hesitation to continue. "...doesn't mean they weren't there."

"There are programs you can run. ENCase! Isn't that the one the police use to check to see what's deleted and restore it? You can run it and it'll show it wasn't..."

"Chief, you know as well as I do there are software programs that will wipe all evidence of deletions right off a hard drive."

"I know, but I haven't deleted anything. I never wrote those damn messages. I didn't hack into any computers and break any passwords."

Slapping his knee hard, Blair slid towards the end of the couch, breaking the fragile contact with Jim's knee. The moment of separation didn't go unnoticed by either of them and two sets of questioning azure eyes locked for a few fleeting seconds.

"And you expect me to trust you?"

"We'll find a way to prove it, Sandburg. I'll have Simon obtain a court order tomorrow to get copies of your ISP's logs. That might show where this other person's messages originated from."

"And what if they originated from inside the same ISP?"

"Then we'll try something else." Jim saw Blair's shoulders begin to sag and knew he was growing increasingly discouraged. Reaching over,

he patted the young man's thigh a couple of times, forcing himself to remove his hand completely. "So, you never did tell me where this other computer of yours is."

He snickered. "I guess I didn't, did I?" Something in the detective's relaxed demeanor put Blair at ease, and he made his decision. "It's over at a friend's house, along with some of my stuff. Let me make a call and then we can go over there and pick it up," he said as he reached for the phone. Abruptly his hand was grabbed before he could lift the phone from the table.

"Hold on there, Chief. That's probably not a good idea right now. It'd be better if you stayed out of sight for awhile until we assess the fallout from your 'death'," he advised.

"Let me call her then. Susie would probably be willing to bring it over here for me."

"Can you trust her. Nobody can know you aren't dead."

"Yeah, I've known her for a few years now. She was the one who got me the job at Comm Sys.."

"All right, make the call."

"Uh, Jim?"

"What?" Jim followed Blair's eyes with own as they led toward the coffee table. "Sorry." He immediately released his grip from Blair's hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Suse!" Blair exclaimed as he jumped off the couch and rushed towards the front door.

Jim barely got the door shut before the young woman he'd just admitted to the loft, brushed past him in her excitement to reach the other man.

"Blair! Oh Man, I heard on the news tonight you were killed. What happened?" She stepped back from his enthusiastic hug to wipe tears from her eyes.

"I don't really know. But listen, Suse, you have got to promise me you won't tell anybody that I'm here. Everybody has to think I am dead."

"But why?"

"I can't really explain that. Police investigations and all of that. You understand."

Just then the phone rang. Jim maneuvered around the two friends to reach for it. "Hello. Hi, Simon. No, not at..." He headed upstairs, still engaged in his conversation.

Both of them watched him as he ascended the staircase. When he finally disappeared from view, Blair felt a nudge to his ribcage.

"So, that's the buff cop, huh?" She smiled broadly.

"Suse!" Blair hissed as he smacked her arm.

"Ow! Hey, no fair. Besides, I agree with you. He's gorgeous!"

"Will you knock it off," Blair pleaded, his eyes drawn upward toward the object of their conversation.

"Why? It's not like he can hear us or anything," she snickered.

"Maybe not, but until this whole investigation is finished he's offered to let me stay here."

"Oh, you lucky dog."

"Jeez, woman, will you give it a rest, already. The guy's straight. I don't wanna give him a reason to throw me out on the street." He looked back upstairs nervously.

"So are you really all right?" Wanting to relieve some of his discomfort she decided to change the subject.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Listen, I really appreciate you bringing my stuff over here. I'll have to figure out a way to get more clothes at some point, but I'll manage."

"If I can help out, you call me, okay?" she insisted.

"Thanks, Simon. Yes, I appreciate you calling." Jim walked slowly down the stairs. "I understand, sir. No, I don't think so," he said, with a glance over at Blair. "What was that you said, sir?" The dial tone continued to drone on in his ear. "Fine. See you in the morning." He punched the button to disconnect as Blair reached the door with his friend.

"Call me if you need anything else, Blair."

"I will. And thanks, Suse." He hugged her again and opened the door to let her out. Turning around, he looked for the detective. "So what did your boss want?"

"He called to give me the preliminary news on the explosion at your place."

"And?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

Shrugging he sat down on the couch. "I don't care."

"The good news is that it was definitely rigged to explode when you plugged something into that outlet."

"So it wasn't an accident?"

"Nope."

"And the bad news?"

"It might not be related to the computer crimes. Sandburg, did you know that on the back side of that warehouse there was a major drug operation going on?"

"What? Hell no, I didn't know about that."

"Well, the chemicals apparently were inserted into the wall from the lab. This could have been done to cover up evidence of the lab; you might not even have been a target."

Blair collapsed on the couch. "Great. Just great. So now what do we do?"

"We? We aren't doing anything. I'm going to continue investigating the computer crimes, same as I was doing this morning, and the day before." Jim opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water out, opened it and took a long drink.

"Come on, Man, I can help you." Blair left his seat to walk over in front of the bigger man. "We'd make a great team. And I know these guys better than you do," he said excitedly.

"You're also working with the assumption these are the guys that set you up," Jim pointed out.

"Who else would want to set me up? I'd be kidding myself if I didn't think that these guys haven't been planning some sort of revenge against me for the last fifteen years." Blair walked over by the front door where Susie had dropped his backpack and laptop, retrieved both and returned to the couch. Unzipping the computer from its case, he turned it on.

"What are you talking about, Chief?"

Blair watched him as he retook his seat on the far end of the couch. "Time to lay the cards on the table, Ellison. You showed up at Comm Sys yesterday as I was on my way out. Last night I did some checking your background. You're good at what you do. By now I figure you've got quite a bit of background me. So can we cut out the bullshit here?"

Jim got up, fished keys from his jacket and headed for the door. "Be right back," he said as he walked out.

By the time he returned, Blair was intently studying the monitor and scribbling notes on his legal pad. He looked up momentarily as Jim walked through the door and noted the folders in the man's hand. Jim tossed them down on the coffee table before hanging up his jacket.

"Okay Chief, you want to compare notes here?" Blair's hand immediately slid over to the folders, but Jim caught his arm before he could open the first one. "Hold on, Sandburg. We're gonna have some ground rules here." Blair rolled his eyes. Jim continued, "I'll let you know what I've come up with and you'll tell me what you've got. If I find out that you're holding any back from me, I swear, I will throw you in jail so fast your head will spin. Got it?"

"I'm telling you, Man, I didn't do any of this." He looked over and saw the determined note in the detective's eye and backed down. "I've got it," he acquiesced.

"Good." He slid the folders closer to Blair. He watched as the young man digested the information contained in each one. As he opened the one containing the sealed information about his own testimony he spoke up. "So tell me, why was a sixteen year old involved with these guys in the first place?"

"I wasn't 'involved' with them, despite what they tried to claim. I, um, was just kinda messing around and happened to discover some password back then. It was also perfectly harmless. I wasn't doing anything with it, I swear. Just something to do. Sort of a game I played just to see if I could do it." He looked over at Jim, trying to gauge the man's reaction to his statement.

"What kinda places are we talking about here?"

"Telephone companies. It was actually pretty easy back then because nobody was thinking about the possibility of anybody trying to break in. The passwords were fairly easy to guess with only a few tries. Anyway, there was a bulletin board operated in the Palo Alto area where I lived that I would frequent. I started reading messages on it from some guys bragging about their hacks where they'd broken into these same phone companies I had. Only they were getting in there and messing around with people's phone records."

"What'dya mean 'messaging around'?"

"They'd said they were disconnecting some people's service, fooling with accounts to make it look like bills had been paid when they weren't; that kinda thing. They gave out the passwords to these companies so other people who read this board could do it too. Since I knew these passwords, I knew they had been into the computers."

"Did you do anything about this information yourself, Chief?"

"I told you, all I ever did was get in and get out. I never did anything. When I found out what they were doing I made some anonymous calls to the companies to alert them to what was going on. Apparently, though, they already knew something was going on by that time and they traced my calls. I ended up getting busted for my efforts. Since I was a minor, the cops offered me a deal of turning State's evidence against the guys who did it. Unfortunately, they didn't protect me very well and these three guys, who they later caught, found out who I was."

"From what I gather from your testimony in this case and the police reports, Sandburg, without your cooperation, they never would have cracked this case in the first place," Jim smirked.

"You've got that right. I've never met a bigger Mickey Mouse police force in my life," he laughed. "The kicker was, right after the trial, I ended up conducting security seminars for the police department and the phone companies before I went off to college."

"Where you studied computer science, right?"

"Nope, Anthropology. Computers were a hobby."

"Why Anthro..."

"It was always a love of mine. Besides, I had a bad feeling these guys were gonna one day come after me when they got out so I figured I'd make it harder for them to find me if I wasn't connected to computers."

"Um, excuse me for pointing out the obvious, Genius, but you were working with computers when they found you," Jim said as he rose, heading towards the kitchen once again.

"Yeah, I blew it there," he snickered in agreement. An icy chill raced up Blair's spine as he sensed where this was leading.

"Wanna another beer?"

"Huh...wha?"

"I said, do you want another beer?"

"Um, yeah, that'll work."

Jim handed him a bottle as he sat back down. "So why did you leave Rainier?"

"Hey, Man, we've been talking non-stop about me. How about we talk about you for awhile?" Blair suggested hopefully, trying to change the subject.

"Uh uh. My house, my rules. Remember?" Jim just smiled.

"Uh, let's just say I was put in a no-win situation, Man. I had to leave," Blair said quietly.

"Or?"

"Or get fired, I suppose"

"What'dya mean you suppose, Sandburg?" Jim watched the young man as he began to peel away the paper from the glass bottle.

Blair took a long swig from his beer before finally placing the bottle on the table. Taking a deep breath, he looked back over at Jim and continued reluctantly. "I told you I did some checking on you last night. You have a high collar rate, Man, so you've got to be pretty good at what you do."

"You're stalling, Sandburg."

"Yeah, 'cos the way I figure it, the only reason you're asking me this is because you've already been over there asking questions and you're

testing me to see if my answer matches what you've heard."

"I'm a detective, Sandburg. I look for the truth."

"The truth, Detective, is that one of the Professors over there was hitting on me. I turned him down and he was pissed off about it. He threatened to ruin me professionally if I didn't give in to him. He had enough clout with the University that I thought he could probably pull it off, so I quit, rather than fight him," he said simply.

"Did this guy have anything on you?"

"No."

"Are you sure about that?"

Blair stared at him hard. "Okay, the fact that you're asking tells me there's something I don't know."

"Yeah, I did go over there and ask questions. I did meet this Professor Taylor." Jim grabbed the appropriate folder off the coffee table and looked over his notes. "Ah, here it is. He said he discovered you've been having affairs with some of your male students. He confronted you about it and gave you a choice of either resigning or being fired. You chose to resign."

"That is so bogus, Man. I would never get involved with my students," he said indignantly as he jumped from the couch and began pacing the room.

"Easy, Chief. I know you didn't do it."

Blair spun around. "You do?"

"Yeah. I spoke with a William Fairchild"

"You met Bill?"

"My partner and I were at the University yesterday doing some digging around. We had a warrant to get your old computer. The Dean had this guy, Fairchild, show us around your office. Afterwards I had a talk with him. He told me you two used to live together. He also mentioned that Taylor had basically blackmailed you into resigning."

"Well, it wasn't..."

"Blackmail is illegal, Sandburg. And if you were worried about the University going after you for being gay, there are anti-discrimination..."

"I know, but at the time I was trying to protect Bill. I didn't want Taylor finding out about him and going after him and threatening him, too," he sighed.

"Fairchild told me all about that. That's why you two split up?"

"No, we..." Blair paused, uncertain about betraying confidences. "Nah, it just wasn't meant to be," he said quietly. "Bill got involved with somebody and I found my own place."

"So your lover, whom you're protecting, throws you out for some other piece of ass?"

"You are so wrong, Man!" Blair shot back. "So quick to judge." He stood up angrily and moved to pack up his computer.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from here. Maybe Susie'll let me crash at her place for awhile."

"Sandburg, sit down!" he ordered, pointing at the couch.

Blair did, looking quickly at the man at the other end of the couch. "Hey listen, Man, I promise I'll behave, honest. You don't have to worry about me trying to jump your bones or anything like that."

"That's too bad, Chief. And here I was kinda hoping to have something to look forward to when this is all over," Jim stated simply before taking a sip of his beer.

Blair cocked his head slightly, studying Jim's face intently. "Are you serious, Man?" He began to slide closer toward the detective.

"Chief, at the moment, I'm trying to stay focused on saving your ass. So slide it right on back down there where it was and tell me what you've come up with," he ordered with a laugh.

Quickly realizing it was a playful rebuke, Blair positioned himself in front of his laptop and began to pull up his files. "Okay, I suppose you've found all the newsgroups that these posts appeared in, right?" He glanced over at Jim while he spoke. Seeing the quick nod, he looked

back over at his screen. "Well, I found a reference to Paul Martin and his screen name of 'dark lord'. Now 'dark lord' posted to these same newsgroups at the same time as I supposedly did. If you look at the writing styles you'll see some similarities."

Jim scooted closer to Blair so he could look at his screen. "Such as?"

"For example. Every time he asks a question there a space between the last letter and the question mark. Or here, there's a space between the letter and an exclamation point. It's the same thing for the posts by both personalities."

"Okay, that could be significant, Chief. Anything show up in the headers between the two?"

"Nothing that I can see just yet. They apparently spoofed my IP address exactly. My guess is that they waited every time until they found me online and posting to the one newsgroup I do participate on, and got my IP address each time."

"Any guesses how they got the passwords from these companies?"

"Probably the same way they did last time. Through trial and error. They found employees who had easy passwords and just guessed them. You'd be amazed at how many people screw up by using the passwords that come with the computers and don't bother to change them. Or else they use simple passwords such as family members or something like that."

"Trust me, Chief, I know all about it," he snickered.

"Oh yeah," Blair laughed along with him. "Sorry about that. For a minute there I forgot what you do."

"All right, Sandburg, enough for tonight. I have a meeting with Simon first thing in the morning. I'm going to also have him get the Court to issue a search warrant so we can search the logs from your ISP. I want to make sure they don't erase them before we have a chance to check them out and see where these bogus messages are really coming from."

"Can I come with you?" he asked hopefully.

"No way.!" Jim said a bit more forcefully than he meant too. He quickly softened his tone and explained. "You're supposed to be dead, remember? There's still a chance that explosion ties in with this somehow, so don't take any chances." He found himself unconsciously stroking the younger man's cheek. It took every bit of his will power to pull his hand away. "There's a futon in that spare room over there you can use. I'll see you in the morning," he said as he slowly headed toward the stairs. Blair sighed as he watched him ascend to the top and disappear from view.

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later Jim was awakened by an unfamiliar noise. Grabbing his gun from under his pillow, he crept downstairs. Halfway into the room he identified the sound. Quietly, he approached and peered into the spare room. There he found Blair perched on the bed in his boxers and t-shirt typing away at his computer.

"Is sleep such a novel concept to you, Sandburg?"

"Wha? Jeez, you startled me, Man." Blair's hands pulled back from the keyboard.



"Sorry, I heard a noise and came down to check it out."

"What noise? I didn't hear anything."

"Your ke..." Jim stopped himself. "Probably just a noise outside on the street. Since we're both up, how about some coffee? Then you can tell me what you've found so interesting on there." He indicated to the monitor on Blair's laptop.

"Sounds good to me," Blair laughed. "I could use a good caffeine fix right about now."



A short while later, Jim returned with two mugs of coffee and handed one to Blair. Pulling up a chair, he sat next to the bed staring at the screen.

"So, what'dya got here, Chief?"

"I think I found Wyatt. At least, I found an alias that I'm pretty sure is him."

"How do you know?"

"It's the one he used before... 'Wyatt Earp'. He's posting on the various hacker newsgroups now claiming to have used my advice. Of course he says I got caught at it so he's warning others not to try it any more."

"Wait a minute. He's saying you got caught? Where?" Jim moved closer.

"Hang on a sec." Blair brought up the screen with the message he had previously saved. "Right there. Says I was caught hacking into several businesses, including Comm Sys and got fired."

Jim scooted closer in his excitement, almost spilling some of his coffee on his leg. "Did you run a trace on his IP?"

"Elementary, my Dear Watson," Blair grinned. "Except he's using a proxy, as I expected, so it doesn't help at the moment. It traces to somewhere in Germany. He's been switching proxies about every two to three posts."

"Anything recent?"

"Um, I dunno. I'll check." Blair downloaded the new messages quickly. "Here's one. Hello! He's announcing my obit."

"Let me see that, Sandburg." Jim yanked the laptop away from Blair and began to read.

Feeling the need to stretch, Blair got up from the bed and padded into the kitchen in search of more coffee. Pouring fresh cups for both himself and Jim, he returned to the small room. Setting a cup down on a nearby bookcase, Blair sat back on the bed.

"I think we've got him, Chief," he said as he handed the computer back.

"How?"

"For starters, he's identifying you as the computer hacker in your obit. For another he's giving out information in that obit that's not public knowledge. He's hacked into police records to pull that information."

Blair set his mug on the floor and read the message on the screen again. "So you're saying this'll clear me?"

"There's a good chance," he confirmed.

Overcome with relief, Blair threw his hands behind the other man's head, drawing him nearer. When he felt no resistance, he raised his mouth and kissed Jim's soft lips. When they opened beneath his, he almost pulled back but Jim slid his own hand into the younger man's curls and kept him in place until Blair relaxed and accepted his tongue.

The kiss lasted several minutes. When they finally drew apart, both men were breathing hard.

Blair raised his eyes to find Jim watching him. "I'm sorry," he began.

"Shhhhh" Jim said softly as he began to trace the fullness of Blair's lips. Soon he was unable to deny the hunger as he crushed the young man to him, claiming his mouth.

Blair gave in to the sweet sensations of Jim's thrusting tongue, abandoning all hope of rational thought. Jim had just shifted his position on the bed when his foot hit the coffee cup on the floor, spilling the lukewarm liquid over the hardwood floor.

"Shit!" they exclaimed in unison, nearly colliding in their haste to find something suitable to clean up the mess.

Jim reached the kitchen first and grabbed the paper towels. Returning, he began wiping up the spill while Blair got more coffee. He looked up when the young man returned to the room, noticing immediately Blair's lips were still swollen from his kisses. As soon as Blair sat down, he caught Jim studying him. He had an overwhelming craving to taste more of him. Leaning down he reached for Jim.



"Blair, don't," he cautioned, his voice raw with emotion.

His fingers slowly curled into a fist as he retracted his arm. "Why?" he asked simply.

Immediately, Jim reached out to caress his face but Blair pulled away. "I really think it would be better we waited until..."

"Better for who? Look Man, I don't need you to feel pity for the little geek kid," he spat out.

As Jim stood up, he pulled Blair off the bed to face him. Smoothing away the errant curls from the smaller man's cheek, he waited until their eyes made full contact. "I can assure you, Chief, that what I'm feeling has nothing to do with pity."

Puzzled, Blair stared at him for a moment before understanding set in. Lowering his eyes, he found his answer. The erection tenting Jim's boxers was threatening to break free of its cotton confines at any moment. With a grin that would have made the Cheshire cat proud, Blair quickly looked up into the detective's eyes.

"And as for 'little geek kid'? I don't think 'little' is the operative word here, Chief," he said, motioning with his chin toward Blair's similarly ill-fitting boxers.

"Jeez, Man," he said, sitting back down on the bed, "you sure know how to make it hard on a guy." He bent over to pick up his coffee mug.

"Sandburg, I'm gonna overlook that bad pun because I like you." He grabbed his own mug but frowned at the cold liquid he found inside. Smiling, Jim couldn't resist petting the thick curls as he made his way toward the kitchen. Pouring the last of the steaming fluid into his cup, he glanced back at the room. "Hey, Chief, are you gonna want any more coffee?"

Striding in quickly, Blair came to an abrupt halt when he discovered the empty pot. "Well, I would have some, if there was any left."

"I was going to make more if you wanted it. There's no point in going back to sleep now since I'd have to be getting up in an hour anyway."

"Sure, coffee'd be fine. Listen, Jim, about what just happened?"

"Don't worry about it, Chief. Let's just play it by ear, huh?" Jim patted Blair on the shoulder before moving away to make another pot of coffee.

Jim found Blair once again laboring over his computer. Sitting down on the futon next to him he spied the screen. Setting the pair of cups on the floor, he moved closer so he could try to make out the words.

"What are you writing?"

"I'm posting on the newsgroup trying to see if I can get any leads on what these guys are up to," he responded without stopping his typing.

"Sandburg, you're supposed to be dead!"

"I'm not doing this as me, Jim." He shot the bigger man an exasperated look. "Give me some credit here, will ya? I've got plenty of anonymous accounts to hide behind and I'm using multiple proxies to hide behind. They won't be able to trace it back to me." He grinned broadly as he resumed his message.

Jim sipped his coffee, hoping to hide the nearly unperceivable frown that crossed his face with Blair's words.

He slipped out of the room undetected, deciding to grab a quick shower and get to the station early.

When Jim poked his head in the doorway again, Blair spun around. "I'm heading down to the station, Sandburg. Promise me you'll stay here and wait for me to get back here."

Laughing, Blair held up his left hand, but quickly dropped it and raised his right one. "I promise, Man. Honest."

"Good." Jim backed away.

"Hey, Jim," he called as he headed after the detective. Catching up to him by the front door. "Here, Man." Blair handed him a computer disk. "It's a copy of all the messages I found on the newsgroups that I think are by Wyatt and Paul. I also copied the traces of the IP numbers they were using."

"Thanks, Sandburg. If you come up with anything else, you can give me a call at the station." He pulled one of his business cards out and handed it over. "I'll see you later. And lock this door behind me."

"Yes, Sir!" He saluted as he closed the door behind the retreating detective.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, Jim, you believe this kid's story?" Simon pulled a fresh cigar from his leather case, enjoying it's aroma.

"So far, Sir, everything's he's told me checks out. And the writing styles of the messages written by Paul Martin under the alias of the 'Dark Lord' and the messages supposedly written by Sandburg are very similar." He pointed to copies of each that he'd placed on his Captain's desk.

"Have you checked out the address Sandburg gave us on this Paul Martin?"

As if on cue, Rafe knocked at Simon's doorway. "Captain?"

"Come on in, Rafe." Simon lit his cigar as he watched the younger detective hand several papers to Jim. "So, gentlemen, what do we have on this Paul Martin?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. The address we got was bogus. I've been running a search on all three names through the public records for the last couple of months. There's absolutely no evidence that any of the three are in Cascade." Rafe responded looking over at Jim who was reading over the materials he'd been furnished.

"Jim?" Simon prompted.

"Sir?" Jim looked up. "This is the print out of the report that Rafe filed in the computer last night. It gave the preliminary status of the investigation on Sandburg. I told him to include certain information in the file."

"Such as?"

Jim put the printout in front of his Captain. "The report lists that Sandburg is a possible suspect in the commission of felony computer hacking against a number of businesses here in Cascade. It lists those businesses. We left off two names of businesses that were hit. The report also states that Mr. Sandburg's apartment was destroyed yesterday in a chemical explosion and that he was killed."

"And your point is?"

Jim pulled another piece of paper from one his file folders and put it in front of Simon. "This is a message Sandburg found on one of the newsgroups that Wyatt Clark apparently wrote last night or early this morning. He was posting Sandburg's obituary."

"Jim, the media was covering the explosion and the kid's death," Rafe pointed out while Simon was occupied reading the message.

"True, but the other information was only contained in the PD report that you typed."

"What?" Rafe immediately bent down to look over Simon's shoulder.

Jim continued his narrative. "However, Sir, there is some information in that message that is not in the report. You'll notice that the message contains the names of all the businesses that were affected by Sandburg's supposedly releasing passwords."

Simon and Rafe both looked over at the copy of Rafe's doctored report to verify that he indeed left off those businesses.

"Sir, I think there's every indication here that the Department's computers have been compromised and..."

"Hold on a minute. You said yourself, you found the kid working on a computer this morning..."

"Yeah, his computer," Jim interrupted.

"I thought his computer was destroyed in the explosion." Rafe interjected.

"That was apparently another computer of his," Jim explained. "This was one he had at a friend's house."

"Are you sure it was his computer and not yours, which has access to our database?" Simon questioned?

"No, sir" Jim admitted reluctantly. "What's your point, Simon?"

"My point is, while you were sleeping Sandburg could've written these messages and now is trying to convince you of his innocence. He also could've hacked into the station's computers to get the information about the status of the investigation. As for the two companies that were left out of the report, he's seen the messages posted under his name giving the passwords for those companies so he already knew the names of the businesses. That doesn't mean much, Jim."

"Simon, a court order can get us the ISP logs showing who was assigned those IP numbers at that particular time."

"Jim, some of those IP numbers trace back to the web based ISPs or the free ones," Rafe pointed out.

"I know they do, but we've gotta start somewhere," he sighed.

"Problem is some of these don't even bother keeping logs because they're big on promoting anonymity."

Simon's phone rang halting further discussion.

"Banks here. Yeah, Joel. So you're sure about that? Is he willing to testify to that? I see. Okay, thanks." Hanging up, he addressed his men. "That was Captain Taggart from Major Crimes. Last night they arrested Pete Field in connection with the explosion at Sandburg's apartment." Simon took a breath and addressed Jim in particular. Joel's team was correct in their original assessment, the chemicals were planted in the walls from the drug lab, or former drug lab. Mr. Field was part of a gang who worked in that lab until recently. Apparently, they received an anonymous tip that Blair Sandburg has posted information on the Internet about their drug lab. After the lab was moved out of the warehouse, his apartment was targeted."

"Simon, he didn't even know there was a drug lab behind him," Jim pointed out.

"So he claims." Simon calmly pulled another cigar from his case and prepared to light it.

"Give me a chance to find these three guys, Simon."

"You realize you're asking a lot of me? Everything points to this kid having done this. Not to mention he could be further implicating himself if he's gained access to our computers," the Captain pointed out.

"Captain, I can't explain it but I feel strongly that Sandburg is telling the truth. I just need some time to prove it. If he's right, then these guys are planning something more than just setting him up and I need to find out what that is."

"All right, Jim. I'll give you twenty-four hours. That's the best I can do. If you can't either prove the kid's innocence or else produce the guilty party in that time, I'm gonna have the kid brought in and charged."

"But, Simon..."

"I'm sorry, Jim. My hands are tied. I've been sitting on the charges that were filed by these companies as it is, letting them assume Sandburg was killed in that explosion."

"All right, I'll check in with you and let you know what I come up with." Jim began to gather his files and papers from Simon's desk.

"Captain, I think I'll help Jim on this," Rafe volunteered.

"Rafe, you don't have to," Jim turned and faced him.

"I want to."

"Thanks," he said softly.

\* \* \* \* \*

After several hours of hitting dead ends both detectives were thoroughly frustrated. Rafe had been checking the listings for all newcomers into Cascade within the last two months with the any combination of the names of the three men and having no success. Jim had been combing through the various newsgroups and archives searching the various known aliases for relevant posts that they could attribute to any of the three. Other than what Sandburg had already discovered, he wasn't finding anything new.

Jim was about ready to give up for the morning and head out for lunch when he decided to look over the information on the disk Sandburg had given him one more time. Bringing it up on his screen he noticed a file he hadn't looked at before. Opening it up, he found a note from Blair.

*Jim,*

*It occurs to me that if Wyatt has gotten into the station computers, he's got access to everything. The phones are probably tapped as well. Don't use your office email or your office phone line. Use your cell phone. I've set up a hotmail account for you to use for email. He won't know about it and since it's web based and not stored on your hard drive, he can't access it. It's 2X4@hotmail.com. The password's studly (not very original, I know. Change it immediately to something hard to guess). I'm assuming that guy you showed up with at Comm Sys is your partner. I've set up an account for him as well. I'll leave it up to*

*you whether or not you want to give him this information. The account is MrGQ@hotmail.com. The password is armani. Again, it needs to be changed. If you need to reach me write to burton@hotmail.com.*

*B*

The remainder of the note contained additional aliases and email addresses that Blair had either remembered the men had used previously or else he had uncovered in the last couple of days. Jim printed off two copies of everything on the disk, putting a copy in two separate file folders..

Logging off the computer, Jim made his decision. He pulled the disk out of the machine and grabbed the papers and files off his desk. Turning toward Rafe's desk, he called over. "How about lunch? My treat."

"You're on."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim waited until Rafe was finished his lunch before bringing up the case. "Okay, I have to know, why are you helping me on this one?"

Rafe looked at his friend and laughed softly. "Take it easy, Ellison. I'm on your side. I don't think he did it either."

"You don't?"

"Oh, the kid's got the talent to do it all right. Only he wouldn't have been so obvious as to use his real name and account. Furthermore, with his academic credentials, he'd be a fool to throw all that away committing a felony like this."

"Okay, beyond the obvious, what aren't you telling me?"

"Jim?"

"You know something else. I saw a look on your face when we were in Simon's office earlier. So are you gonna tell me?"

"When we were comparing the newsgroup message announcing Sandburg's obit against that report, there was something that wasn't in the report."

"What?"

"The message made mention that Sandburg was being charged with felony crimes or about to be charged. Something like that. I hadn't put anything like that in the report. I never mentioned that the various companies had filed charges."

"Why didn't you say something at the time to Simon?" Jim looked curiously at his partner.

"Simon started on his rant explaining away every possibility. I figured if I brought it up, he'd probably just claim that Sandburg put that in as an educated guess so it didn't mean anything. Jim, You and I know, however, that he was going to be charged based on all the reports filed."

"So how did this person find out about that? There was no record anywhere in any computer?"

Rafe sighed, "I have no idea."

"That makes two of us. And Simon has only given me twenty-four hours to either clear Sandburg or else find who did it."

"You've got it bad for the kid, don't you, Jim?"

He debated denying his friend's statement but decided it wasn't worth arguing the point. "Is it that obvious?" he grinned weakly.

"Only to somebody who knows you. Does the kid know?"

"Yeah. But nothing's going on until this mess plays out."

"I have a feeling it's gonna be easier for us to clear Sandburg, so why don't we concentrate on that part. Then we can focus our energy on going after the actual guilty party or parties."

Jim pulled a folder off the empty chair beside him and put it on the table in front of his partner. Rafe slowly flipped through the papers it contained. When he got to Blair's note which mentioned the hotmail accounts he snickered. "I feel like we're playing secret agents or something here."

"He says that these guys are up to something bigger than just setting him up. I suspect he's right. I mean, why bother hacking into all those companies. One company would have been enough to land Sandburg in jail on felony charges. And why those particular companies? I suspect there's a pattern in there as well?"

"I'll head back to the office, Jim, and see what I can come up with. I'll get in touch with you later this afternoon."

"Remember, cell phone or that hotmail account only. Oh, and if you use the computer, don't store anything on the hard drive. Put things on diskettes only and carry them with you."

"Got it. Hey, Man, thanks for lunch."

"No problem. Catch you later."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim wasn't sure what he expected when he walked in the door to the loft but he certainly didn't expect the silence that greeted him. Placing the bag of groceries down on the counter, he extended his hearing until he located Blair, fast asleep, on the futon in the other room.

Reassured, he quietly put away the groceries. Sitting down on the couch, he turned on his computer and found a disk sitting beside it. When Jim brought it up on his screen, he found another note from Blair.

*Hey Big Guy,*

*I guess if you're reading this you've gotten home. I've had quite a bit of luck with figuring out what's going on here. Don't ask me how. You really don't wanna know.*

*For starters. My friends, posing as me, were turning in the drug dealers who lived on the other side of me. The dealers kinda took it personally and wanted to teach me a lesson...of the permanent kind. Can't say that I blame them.*

*I also have reason to believe that whatever is going to happen is going to happen within the next two days. I found several references to that.*

*If I'm asleep when you get home, just wake me so I can show you this stuff.*

*B*

Jim listened for a moment, and hearing the deep even breathing of the young man, opted to let him continue sleeping.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim was cooking dinner as Blair wandered out of the spare room.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were gonna wake up or not, Chief."

"Oh man, you should have woken me up. Now I'm gonna be up all night again."

"We're probably gonna be up anyway so I figured I'd let you rest now."

"That smells great, Man. Any chance I could grab a quick shower before dinner?"

"Go ahead. This is gonna take awhile longer."

Despite his promises to himself, and Blair, that he was going to behave and not do anything until all of this was over, Jim found himself listening in the entire time the younger man was in the shower. 'Need any help in there, Chief? Ellison, you are so bad. You are just making this harder on yourself.'

By the time Blair finished and turned the doorknob to leave the bathroom, Jim had to sprint to make it upstairs so that he wouldn't be seen in his current state of arousal. It took him several minutes to calm down enough before he was able to come back down the stairs.

After dinner Blair started to explain in detail some of what he'd discovered to Jim while they washed the dishes.

"I'm still trying to figure out how this ties together, Man. I just know it does. And there's something else that bothers me. When I met with my former boss, right before he fired me, he said something about me implicating his son. Well, since I never involved his son, I have no idea what he's talking about. I also didn't find any messages about that either. But I think it's important."

"Did you find out anything about the other companies?"

"Not that much but I'm still digging. It takes time."

"Sandburg, we don't have time."

"What'dya mean?"

Jim took a deep breath. "Simon's given me twenty-four hours to either prove you innocent of the charges or else to find the guilty party or parties." He looked down at his watch. It was about 7:15. "I've got a little less than fifteen hours left."

"Oh Shit! Wait a minute. I thought you said that the fact that Wyatt posted my obit that contain the stuff from the stations files would show

that I didn't do it."

"Unfortunately, Simon said that you had the opportunity to do it by getting online with my computer this morning while I was sleeping."

"Jim, I didn't use your computer." Blair grabbed a couple of beers out of the refrigerator, handed one to Jim and moved over to the couch.

Jim stood at the end of the couch, debating which end to sit at. "I know that, Sandburg. It's circumstantial at best and Simon knows it. But it could convince a jury if it came down to that." Making his decision, he sat next to Blair. "We've got to find something solid to prove your innocence."

"And just how am I gonna do that?"

"I'm still working on that."

"Did you find Martin's house?"

"That address is bogus. We can't find any of them in Cascade."

"Of course not. That would be way too easy," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jim, however, didn't miss the catch in his voice nor the fear that radiated from his body. "We're gonna catch 'em, Sandburg. They'll screw up somewhere and we'll nail 'em."

"In case you haven't figured it out, Ellison, these guys are good. And there's three of them."

"There's three of us, Chief. You're forgetting my partner, Rafe. Besides, these guys have been locked away for fifteen years. They're gonna be rusty. That gives us the advantage, wouldn't you say?"

"Ordinarily, yes. However, with that deadline your Captain has hanging over my head..."

Jim reached over and stroked Blair's hair, wrapping it around his fingers. Softly he caressed the young man's cheek with his thumb. Blair closed his eyes at the intimate contact.

As the gentle stroking on his cheek continued, he opened his eyes and gazed over at the man sitting next to him. Blair grasped the hand caressing his face and brought it to his lips. He brushed kisses over Jim's palm, wanting to taste him, yet never allowing his eyes to break contact with him. Then he reached over and gently drew the older man to him and kissed him tentatively.

Blair lifted his head up slightly and looked at Jim questioningly. From somewhere in the blue depths he found the unspoken answer to his unasked question. He lowered his head to feast from Jim's lips.

Like a caged animal, unexpectedly released, Jim's passion flared and his kisses became increasingly urgent. His fingers carded through the flowing curls, pulling Blair closer. As he fought for some control, Blair began to softly suck on his lower lip, drawing a moan from deep in his throat. He managed to release himself from the grip.

"Isn't this where we got in trouble last night?" he sighed.

Blair laughed softly. "And your point is?"

"I thought we were gonna wait until this mess was resolved."

"Do you have to be the voice of reason?"

Just then Jim's cell phone rang.

Jim shrugged his shoulders and laughed "It's fate," he said, as he walked over to retrieve the phone from his jacket. "Ellison. Hi. Yeah, I'm sorry I didn't..."

Blair sat up straight and took a sip of his beer. He watched Jim, trying to decipher the meaning from the one-sided conversation.

Finally, he hung up the phone and returned to the couch. He looked over at Blair. "Rafe's coming over. He may have found something useful".

Blair's eyebrows rose as he pondered the possibilities. Unsure of what to say, he merely responded with "Oh."

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair was puzzled when Jim went over to the front door and pulled it open. Standing in the hallway was his partner. He quickly motioned for him to enter.

"Detective Brian Rafe, this is Blair Sandburg. Blair Sandburg, Detective Rafe." Jim introduced the men.

Blair walked over to shake Rafe's hand awkwardly, before returning to his place on the couch. Jim noticed what seemed to be a lack of interest between the two men but shrugged it off as Blair resumed his position on the couch.

"So have you come up with anything new, Rafe?"

"Possibly." He pulled a piece of paper from his inside pocket and handed it to Jim. "I found that of all the companies that had been posted on the newsgroup, so far, three of them had the passwords linked to the sons of either the President or CEO of the companies."

"That's not necessarily too surprising." Blair offered his opinion. "Depending on the age of these kids, it's most likely that they either had easily identifiable passwords or failed to change the original passwords that came with the computers when they were installed.."

"Any chance of tracking the remaining companies to the hacked passwords?" Jim asked.

"I've been working on it. The companies so far have been unwilling to volunteer that information."

"We can force them with subpoenas, but we can't get those until tomorrow. That's too late," he sighed. "Did you have any luck with the ISP logs?"

"There's nothing that shows anything coming in from the outside. Sorry, Blair," Rafe looked over at the young man, "it appears to be from your ISP."

Jim caught the subtle familiarity between the two men and frowned. Blair hadn't even looked up from his computer screen.

"I should have expected that," he sighed. "These guys are good. They weren't gonna make it easy to be caught."

Jim went in to the kitchen and began to make coffee, preparing for a long night. "Alright, Sandburg, if you were gonna do this and pretend to be somebody else, how would you do it?"

"Oh, Man, there are a lot of ways to do it. Most of them are pretty time consuming and fairly tricky to pull off without getting caught." Blair pondered the question for awhile. "Hang on a minute. Probably the easiest way would be to hack the router."

"That can't be done."

"Where have you been, Rafe?" Blair laughed. "It wouldn't take any real effort at all."

There is was again. Jim looked from one man to the other. They definitely knew each other. But how?

"What are you suggesting here, Chief; that this was an inside job?" Jim questioned.

"Nah, all they need to do is to attach a small box to the router with a simple cable. If they managed to get one of their guys inside the Quantum Internet Services building under any kind of pretext, they could get near the machine and attach it. Then it would lie there passive until they knew I was online. It could be operated by remote control."

"How do you happen to know about this stuff, Sandburg?"

"It's real easy to find out about any of this stuff, Jim. And just because I know how to do something, doesn't mean I want to."

"Jim," Rafe interrupted. "we can send some people down to the Quantum offices and have them search for this box. If they find it, we can have it dusted for prints," he pointed out. Rafe immediately felt the tension forming between the two men and suspected the reason behind it.

The older detective looked over quickly. "Do it," he ordered. He returned his attention to the coffee he was brewing.

Rafe made the call. He glanced down at his watch and frowned before disconnecting the call. Quickly he made another call. Hanging up, he went over to assist his partner.

"The Quantum office is closed and there's no way to reach anybody tonight so we're gonna have to wait until the morning to get in there," he informed them. He grabbed a couple of the mugs from the counter. "Let me help you, Jim."

Jim let him take one but grabbed the other two. "I've got it," he said as he walked over toward the couch. He placed one cup on the coffee table near Blair.

"Okay...what gives?" Blair asked, puzzled.

Jim sat down at the opposite end of the couch; Rafe on the other couch. They looked at each other momentarily. Finally, Jim looked back at Blair. "I don't know, Chief? Maybe you should tell me. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it sure seems like you and my partner here know each other."

Blair nervously looked over at Rafe. Jim watched as Rafe nodded his head in answer to Blair's silent question. Blair looked back toward Jim.



"No, you're not wrong, Jim. Rafe..."

Just then Jim's cell phone rang. He stood up to pick it up. "Ellison. Yeah, Simon. We have reason to..." As he continued talking to his Captain, he saw in the reflection of the glass door to the balcony, Blair talking to his partner in hushed tones. A smile began to creep across his face. Erasing it quickly as he loudly ended the conversation, Jim spun around and returned to his seat on the couch.

"What did Simon want?" Rafe asked.

"He wanted an update and I told him the plan to send people over to search Quantum for that box in the morning. He said he'll let us know if anything comes of it. All right, Sandburg, you were saying..."

A knock on the door provided yet another distraction.

"Now what?" Jim got up to open the door.

Bill Fairchild stood in the doorway. For a moment, Jim debated slamming the door in his face. From his vantage point on the couch, Blair could see Jim tense up. He muttered under his breath, "Man, it's not what you think." before biting his lip in frustration. Jim slowly turned and glanced back at Blair, who looked on in disbelief at Ellison's strange behavior. The detective motioned for the man to enter.

Blair quickly jumped from the couch and approached his friend. "Hey, Man, what are you doing here?"

Fairchild glanced nervously over at Rafe. "Um, Detective Rafe called and asked if I would come over here. He said you and Detective Ellison needed to talk to me."

Sandburg laughed as he glanced over at Rafe. "You never told him, did you?"

"Told me what," Jim asked perplexed.

"Jim, you remember when you were asking me all those questions about Bill and me?"

"Yeah? And why are you changing the subject, Sandburg?"

"I'll get back to that. And you wanted to know about us living together?"

"Yeah. And you said you quit to protect him and then he got another lover and..."

"No, that's not what I said...Bill and I were never lovers. You just assumed that."

"But you said you lived together."

"Yeah, we were roommates."

"So, you aren't gay?"

Blair sighed heavily. "It's a bit late to be asking that question, don't you think? Yes, I'm gay. No, Bill and I weren't lovers. With me so far, Big Guy?"

Jim smiled. "Yeah. So you wanted to protect Bill, because he was gay, from being harassed by this Professor?"

"That was part of it," Blair responded as he got up to refill his cup.

"And the other part," Jim turned toward the kitchen and prompted.

"To protect his lover," he finished.

"So now can we get back to the original question, Chief? How do you know Rafe?"

Blair groaned, just before tossing a spoon at Jim.

"What did I do?" he asked. "Oh..." He finally glanced over at the other couch and noticed Bill and Rafe quietly holding hands, smiling at him.

"You could've told me, Rafe"

"Told you what, about Bill or about Blair?"

"Both."

"There was no reason to tell you about Bill and if I told you about Blair, you would have pulled me off the case and you know it," he reasoned.

"Speaking of which," he looked at his watch "we've only got a few hours left before Simon's deadline to prove Sandburg's innocence. We need to get back to trying to solve this, just in case the boys turn up empty handed at Quantum."

Bill stood up. "I've got some stuff in my car for Blair. Rafe, can you give me a hand?"

Jim walked over to the kitchen counter and put his arms around Blair. "Sorry for the misunderstanding about those two."

He bent down to kiss him, intending to be gentle. Blair, however, had other ideas. His tongue sent shivers of desire racing through the bigger man. It took every ounce of energy for Jim to push him away just before their guests returned.

When the knock came, Blair was back at his laptop while Jim opened the door.

"We've got a surprise for you, Blair. With everything that's been going wrong for you I thought, maybe, you could use something to cheer you up," Bill explained as he entered.

"What are you talking about, Man?"

Rafe looked over at Jim. "I need to explain something to you. You're going to witness an event here. I can assure you that this has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the ongoing investigation."

Blair was on the edge of his seat. "What's going on? Bill?"

"You know that Rafe and Detective Ellison..."

"Jim," he insisted.

"Okay. Rafe and Jim showed up yesterday and confiscated your old computer from the University, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Did you happen to make a copy of what was on the hard drive of that computer before you left?"

"Yeah, except I copied it to the hard drive of the laptop that was at my apartment," he finished dejectedly.

Rafe fished a jewel case out of his pocket and held it up.

Blair's eyes lit up. "You didn't. But how. Oh man, aren't you gonna get in trouble for messing with evidence or something?"

"Nope," Bill grinned at his friend and then looked at the other detective. "I burned a copy of that hard drive after you left Rainier. I figured you might want it some day."

Rafe quickly sought out Jim's eyes. "I went over that hard drive with a fine tooth comb, Jim, there's no evidence of any suspicious activity or covering up deleted files. The only thing on that drive is Sandburg's research, lesson plans and exams."

"Oh, Man, this is great. It'll at least be a start for me to rebuild my files that I lost. I really appreciate this guys. You have no idea."

"So how much do you appreciate it, Sandburg?"

"What?"

"Come on, Sandburg. Do you appreciate me enough to say, buy me a new laptop to replace the one you borrowed and never returned?" Bill asked innocently?

"You're crazy man," Blair shook his head at his friend.

Rafe motioned over to Jim to just play along with whatever was going on.

"I'm serious here, Blair."

"So am I. I returned your damn computer, Man, as soon as I got mine back from the shop. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yeah. I guess you must be right." Bill stood up and mysteriously produced a laptop computer. He changed seats so he could sit on the couch next to Blair and put it on his lap. Opening it, he turned it on. Searching the directories, he finally found what he was looking for.

"Yep, you were right, Blair, this is my computer. Here's my thesis. Man, I thought I'd never find this damn thing." He began to page down a few times skimming through it. "Yeah, I think it's all here. Good, good. I'll be able get back to work on it." He looked over at Rafe. "You have no idea how hard I've worked on this. Hell, you know how devastated I've been that I haven't been able to find it."

"What's your paper on?" Rafe inquired.

"It's all about the effects of Society on a Modern Day Sentinel."

"What?" Blair sputtered, spitting out some of his beer. "Let me see that." He grabbed the computer away from his friend. He pulled up page after page. "Ohmigod, Ohmigod, Ohmigod," he chanted repeatedly.

"Sandburg! We get the point already." Jim had to raise his voice to be heard over Blair's incessant rambling.

"Sorry. I thought this was lost forever. All that work."

"Now maybe you'll actually go for your doctorate, Blair."

"Oh sure, like that's gonna happen. I can't go back to Rainier, Bill, and you know it. Taylor's seen to that. And with this crap hanging over my head."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim felt himself drifting in and out of a dreamlike state. The sensations he was experiencing were both sensual and erotic at the same time. There it was again. Concentrating as hard as he could he almost identify the stimuli. A tongue. Yes. That was it. A tongue circling first one nipple and then the other. Awareness slowly began to creep into his brain. He felt each hair strand as it was pulled across his torso... "What the.. Sandburg, what are you...umphhhfffff"

Blair quickly silenced any protests with his insatiable mouth. Opening his eyes, he found himself pinned beneath the wiry young man.

In one smooth move, Jim flipped them so their positions were reversed and he now held Blair captive. Looking down, he grinned. "Interesting wake up call you've got there, Chief."

"I tried calling your name a few times but you didn't answer, so I thought I'd give this a shot. I've got something I think you should see, Big Guy"

"Let me guess, you've been up all night again on the computer?"

"Well, not all night," he said sheepishly. "I woke up, couldn't get back to sleep and started checking some stuff out."

Jim grabbed his robe and headed downstairs. "Okay, let me get some coffee and then show me what you've got."

He poured himself a cup from the pot already made and padded over to the couch to see what had so intrigued the young engineer.

There on the coffee table he found spread out various email messages.

"Chief?"

"These are the messages that were posted, supposedly by me. They've been bugging me and I couldn't figure out why."

"Because we couldn't figure out how they duplicated your IP address."

"No, Man. It's not just that. I mean, it's the whole message thing. If these guys are gonna give out the passwords; that's one thing. But why the message?"

"I don't know, Chief?"

"Like I said, it's been bugging me. So I've been studying them. And I've figured it out. It's a code."

"A code?"

"Yeah. See, the whole password thing is bogus. By the time this hit the newsgroup, I imagine the original passwords were changed."

"But from the reports that were filed by the various companies that were hit, the passwords had to have been legitimate because they discovered funds were being siphoned off from multiple accounts."

"Precisely, and no doubt they'll find money is continuing to disappear. You see, part of the code translates into another set of active passwords. It's a derivative of the now disabled passwords. But you have to know the code to decipher it." Blair pointed out a sheet of paper he'd printed out that contained the translated code.

"Rafe said that some of the original passwords belonged to the sons of the Presidents or CEOs of these companies. Chances are these new passwords belong to them as well."

"More than likely. The rest of this coded message talks about the plan and specific instructions, but doesn't give a date. It's likely that since they think I'm dead they're using another name to pass the coded messages, I just haven't found it yet," Blair explained.

"Best guess is that it's gotta be soon because these companies aren't gonna sit back and allow their coffers to be drained," Jim pointed out. "Is Wyatt behind this?"

"Nah. He just set up the means for this group to communicate. And of course, you can bet he's being paid very well for his services."

\* \* \* \* \*

He heard the key in the lock as he walked out of the bathroom. Assuming that Jim must have forgotten something, Blair was surprised when a tall brunette woman entered the loft.

She looked at him quizzically. "Excuse me. Who the hell are you and what you doing in my home?"

"Your home. Um, I'm a friend of Detective Ellison's."

"Well, I'm his wife."

"Wife! Damn you, Ellison!" "Um... Mrs. Ellison. My name is Blair Sandburg. I've been working with..."

"Sandburg? I thought you were dead." She look puzzled.

"The reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated, I assure you," he laughed. "I'm helping Detective Ellison catch the real criminals."

"Mr. Sandburg, is it? Well, Mr. Sandburg, I'm sure my husband has matters under control so your services are no longer required."

"But..."

"I'm afraid I really must insist, Mr. Sandburg." She pulled her police credentials from her purse and flashed them in front of his face.

With a loud sigh, he began to gather up his meager belongings. 'All of this was just a game to you, wasn't it, Ellison? Have a little fun at the geek's expense while the wife's away?' Blair quietly shut the door behind him as he left the loft. "You really screwed up this time, Sandburg," he said aloud as he exited onto the street. "Whatever possessed you to think you could trust a cop?" He continued berating himself as he walked away from the building.

In desperation, he made a quick call from a nearby pay phone. "Suse? Yeah, it's me. Listen, can you meet me in the Park in about fifteen minutes? It's a long story. Okay. Thanks." He hung up the phone and hurried to meet her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair collapsed on the first bench he came to. He lowered his head in to his hands, fresh tears burned his eyes. 'How could you lie to me, Jim? He didn't lie to you, Sandburg. Yes, he did. A lie of omission is still a lie,' he reasoned. "Great, Sandburg! Just great!" Blair wiped the moisture away from his cheeks. "Now you're arguing with yourself!"

He didn't see her approach nor was he even aware of her presence until she sat down beside him on the park bench.

"Blair, you look terrible. What happened?"

"Turns out Detective Ellison has a wife. She threw me out of the apartment."

"Oh, sweetie. I'm so sorry." Susie hugged him tightly.

"Yeah, me, too. He sure had me fooled. Anyway, I've got a really big favor to ask. Can I stay at your place for awhile? I'd call Bill, but since Rafe is Ellison's partner I just don't wanna deal with it."

"Sure, I understand. No problem. Um, I don't have a spare key on me right now though."

"That's okay. I really need to go get me some new clothes. So how about I meet you back there when you get off work?"

"That works."

"Oh, one more thing. Can you keep these laptops with you. I don't wanna be dragging them around with me while I'm shopping."

\* \* \* \* \*

At 6:15 that night Detective Ellison received a call at the station. "Detective Ellison? This is Susie Rush, Blair's friend. Have you heard from him?"

"I assume, Ms. Rush, that he's still at my apartment."

"Uh, no, sir. He was supposed to meet me at my apartment when I got home from work at 4:00 today. He hasn't shown up and I'm worried about him."

"What? I told him not to leave the apartment..."

"Apparently, Detective Ellison, your wife ordered him to leave the apartment," she said.

"Dammit" she heard him exclaim under his breath.

"He had nowhere else to go and he was very upset. He came to meet me at lunch time. Blair said he was gonna go shopping for some clothes and then meet me at my apartment."

"I appreciate you calling me, Ms. Rush. As soon as I locate him, I'll see to it that he contacts you."

"Thanks."

Jim closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Rafe looked over at him with concern. "Problems, Jim?"

"Yeah, Carolyn threw Sandburg out of the loft. He was supposed to go and stay with a friend of his but his friend just called to say he never showed up and she's worried."

Rafe immediately got on the phone to see if Bill had heard anything. Hanging up, he glanced over at Jim and shook his head.

Jim was on the verge of leaving to go home to confront Carolyn when she walked into the station.

"How dare you?"

"It's good to see you too, Jim," she shot back at him.

"You had no right to throw Sandburg out of the loft."

"It's my home, too."

"Not any more, it isn't. I owned it before we were married and I got to keep it as part of the settlement. Our divorce was final as of a week ago. You know that, Carolyn."

"I don't have to listen to this from you," she screamed.

"I can have you brought up on B&E charges for that stunt," he spat out angrily, shooting her a venomous look.

"Jim, you'd better take a look at this," Rafe interrupted him frantically.

Jim walked over to Rafe's desk and peered over his shoulder at the computer monitor. There on the screen was an email message sent to the hotmail account Blair had set up.

"This was sent to both of us this morning," Rafe said.

*Hey Guys*

*I found a post on the newsgroup that has some more code in it. Looks like whatever is going down, is going down tomorrow. Does the name Sunrise Patriots mean anything to you? How about Kincaid?*

*The computer network inside the police department network has been compromised. It's possible that the router there has been hacked into as well, but I can't be sure. Look for one of the boxes.*

*B*

"Damn!" Jim glanced over and realized that Carolyn had left. Straightening up, he marched into Simon's office without even knocking first.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later Jim and Rafe met back in Simon's office to brief him on their progress. So far they had located the boxes used to hack into the routers at Sandburg's ISP and the Police Department network. The sons of either the Presidents or CEOs of all but two of the companies that had been attacked had been arrested. The APBs had been issued on the two that had fled. So far, however, the three hackers had still eluded detection and Kincaid was nowhere to be found. Nor, for that matter, was the missing grad student/engineer.

"Jim, what are the chances that there will be more coded messages?" Simon sounded hopeful. He pulled a cigar out of his case and neatly trimmed the end.

"Doubtful, Sir. By now Kincaid must be aware that his financial resources have tapped out. The passwords have been blocked as well."

"Well, he's not getting out of the city. The governor has called out the National Guard to help block all roadways out of the city. The airport, train station, bus station, ferry, everything is covered. Kincaid will be returned to prison."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Jim finally returned to the loft, he was dead on his feet. He had no appetite and dragged himself upstairs to bed. Sleep, however, was elusive. He spent what seemed like hours tossing and turning in bed before finally drifting off into a troubled sleep. When a particularly

vivid nightmare woke him, much earlier than the alarm, Jim decided to forego any further attempts at sleep and got up. He was back at the office by 5:00 a.m.

By 10:00, the office was alive with activity. Jim and Rafe had entered Simon's office. As usual, Simon was enjoying his first cigar of the day. He was prepared today, he brought more than his usual number into the office.

Simon's phone began to ring, startling the men.

"Excuse me. Simon Banks here. Yeah, Joel. What? All right. We'll be right down. Keep him on the line." He quickly hung up the phone and turned towards his two detectives. "Joel's got Kincaid on the line downstairs. He's asking for you, Jim."

Jim didn't wait to hear anything else, he broke out of his Captain's office at a dead run. Not waiting for the elevator, he took the stairs. Simon and Rafe struggled to keep up with him.

Once the three entered Joel Taggart's office, the Major Crimes' Captain signaled that all was in readiness for the call. He pressed the button for the speakerphone.

"What'dya want, Kincaid?" Ellison said, in an attempt to feign disinterest.

"Ah, Detective Ellison, good to hear your voice. Although I'd much prefer it if I could hear it when I was much farther away from your lovely city," the disembodied voice stated.

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen, Kincaid.."

"Oh, but it will, Detective. Let's just say I've got my 'Get out of Jail Free' card with me," he chuckled.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come now, Detective Ellison, you don't think I'd go to all the trouble of planning something without having some sort of contingency plan in mind, do you?"

Jim had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What sort of contingency plan are we talking about here?"

"Hostages, Ellison. One of my newer patriots, Mr. Patterson, was thoughtful enough to provide me some of the personnel from Communication Systems. Oh, and did I mention that his father, Emmett Patterson, the President of the Company is also here?"

"So help me, Kincaid, if you harm any of those people..."

"You're not in any position to make any demands, Detective Ellison. I, however, can and will make demands of you and the Cascade Police Department.

"What do you want, Kincaid?"

"I want two 14 foot trucks, fueled and ready to go. I expect guaranteed clear passage out of town. I'll call back with the coordinates of where to leave them."

\* \* \* \* \*

The blindfold was yanked from her head as she was roughly shoved in to the small room. She barely managed to maintain her balance. Turning around slowly, she recognized a few familiar faces. There were two men, however, she didn't know. Nor did she really want to get to know them better; not as long as they were holding guns. In her haste to put some distance between herself and the men, she failed to notice the person huddled against the wall until she'd backed into him.

"Owwwww," she cried out, landing awkwardly on her ankle. She struggled to fight back the tears that sprang to her eyes. Glancing over, she instantly recognized the person she'd tripped over. "Mr. Patterson?"

Rough hands jerked her to her feet. "Get away from him, girl, unless you want to end up like him."

Hobbling away, she moved toward a couple of her female co-workers. "What happened to him?" she asked them.

"For God sake, Susie, keep your voice down," one girl implored her.

The other spoke softly into her ear. "Apparently, he was brought here last night. I've heard his son did this to him."

"You're kidding? Bobby? But why?"

"Suse?"

She felt the light touch on her arm and spun around. "Blair? Oh My God, Blair! Are you all right?" At that point, her weakened ankle gave out on her and she crumpled to the floor.

He helped her up and together they moved toward the closest wall. Carefully, he lowered her before slumping beside her.

Holding his finger to his lips, he indicated that they needed to be quiet. "I guess I'm okay," he said barely above a whisper.

Susie looked closely at her friend. "You don't look all right. What happened to your eye?" She raised her hand towards his face but he shrank back from her touch.

"Lucky punch," he responded dryly.

She looked around the room once again before returning her attention to her friend. "So where are we?"

"I don't have a clue. I got jumped on my way to the store to pick up some clothes. I must have been knocked unconscious. When I came to, I was blindfolded and tied up."

"So who are these guys and what do they want with us?"

"I don't know about the guys out there," he indicated with a nod of his head. "The two standing over there are Tim Preston and Paul Martin. A couple of the real hackers I told you about. I'm guessing that this place belongs to them since they seem to know it pretty well."

She looked at him curiously. "What do you mean, Blair?"

"Whenever anybody is looking for something, these guys, or Wyatt always tells them where it is."

"Wyatt's the third guy?" she guessed.

"Yeah. This," he gingerly brushed the hair away from his face as he lifted his head slightly, giving her a better view, "was a present from him. Compared to those two, Wyatt's a real piece of work."

Susie barely contained a loud gasp as she observed the purplish bruise that had formed on his cheekbone, just beneath his swollen eye. "How long have you been here, Blair?"

"What time is it now? It must have been just after 3:00 yesterday when they grabbed me." Blair indicated with a nod towards the figure slumped against the opposite wall. "Mr. Patterson was brought in some time last night."

She looked down at her watch. "It's around 10 a.m. I got nailed in the elevator on the way to the office. The guy grabbed me before I knew what was happening and blindfolded me. I think there were a couple others who got thrown in here when I was."

"Did you hear anything when they were bringing you in?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute. Somebody was talking on the phone. I think the guy was talking to the police. I heard him say 'detective something or other.'"

"Detective Ellison?" Blair asked hopefully. "Think Susie, this is important. Did he say Detective Ellison?"

"I'm not sure, but that could be it. That's the guy who's apartment you were staying at, right?"

"Yeah, that's him. Listen, I might have an..."

Blair unexpectedly went silent. Susie looked up, trying to find the cause. She didn't have far to look. One of the hackers had been moving around the room and was now close to where they sat. She began to scoot slowly away from her friend.

The man's movement ceased as he stood in front of her. Glancing down, he saw her rubbing her sore ankle. He reached out and grabbed her arm, hauling her to her feet. "Try walking it off," he commanded. Susie dared not look back as she began moving.

She approached a group of her co-workers and slowed her pace and used them to obstruct the man's view of her. She hoped Blair had been watching her.

Susie wasn't disappointed when she heard his soft voice behind her. "Get near that door. Repeat this message, but you have to whisper it so they can't hear you. Tell Ellison to be looking for a real geek's vice."

She looked over her shoulder at him questioningly. "What?"

"I'll explain it later. It's a clue, but we can't be specific in case they hear you."

"Blair, you're nuts. Like Ellison's really gonna be able to hear me." She shook her head.

"Trust me. If I'm right, there's a chance he might." Blair noticed that one of the two men was again moving in their direction. With a gentle shove, he pushed his friend towards the door. "Move away, now!"

Cautiously, she limped toward the closed door. Spotting two of her office mates standing close by, she moved next to them, her back to the

door.

Abruptly, the door opened and a hand grabbed her shoulder, dragging her backwards. She was quickly blindfolded again and led away.

She felt the phone receiver as it was pressed harshly against her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Before I agree to anything, let me speak to one of the hostages," Ellison demanded. He heard the sound of the phone being passed off.

"Hhhhello?" It was a feminine voice.

"This is Detective James Ellison of the Cascade Police..."

"Detective Ellison, this is Susie Rush."

"Susie, are you all right?"

"I guess so. Mr. Patterson isn't doing so well, I'm afraid," she reported.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He was beaten by his son when we were first taken," she said as calmly as she could under the circumstances.

"Now you just hang in there, Susie. We're gonna do everything we can to get you all out just as fast as we can."

"I know you will. Um...Detective Ellison?"

"Yeah, Susie?"

"They've got Blair, too." The phone was grabbed away from her.

"What?"

"That's right, Ellison, we've got the hippie geek. He cost me quite a lot of money with his interference. I've got three associates here who owe him something as well."

Leaning over the table, Jim pounded his fist into the unforgiving surface for emphasis. "Kincaid, any hostage trade is for all hostages, including Sandburg." "I swear, Kincaid, you harm one hair on the kid's head, and so help me... Wha??"

In the background, Jim thought he could detect a faint female voice. He tried to focus in on it. "Blair said you should look for a real geek's vice. Look for a real geek's vice. Look for a real geek's vice." Over and over she whispered the words. He could hear the voice growing more and more distant. Then he heard a door slam.

"Why, Detective, I'm touched by your concern for the young man. I'll get back to you on that point.

"Kincaid, you listen to..."

The phone call was abruptly terminated with Jim left staring at the speaker.

\* \* \* \* \*

Susie was still whispering when the man behind her roughly pulled the blindfold off. "What's that you're saying, girl?"

She looked down at the ground trying to think quickly. "I was just praying that I get out of this alive," she answered quietly, hoping he didn't notice how violently her knees had begun to shake.

"You're gonna need more than prayers," he laughed as he pushed her forward before slamming the door closed.

Leaning against the wall, Susie closed her eyes tightly.

"What happened?"

She turned toward the familiar voice. "You were right. It was your friend the detective they were talking to. They had me talk to him for a minute," she reported.

"Did you give him the message?" Blair asked urgently.

"Well, I was whispering as I was brought back here," she said flippantly. "I mean really, Blair, there's no way Ellison could hear me. There was this goon right behind me and I was talking so softly, even he didn't hear me."



"We'll keep our fingers crossed."

She looked at her friend and just shook her head. "What did that message mean, anyway?"

Blair snickered as he nodded towards the two hackers still in the room. "These guys have their toys outside the house. I've been hearing them talking about them all night."

She stared at him blankly. "Toys?"

"Sports cars," he grinned. "I'm hoping Ellison can trace the registration or something to find a location."

"Why couldn't you have just told me to tell him to check for sports cars?"

"If anybody heard you, they might have figured that out."

"Well, I sure hope your friend figures out that cryptic clue. Assuming he even heard me," she sighed.

Blair noticed that Preston was drawing closer to where they stood. Wisely, he chose to move away from his friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

He stood up and turned to face the other occupants of the office. "That had to be Susie who was whispering that message."

"What message, Jim?" Simon looked bewildered. "I didn't hear anything."

"She said that Sandburg told her to tell me to look for a real geek's vice." He looked over at Rafe, who sat with a blank look on his face.

"Get real, Jim." Rafe looked up in mock offense. "Do I look like a geek to you?"

"They say that computer geeks like to eat junk food all the time," Joel volunteered. The others just stared at him. "What? I was just thinking that maybe their location is somewhere near a distributor of typical junk food. Or a donut shop."

"All right. While you three ponder the whereabouts of Twinkies and Ho-Hos, I'm going to see what I can do to meet these demands of Kincaid's so we'll be ready to move when he calls back," Simon informed them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim and Rafe were pouring through the Cascade yellow pages trying to locate every distributor, every vending machine supplier, every donut shop, anything that remotely resembled junk food. So far, however, they were turning up blanks. There were no empty buildings, nor recently rented out spaces anywhere nearby any of these establishments.

Reluctantly, they found themselves back at square one. While they were trying to solve the clue that Sandburg had left them, Rafe's cell phone rang.

"Rafe here. Hey, Bill. Yeah, they've taken Blair. We're doing what we can but we don't know where to start. Blair left us a clue but we don't know what it means. Something about a real geek's vice. What? You're sure? Ah, babe, you may have just saved Blair's life. Yeah, I'll talk to you later." He quickly hung up and when he looked over at Jim's desk he found a pair of steel blue eyes already focused on him.

"Well?"

"Bill says Blair told him a long time ago that he would never be a real geek because a true geek's vice is they have to have a sports car."

"Rafe, you start calling around to all the sports car dealerships in town to see if any of these three purchased a car in the last two months? I'm gonna have records check some tags for me."

Thirty minutes later, they were no closer than when they started. Rafe had called every dealership in town that sold sports cars, or any car that by any stretch of the imagination could be considered a sports car. Jim had run checks on the vanity license plates of Wyatt Earp and Dark Lord and turned up nothing.

He had just about run out of ideas when Jim decided to play a hunch. He went back and looked over the email message Sandburg had sent to Rafe and him that morning. Attached to it was the newsgroup post of one of the trio of hackers. When Jim applied the ROT13 code breaker to the message, he discovered the alias the man was using - - 'Cracker'. Quickly he called in the name to records to check on the possible registration of such plates.

They hit pay dirt. The plates were issued on a 2001 Blue BMW Z3 . The car was registered to a Timothy Presston who bought the car in Olympia and paid cash for it.

'Gotcha, Preston.' Jim chuckled to himself. 'Thought you covered your tracks by going out of town and paying cash for it, huh? Nice touch misspelling your name too,' he smirked. 'But you got lazy. Didn't wanna have to drive all the way back to Olympia for the tags, so you registered it to an actual address in Cascade.' Jim was visibly smiling now. He turned around abruptly when he felt the hand on his shoulder.

"Jim?" Rafe appeared bewildered.

"I've got an address," he quickly explained. "Sandburg's clue paid off." The smile began to deteriorate and Ellison's partner readily guessed the reason.

"He's gonna be all right, Jim."

"I sure hope so, Rafe. I sure hope so..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wyatt, come in. Have a seat." Kincaid motioned to an empty chair at the dining room table.

Wyatt looked at him suspiciously, but sat down. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. I just thought you should know that we're gonna be moving out tonight. We're gonna take the hostages with us."

"You're gonna leave Sandburg, right? That was the deal..."

"Sandburg's all yours just like I promised. However, I think the time has come that you and your men should take him to the basement and wait for our signal. I'll let you know when we're pulling out."

"Fine, fine..."

"And Wyatt, you do realize that Mr. Sandburg will have to be killed? Kincaid watched the man's face carefully.

"What? You never said anything about having to kill anybody, Kincaid."

"He's too dangerous to be allowed to live. It could jeopardize our organization. Now, if you don't think that you and your friends have the stomach for such things, we can just take care of him now," Kincaid offered.

"No, no," he sighed. "I'll take care of it. That little shit owes me, so I should have the honors."

"See that you do. Trust me, Wyatt, you don't want to cross me," Kincaid assured the man.

Realizing he'd been dismissed, Wyatt stood up and approached the small room where the hostages were being held.

Within a few minutes, Blair was dragged from the room and forced into the basement by Wyatt. His two partners followed closely behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Within a couple of hours Detective Ellison found himself right back in the thick of things, as if he'd never left Major Crimes. He, along with Rafe and Simon, had joined forces with Joel and the detectives of Major Crimes. Together with the Cascade Police Department Swat Team, they were assembled at an elementary school located within two blocks of the location of Kincaid and his men.

"Captain Taggart, the report we got from Comm Sys was that twelve of their personnel were taken. That includes the President, but not his son, who is to be considered a hostile," Rafe announced to the head of Major Crimes, as well as the others assembled in the school's cafeteria.

Jim looked up from his computer screen. "There's thirteen altogether, Sir," he amended.

"What?" Joel's head snapped upright.

"Sandburg, Sir. He's the thirteenth hostage."

"Right, right..." Taggart's voice trailed off as he resumed scanning the blueprints of the house in question before directing his attention back to the group convened at the kitchen table. "Do we have any reliable information as to how many men Kincaid might have in there?"

Henry Brown stood up and pointed to the blueprint and survey. "He's got five patrolling the perimeter. This is a fairly small house, Captain. With twelve hostages already inside, that's not gonna leave a lot of room for Kincaid's men. This is a guess, but I'd say between five and ten men inside."

Simon glanced at his watch. It was almost 6:00. He looked over at Jim. "Think he'll move tonight or wait 'till tomorrow?"

"I think he's going to move tonight. I also think he's got fewer men than we originally calculated and he needs the cover of darkness to hide that fact," Jim predicted.

"It also takes out some of our shooters," Joel countered.

"He's counting on that fact," Ellison said. "But something just doesn't add up here."

"Jim?" Simon walked around the table until he was standing directly behind the detective, peering over his shoulder at the computer screen.

"Simon, this is a residential street. It doesn't make sense for Kincaid to have two large trucks pulling up here to load up the hostages and all his men."

"There aren't enough vehicles around that house now to transport all the hostages," Joel reasoned.

"Which means that either Kincaid has no intention of transporting the hostages because he's planning on killing them here or he's somehow gonna get more vehicles here before he moves." Jim rifled through the stack of newly developed photographs on the table. Selecting one, he slid it across the table toward Captain Taggart. "That was taken less than an hour ago, Sir. It clearly shows only four automobiles."

Joel looked at the men stationed at various points throughout the room. "Suggestions, anyone?"

"Sir, I propose we engage Kincaid at the house before he has a chance to move anywhere," the head of the Swat Team advised. "If Detective Ellison is right, and Kincaid's numbers are at their lowest at the current time, it would be prudent to strike while the odds are in our favor."

"You do that and Kincaid's gonna use every one of those hostages as human shields. I can almost guarantee that." Jim angrily pushed his chair back so hard when he jumped up, it crashed to the floor.

"Gentlemen, I suggest we table this discussion until we hear back from Kincaid. In the meantime, I'd like everyone to compile a list of possible scenarios to consider and corresponding solutions," Joel recommended.

Jim stormed out of the room and headed down the corridor.

"Jim, wait!" his partner implored.

He halted his long strides and spun around, shoulders sagging.

"I know you're worried about him," Rafe said quietly. "Hell, I am, too. We'll think of..."

"Ellison!" Simon's voice echoed off the narrow hallway as he caught up to his detectives. "You have got to keep that temper of yours in check. You're not gonna do anyone any good if they send you home."

Jim looked over at his Captain, fully cognizant of the truth behind the harsh words. "I know, Sir. I hate feeling so out of control."

"Then I'd suggest you get back in control. Joel's a good man. He'll listen to you if you give him a reason."

"Simon, I..." Words began to fail him. "He's gotta be remembering the last time we dealt with Kincaid."

"Maybe. Let's just wait and see what happens when the call comes in."

\* \* \* \* \*

They didn't have long to wait. Within the hour, the call came in on Taggart's line which had been set to transfer to their location.

"Captain Taggart. Yes, Kincaid, I've been waiting for your call. Everything is set up for you. Hold on, I'll get him." Joel put the man on hold. Looks like it's a go for tonight. He nodded in Jim's direction. "He wants to talk to you, Jim." He engaged the speakerphone.

"I'm here, Kincaid. What do you want?" Jim asked impatiently.

"I'm making sure my trucks will be ready to roll, Ellison."

"They'll be ready. Where and When?"

"I'll have the coordinates and time faxed over within the hour. The drivers will drop off the trucks, then get out and walk. Do I make myself clear? If I so much as see another person around there other than these two drivers, the hostages all die."

"And once you and your men board the trucks, you'll leave the hostages behind?"

"Sorry, Ellison, it doesn't work that way. If all goes well, I'll drop the hostages off once we have safely left the state."

"And we're supposed to just trust you, Kincaid?"

"I don't see as you have much choice, Ellison. None of your fancy tricks like last time we met. All that got you was a trip to the hospital. How long were you in there?" he goaded the detective.

"That's not important. You were brought down, Kincaid." Jim took a deep breath, struggling to maintain his eroding confidence.

"At what cost? I seem to recall there were quite a few officers who were seriously injured that day; ended a number of careers, too. You try something stupid like that again, Ellison, and there will be innocent civilians who will be sacrificed this time."

"The trucks will be there, Kincaid," Jim said quietly, not wanting to be reminded of his dismal failure the last time he'd locked horns with this dangerous man.

"I'm glad that you see things my way."

"What about Sandburg? Will he be among the hostages?"

"No, I don't believe he will be. My associates seem to feel that he needs to answer for previous crimes. You'll have to negotiate with them directly concerning Mr. Sandburg."

"But..."

Once again the phone line was abruptly disconnected.

Jim walked quietly toward the front door.

"Where are you going?"

He turned around to face his Captain. "I'll be back shortly, Simon. There's something I need to take care of first." He exited the building quickly before anyone could think to stop him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kincaid had one of his men summon Wyatt Clark from the basement. He was talking to one of his men when the hacker walked into the room. Swiftly dismissing his soldier, he turned to face Clark.

"Wyatt, we're going to be pulling out in the next couple of hours. When we do, our business dealings will be concluded."

"I understand, Mr. Kincaid. We will be moving on ourselves in the morning," Clark hastened to assure him.

"After you wrapped up that last of it, that is..."

"Sir?"

"Sandburg," Kincaid reminded him. Grabbing the gun lying on the table, he slid it over toward Clark. "You can finish him off with this."

Wyatt gingerly held the gun, unaccustomed to its weight. "You really think this is necessary?"

"That is an order, Clark! Mr. Sandburg is a loose end that has to be taken care of." Kincaid stared at the man through cold, emotionless eyes.

The hacker took a deep breath. "I understand." He turned around and began walking slowly out of the room.

"See that you do." Kincaid spoke to the man's retreating back. Looking over toward the far entrance to the room, he motioned with his head for one of his soldiers to step closer.

Once Wyatt was out of sight, Kincaid motioned with his hand for silence. He waited. He finally heard the sound he was searching for - a door opening and closing. He began speaking with the man next to him.

"John, you heard we're pulling out soon."

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm not sure that I can trust Mr. Clark to complete his assigned task. I've always felt that he and his men have divided loyalties. Nothing can stand in the way of advancing this organization. Therefore, John, I'd like for you to stay behind after we leave and take care of things for me here."

"I understand, Sir. I'm to eliminate Sandburg?"

"I want you to take care of all four of them, John. No witnesses, no loose ends."

"Yes, Sir," the soldier responded automatically.

A sound was heard from the next room, followed by a door opening. A lone figure stood at the entrance of the room. "I'll show you divided loyalties, Kincaid." Wyatt Clark aimed the borrowed gun carefully and pulled the trigger. The only response was a feeble click.

Kincaid merely shook his head, drew his own weapon and fired. Wyatt crumpled to the ground, shock frozen on his face.

The gunshot drew several men into the room simultaneously. Kincaid motioned to the body on the floor. "Clean that mess up," he ordered as he walked over to where John remained standing. "This changes nothing. You are still to carry out my orders after we've left."

The man nodded mutely.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kincaid apparently did make one change however - - his timetable was moving more rapidly than expected. The fax came through only a half hour later. According to the instructions, they had approximately one hour to leave the two trucks at the drop off point.

Joel Taggart made the necessary phone call to position the trucks. Jim walked back into the house, just as Joel was hanging up the phone. He acknowledged the detective's presence with a nod before turning his attention on the opened map on the table.

"Trucks are on their way," he said tersely, pointing to a spot on the map. "They should be there in approximately twenty minutes."

Simon studied the location momentarily. "My guess is they're gonna head towards the border." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his detective move towards him. "What'dya think, Jim?"

"That seems most likely, Sir," Jim agreed. Lifting his head slightly, he addressed Taggart, who was standing opposite them at the table. "Sir, as I pointed out before, they don't have the necessary number of vehicles to move the hostages to this remote location. It stands to reason that either Kincaid is bringing in more vehicles to move these people or else he's planning to kill them here."

"Jim, you don't think Kincaid would..."

"Simon, Kincaid's capable of almost anything. We all know that. However, I tend to believe he wants those hostages alive, at least for the time being. He needs them to insure safe passage out of the state. I think we should let them load the hostages on the trucks and then strike before they have a chance to move out."

"And risk the lives of all those hostages? Kincaid's already said if he sees any sign of us, he's gonna kill them all. This is basically an open field. It'll be virtually impossible to hide as many men as we're gonna need. No, no...this is an unacceptable risk."

"But, Captain..."

"I'm sorry, Jim. I've noted your recommendation. However, I'm just not willing to sacrifice that many lives. I think it's wiser to hit him at a strategic point en route."

Jim practically had to bite his tongue to hold his temper in check. He left the room before he could say something he'd regret.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul slowly tried turning the doorknob but it didn't budge. "I can't believe they locked us in here," he ranted as he descended the staircase to the basement.

"They don't want you finding out what's going on, Man. Don't you get it?"

"Shut up, Sandburg. I don't believe you."

"Paul, will you just face facts, Man. I heard them. You heard the damn shot. We all did. Those guys up there were talking about Kincaid blowing Wyatt away."

"Tim, you didn't hear nothing," Martin angrily responded.

"Get a grip, Man. We're probably next." Tim anxiously paced about the room.

"Yeah, and just what are we supposed to do about it?" Paul stood in front of his frantic friend, halting his further movement. "They've got guns. We don't."

"There's another way."

Two pairs of eyes locked on the bowed head, seated on the worn couch.

"Okay, genius, what's your idea?"

Blair immediately stood up and walked toward the bookcase on the far wall. "Is there a way to get online without them detecting us?" He stood pointing at the laptop computer lying between several large books.

Tim began to look around the room. "The guy we're renting from said something about a separate phone line down here. I think this was his office. I don't even know if that thing works."

"Here it is," Blair said a moment later, after pulling the bookcase away from the wall a couple of inches.

"So what is your great plan, hero?" Paul said, crossing the room towards the two men.

"If I can get online, I can try to get a message to Detective Ellison. He'll..."

"No cops, Sandburg. That's just as bad as..."

"Paul, we don't have much of a choice here. Kincaid's gonna have us killed. They've already killed Wyatt."

"You don't know that, Tim."

"You heard the shot, Man. You figure it out. I say we let the kid contact this guy and then we take our chances. Maybe we can cut a deal. Right, kid?"

"Huh, um sure, I'll talk to Ellison and see if he can do something." Blair glanced over at Martin, waiting for a sign that he could proceed. A reluctant nod was his response.

Luck was with him when the computer powered up with no problem. However, he soon was beginning to curse that same luck when he encountered difficulties with logging on through an internet provider.

"Dammit, I can't get it to recognize my ISP," Blair groaned.

"Is AOL installed on there?" Tim asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Here, let me." Moments later they heard the familiar whine of the modem connecting to the service. "It's a junk account I keep," Tim explained when he saw the questioning faces on the two men.

As soon as they were in, Blair resumed control and quickly typed a message to the detective.

"What are the chances Ellison's even online?" Tim asked quietly, afraid to get his waning hopes up.

"I don't know," Blair had to admit reluctantly. "Hold on a second. Let me check something." His hands flew across the keyboard as he quickly brought up the instant message option. Within moments he was able to send a message through. His response was almost instantaneous.

*Blair, where are you?*

*No time, Man. Find Jim and Rafe. Matter of Life and Death. They need to read hotmail!!!*

*Understood!*

"What's all that about?" Paul asked, after reading the brief exchange.

"This guy's a friend of mine. He'll know how to reach the detectives," Blair assured them. 'Please, Jim, get this message. I really could use some help here, Man,' he thought frantically.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jim, you're not giving me much choice here. I can order you to go home," Simon tried to rationally point out.

"Captain...Simon," he begged, "you've gotta know I'm right about this. It's the..."

Just then Rafe's cell phone rang loudly, momentarily breaking the tension surrounding the men.

The younger detective moved apart from the group. "Rafe here. Bill, I...What? Yeah, he's here." Holding the phone away from his mouth, he yelled at Ellison. "Jim, Bill says Blair's trying to contact us. Check the hotmail account...." Jim broke into a dead run toward the cafeteria, Simon and Rafe on his heels.

"Can he still talk to Blair?" Jim shouted over his shoulder.

"Bill, are you still in contact with Blair? Good. Tell him we're gonna get online. You might have to keep talking to him for us. Okay, hang on, let's see what we've got."

Jim rapidly logged into the hotmail account and found the new message. Rafe and Simon, having caught up to him, read over his shoulder.

*Guys*

*Think Kincaid's killed Wyatt. Heard a shot fired and Wyatt never returned. Tim heard guys talking. We're locked in basement. Me, Tim and Paul. Think they're planning on killing us. A little help would be nice.*

*B*

"Rafe, let me talk to Bill." He was immediately handed the phone. "Ask Sandburg how many guys Kincaid has in the house." Jim heard the sounds of the keystrokes as they were typed out.

"He doesn't know for sure. He's been blindfolded around those guys. He's heard maybe four or five different voices but thinks there's more."

Jim began scribbling notes on an empty notepad he grabbed from the middle of the table. "Okay, ask him if the other hostages are split up or are they in the same room."

After a moment's delay Bill responded. "They were in the same room but Blair's been separated from them for awhile."

"Are there any windows in the basement? If so, have them check to see if anybody is walking around out there. And Bill...tell him to be careful if they're opening windows."

"I will. Hang on a minute."

Jim began to drum his fingers on the table top, his anxiety growing with each passing moment of silence.

"Jim, he says there's one window that leads to the backyard. They cracked it open and didn't hear or see anything."

"Good," he sighed softly. Ellison glanced quickly at his watch. Time was growing short.

Joel hung up his phone and noticed the three men huddled around the computer screen. He walked over to them.

"Simon, what's going on?" he looked puzzled.

"Jim's got a link with Sandburg. Kincaid's apparently killed Clark already and Sandburg thinks he, Martin and Preston are next."

"Let me talk to..."

"No," Jim said firmly. "I want to be in charge in getting Sandburg out of there."

"Jim, you know I..."

"Joel," Simon put his arm around his fellow Captain's shoulders, gently leading him away. "Let Jim handle this part of it. We both know he can handle it. You worry about getting the rest of the hostages freed."

Joel turned back and watched the detective as he alternated between his phone conversation and rapidly scribbling notes on his pad. He simply nodded his acquiescence at Simon.

"Simon!" Jim shouted at his Captain. "Sandburg says they've hacked into the other phone line in the house. Kincaid's just gotten the word the trucks arrived at their destination. He's called for vans to pick up the hostages."

Joel walked quickly toward the group of men at the far end of the room and began barking out orders.

"Jim, Blair wants to know if they should crawl out the window and wait for you?" Bill asked

"No, tell him they should stay put. Leave the window open just a crack," Ellison ordered.

The response was to be expected. "He's not real crazy about that idea."

"Tell him I won't..." Jim's voice faltered slightly. He felt the stares from his Captain and his partner. He closed his eyes when Rafe's hand lightly squeezed his shoulder.

"He understands, Jim," Bill said softly.

"Thanks. Tell him I'm gonna stay on this phone until I get there. He shouldn't break the connection unless he absolutely has to." Jim handed the phone back to Rafe as he took Simon aside. "Captain, I'm going in there to get them out. I can catch up with you afterwards."

"I'm staying with you, Jim," Simon said firmly.

"Count me in," Rafe added, momentarily interrupting his phone conversation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two large passenger vans pulled up outside the small house. Several men walked up to the front door and were quickly admitted.

Jim waited for the man patrolling the backyard to move around to the side of the house before he quietly scaled the short, chain link fence. Moving rapidly towards the light shining through the solitary basement window, he lifted the phone to his face. "Bill, tell Blair, I'm outside and I'm coming in." He stood in the shadows, awaiting the response.

"He says to hurry."

"Got it." Disconnecting the call, he stuffed the phone in his pants pocket and he knelt by the window. Carefully, he pushed it open and slid inside. He was in the process of pulling it closed when he felt two arms snake around his waist. Closing his eyes briefly, he patted one of the

trembling hands. "It's okay, Chief."

Blair released his grip on Jim as the larger man spun around to study the room. He pointed at the two men standing near the computer screen. "Jim, that's Paul Martin and Tim Preston. They helped me and they want..."

"Later, Chief. Right now we need to deal with Kincaid's men. They're moving the hostages outside right now."

"How do you know that," Tim looked perplexed.

"He probably saw them going outside before he came in here," Blair explained away easily.

Jim glanced down at Blair, his eyebrows raised as he silently questioned the young man's behavior. Lifting his finger to his lips for silence, he moved closer toward the stairs.

All at once he reacted. Motioning at the three of them to move closer, he whispered to them. "You guys stand over there," he pointed to a remote part of the room, away from the line of sight of the stairs.

Rapidly they moved to where the detective had indicated. The sound of the heavy front door slamming could be heard over their pounding heartbeats. Blair watched as Ellison positioned himself beside the staircase. He could clearly make out the words as Jim mouthed them. "Trust me."

After what seemed like a lifetime the door to the basement opened. A man's voice called out to them. "Okay, guys, everybody's cleared out. You can come out of there now."

Jim shook his head and motioned for silence.

"Preston, Martin?" the man beckoned them again. Again, he was greeted with silence.

"Shit!" he exclaimed as he made his way down the stairs.

Halfway down, he felt a hand grasp his ankle but it was too late to prevent his forward motion. He fell forward, landing hard on his face, the gun in his hand falling harmlessly to the floor below.

Paul leapt from behind the couch and moved to retrieve the weapon. Jim stepped out in front of him, his weapon drawn. "Don't even think about it," he said simply. Paul retreated.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tim Preston and Paul Martin were placed into a waiting police cruiser when the men returned to the deserted school building. Blair approached Jim as the vehicle drove off.

"I'm going with you."

"It's too dangerous, Chief, I can't allow..."

"Kincaid's got one of my friends, Jim. I'm going with you." Quietly Blair walked over to the parked Expedition.

Ellison sighed as he relented. He caught up to Simon as he was about to get into his car and nodded to Rafe, who sat in the passenger seat. "We need to keep in touch by cell phone only, Captain. We don't know if Kincaid's still tapped into the Department phones and radios."

"I'll contact you as soon as Joel lets me know Kincaid's reached the rendezvous point," he said as he slid in to the driver's seat and started the engine.

Jim ran back to his vehicle and climbed in. With a quick glance at his passenger, he turned over the ignition.

\* \* \* \* \*

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, while maneuvering through the familiar streets of Cascade, Jim glanced over at the shivering young man. Reaching out, he gently covered Sandburg's hand with his own. Blair snatched his hand away, as if he'd been burned, trying to scoot closer toward the door.

"Are you okay, Chief?" Concerns etched across his chiseled features.

"Yeah, I'm all right. I guess it's all just starting to hit me now. How close we came to..." His voice trailing off as he stared out the window, unwilling to make eye contact.

Jim watched him for a moment as he slowly curled his fingers into a fist, removing his hand altogether from the passenger seat. He had a hunch something else was bothering Blair.

"Listen, Chief, I'm sorry Carolyn threw you out of the loft. She had no right to..."



"She had every right, Man. She's your wife, for God's sake."

"Was', Sandburg. Past tense."

"What are you talking about?" Blair's head turned sharply to his left as he studied the man sitting next to him.

"She's my ex-wife, Chief. We're divorced. She had no business even being at the loft, let alone doing what she did to you."

His entire body visibly relaxed. Blair moved away from the door he'd been crowding so tightly. "I'm sorry, I just..."

"You thought I'd lied to you," Jim finished softly.

"No, I...well, yeah, I guess I..."

"You should have called me and told me what happened."

"She just hit me with it, like out of the blue. I thought we were getting pretty close and then she lays that on me. It was a total knee jerk reaction," he tried to explain.

"Carolyn always did manage to bring out that response in people," Jim sympathized with the young man. "Speaking of getting close, Chief. I've gotta ask you...what made you have your friend whisper that clue? How did you..."

"You did hear it? I knew it! This is great..."

"Whoa, slow down there, Chief. You're losing me here." Ellison had the eerie feeling he was crossing over into the Twilight Zone.

"I've been observing you while we've been together. Some of the stuff you pick up on is like so totally off the charts."

"Huh?"

"Stuff I've been studying, Man. It's all about..."

The phone's shrill ring cut off the conversation.

Jim reached down, retrieving the phone. "Ellison. Yeah, Simon." He glanced over at Blair. "Which way are they headed?" Jim glanced over at the clock on his dash. "Simon, that road leads toward Tacoma. If we take Rt. 612, we can make up some time. Okay, call if you hear anything further." Punching the button, he ended the conversation.

"So what's up?"

"They've got two trucks, Chief. It looks like they're headed into Tacoma. It's probably a safe bet Kincaid wants to head North across the border into Canada."

"Why do I get the impression there's something you're not telling me here?"

Jim looked over briefly, not daring to allow his eyes to fully lock with those of his inquisitive passenger. "Captain Taggart and his men are following at a safe distance. I have a hunch that Kincaid's gonna have those trucks split up at some point. He's got no intention of taking those people into Canada, Chief."

"He's gonna release them first, right?"

Jim sighed deeply. "That's not his standard operating procedure, Sandburg. He doesn't like to leave any witnesses. Look what he almost did to..."

"Don't remind me, Man." A cold chill swept over Blair's body, causing him to shiver. "You've gotta do something, Jim. Susie's on that truck," he begged.

"I'm working on that, Chief."

\* \* \* \* \*

They were approximately a mile outside the city limits when the next call came through. "Ellison. Then we're ahead of Joel and the others. We'll need to push it so we don't lose him in town. Simon, make your next right. Yeah, this is the road they were headed in on. Okay, you call Joel." Disconnecting the call, he tossed it on the console.

They continued the trip in relative silence until Ellison abruptly jammed his foot hard on the accelerator pedal. Pulling out into the passing lane he cruised past his Captain's vehicle and sped on ahead.

"What the hell?"

"I see the trucks, Chief"

Blair looked up the highway at the taillights in the distance. "How can you tell it's them?"

"Before the trucks were delivered to the drop off point, I went over there and put holes in the taillight covers. It's an old trick I learned from a PI friend of mine years ago," he smiled.

"And you can see the light shining through the holes from here?"

As soon as he had gained about seven or eight car lengths on Bank's car, he began to decelerate. As expected, his phone began to ring.

Jim tried to ignore the call.

"You gonna answer that or what?"

"You answer it. Tell Simon I thought I saw them up there."

"Thanks a lot, Man." He leaned over snatching the phone. "Hello, Detective Ellison's phone. Yes, Sir. He's a little busy right now, Captain. He thinks he saw the trucks up ahead, Sir. Yes, Sir. I'll tell him, Sir." He hung up the phone and looked over at Jim. "He says you're crazy."

Blair's eyes widened once they reached the first traffic light. There in front of them was a large truck with a small hole in the right tail light. "We've gotta talk about this."

"Later, Chief." He handed the phone to Blair, as he checked his rear view mirror. "Call Simon. Tell him the trucks are in front of me."

Blair quickly dialed the number Jim gave him. "Captain Banks. The trucks are in front of us. Yes, Sir."

"Shit!"

"What?"

"They've pulled into separate lanes. They're gonna split up."

Blair quickly glanced from one truck to the other. "Can you tell which truck has the heavier load?"

"What? I can't..."

"Look at 'em. Does one look heavier than the other?"

Jim's vision shifted between the two vehicles. "The one of the left."

"Follow that one."

He quickly moved over into the correct lane and signaled for a turn. Jim grabbed the phone from Blair's hand. "Simon, take a left at this light and follow me. The trucks are splitting up. I think the hostages are in this truck. Call Joel. Have him and the Swat Team follow the other truck straight on North Union Street. If my hunch is correct, Kincaid and most of his men are on that one."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim occasionally changed lanes and speed so as to not alert the truck driver of his constant shadow. He was beginning to wonder where this trail was going to lead when he spotted a row of warehouses up ahead with a sign indicating the road ended. Snapping on his turn signal, he quickly turned onto the last street with Simon following close behind. A parallel street ran behind the warehouses and Jim maneuvered the Expedition rapidly down the road.

Jumping out of the vehicle he turned toward Blair. "Stay here, Chief." Drawing his gun from his holster, he ran between the buildings to catch up with Simon and Rafe.

The three men stood silently at the edge of the building, just out of sight of the occupants of the truck's cab. Jim peered cautiously around the corner before moving back to his Captain's side.

"There's three men inside the cab, Sir. Kincaid's one of them."

"Damn. Is this the truck with his men?"

"No, I can hea...No, the hostages are here. I'm sure of it, Captain."

Simon just stared at his detective. "I sure hope you're right about this."

Sneaking around the back of the truck, they waited to ambush the men when they left the cab. The task was made easier when only two men rounded the side of the truck. Kincaid chose to wait in the passenger seat. Jim and Simon rapidly dispatched the men with their fists, sending them into unconscious oblivion, while Rafe applied the handcuffs.

Simon prepared to raise the louvered door of the truck. He looked at Rafe standing at the back of the truck, gun raised. "Ready?" he

whispered. A nod was his response. He glanced over his shoulder at Jim, who stood at the side of the truck, ready to charge the front of the truck, should Kincaid be alerted and try to drive away. "Ready, Jim?"

"Yeah."

He pushed the door up, raising his own weapon as he did so. He took a deep breath and held it.

A cursory inspection of the interior cabin assured the relative safe condition of all twelve hostages. As they were unloaded from their temporary prison, Jim crept closer to the cab.

The driver's side door was yanked opened, a gun poked in his face. "Out of the truck, Kincaid," Ellison ordered.

"This isn't over, Ellison," he said, as he fingered his own gun, lying on the seat, out of view.

The opposite door of the cab opened, Simon Banks pointed his own weapon at the fugitive's chest. "Yes, it is." Reaching in, he grasped the firearm and removed it.

\* \* \* \* \*

With his hand on Kincaid's head, Ellison pushed the man inside the police cruiser and shut the door. The other men already loaded, the vehicles sped off amidst blazing lights and sirens.

Simon pocketed his cell phone as he approached his detectives. "That was Joel. The remainder of Kincaid's men were apprehended by the State police about eight miles outside of town. He's gonna be heading back to Cascade as soon as they finish up. Listen, why don't you two take the next couple of days off, you've earned it," Simon offered generously to his detectives.

Rafe leaned against the passenger side of Simon's car. "Thanks, Captain."

"What about the reports, Sir?" Jim questioned cautiously.

"Jim..." His partner punched him in the shoulder.

Simon only laughed. "I'll call you if there's anything that requires your immediate attention," he said, as he slid in the driver's seat.

He watched as the car drove off before turning his attention to the large tour bus currently being boarded by the former hostages. Jim readily located Sandburg, standing off to the side, hugging his friend Susie.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll stop by tomorrow to pick up my stuff, Suse."

"I'll take that to mean you don't need to crash at my place tonight," she snickered.

Blair turned slightly and watched Jim approach his vehicle. "Nah, I think I'll be okay," he grinned.

"Guess you guys got things straightened out, huh?"

"We're working on it."

"He seems like a good guy, Blair, but if he does anything to hurt you, I'll kick his butt for you."

"Thanks, Suse," he chuckled, pulling her into another hug. Then kissing her quickly, Blair walked to the open door of the bus.

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"You'd better," she laughed. "And I want details." Spinning around, she climbed the stairs

"Don't hold your breath on that," he called after he disappearing figure.

He waited until she was seated, waved, and then began to jog towards the man standing alongside the SUV.

"We could've given her a ride home, Chief."

"I tried to tell her that but she wanted to ride the bus." Blair walked around to the passenger side and climbed in.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, Jim, besides your incredible eyesight and hearing, what other heightened senses do you have?"

Jim almost choked on the coffee they'd just picked up. "What?"

"Come on, Man. I've been around you for a few days now. I can't believe I didn't catch on sooner. You saw those small holes in the tail lights of the trucks from quite a distance. And you admitted you heard Susie whispering that clue I told her to give you."

"Now hold on there, Einstein. Just because I can see and hear a little better than average..."

"A little better than average! That was like so off the charts. It was unbelievable! What about the other senses? Smell? Taste? Touch?"

Jim sighed heavily. "You don't give up, do you? What's the big deal anyway?"

"You remember when Bill and Rafe came over to your place and they were talking about my research?"

"Yeah, so?"

"For years, I've been studying people with heightened senses. I've never been lucky enough though to find someone with all five heightened senses. A real sentinel."

"A sentinel?"

"A watchman. He'd watch over the tribe with his senses."

"All my senses do, Chief, is frustrate me and give me headaches."

"That's because you don't know how to control them properly, Jim."

"And I suppose you do?"

"No, not exactly."

"I don't recall 'not exactly' being a term often associated with scientific endeavors, Chief," Jim was quietly laughing to himself.

"Jim, I know more about sentinels and people with heightened senses than anybody else you know, right?"

"That's not saying a lot."

"Give me a chance, Man. I think I can come up with tests that'll help you control your senses."

"Tests, huh?"

"Just simple stuff, honest."

"I'll take it under advisement, Chief," Jim smiled as he glanced over at Blair. He saw the mild disappointment on the young man's face. "So, Sandburg, you admit you're 'not exactly' sure how to control these sense I may or may not have..."

"But you do have them. You said so," Blair pointed out quickly.

"No, I've only admitted, and reluctantly I might add, to two, slightly better than average senses - - sight and hearing. You're the one who's making all the assumptions here about there being any others."

"Jim, are you denying you have the other three?"

"Sandburg, who's interrogating the witness here, me or you?"

"Ellison, you are so full of it. Just answer the question."

He was openly goading him now. "Which question was that, Chief?"

"The other three heightened senses?"

"You can't even ask good questions. Is there anything you're good at?"

Blair began to get flustered until he noticed the smirk on Jim's face. He fought to maintain a straight face as he responded. "As a matter of fact, Jim, there are a number of things I'm extremely versatile at."

"Oh really. Such as?"

"I've been told that I've got exceptionally talented \*Hands\*." Blair began to sensuously stroke his thigh with his hand for emphasis. From the corner of his eye, he caught the slight motion of Jim squirming in his seat. "I've also been complimented on my quick \*Tongue\*." He slowly licked his full lips, then repeated the process. "But, you're probably right, there's nothing I'm just good at." He closed his eyes as he faced the window desperately trying not to laugh.

"Sandburg, are you trying to kill me here?" he growled.

He turned back around. Jim's hand's were gripping the steering wheel tightly. The squirming had become more pronounced. When Blair allowed his eyes to wander along Jim's legs, he quickly discovered the source of his discomfort. "I suppose you're gonna say that's all my fault."

"You see anybody else riding in this vehicle with us?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Want one?" Jim held up a bottle of beer.

"Maybe later. Right now, I'm ready to kill for a shower."

"Save me some hot water, will'ya, Sandburg?" Jim spoke to his retreating back.

Blair paused at the door and turned towards the kitchen. "If I'm not out in ten minutes you can send in a search and rescue team," he laughed before shutting the door behind him.

He tried to hurry himself along as he rubbed the soapy washcloth across his skin. Blair leaned heavily against the tiled wall as he allowed the warm water to bounce off of him. Straightening back up, he searched for the bar of soap used moments earlier.

"Looking for this?" Jim had pulled the shower curtain aside and held the missing soap.

"Yeah," Blair snickered, holding out his hand.

He retracted his arm. "I thought somebody here called for a search and rescue team."

"You volunteering?"

"It'll probably be the only way I'll get any hot water, Chief," he laughed. Pulling the curtain back further, he stepped in behind Blair.

"HMMMMM," Blair purred as Jim scrubbed his shoulders and back, slowly working his way down to the twin mounds. He carefully slid the washcloth between the cheeks of his ass. Reluctantly, he moved on to cover the backs of each leg.

"Turn around," he ordered, as he stood up.

Obediently, Blair pivoted. Jim's sharp intact of breath forced Blair to freeze. Gentle fingers caressed the darkening bruise on his collarbone. "It's not too bad," Blair hastened to assure him.

Touched by Jim's concern, Blair glanced up, allowing the shower spray to hit his face. Gritting his teeth, Blair hissed.

Jim's hand flew off Blair's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Chief, I..."

Blair quickly lowered his head and stepped back, away from the painful spray. "No, Jim, you didn't do anything. The water just stings."

"I don't understand, you didn't..." Jim watched as the water continued to strike Blair's chest with no visible reaction. Realization hit him as he lifted Blair's chin. It was the first time he'd seen the full extent of the bruising on Blair's face. "Chief, I..."

"It doesn't matter. Besides, it's better than it was. Before you got there tonight it was almost swollen shut."

"Kincaid?" Jim guessed.

"Nah. Wyatt."

Jim leaned down and placed a feather soft kiss on the discolored eyelid and another on the battered cheekbone. He wasn't quite so gentle when he reached Blair's pouty mouth and began to suck on his lower lip.

He forced himself to break contact so that he could continue the task he originally set out to accomplish. Retrieving the washcloth from the tiled floor, Jim resumed where he'd left off.

Although he caught himself on several occasions playing with the silky hairs on Blair's chest and stomach, he was making progress. Until he moved lower.

Blair moaned as the soapy washcloth enveloped his cock and began a gentle rhythmic motion. Jim allowed the other hand to wander freely while kneading the soft testicles.. His knees rapidly assumed the consistency of rubber and Blair was forced to lean against the wall, water splashing over him.

Squeezing his eyes shut momentarily, Blair tried to rein in his ragged breathing. It was a futile effort. He hit sensory overload when Jim's tongue swirled around the head of his cock, just before beginning it's descent down the thick length. Blair opened his eyes just as Jim sucked him into his mouth. As overpowering as the desire was to shut his eyes again to enjoy the sensation, the sheer eroticism of watching the entire length of his shaft thrusting in and out of Jim's hot, wet mouth was completely overwhelming. His mouth fell open with only gibberish

and occasional whimpers escaping.

Blair clutched at Jim's shoulders frantically, not so much for balance but as an anchor, preventing him from driving his hips uncontrollably into Jim's mouth. He felt himself hurtling over the edge and he tried pushing Jim away. In response, however, Jim clutched Blair's ass tightly pulling himself closer. He roughly began kneading each firm cheek, while, at the same time, varying the intensity of the suction.

Uncontrolled spasms increased in magnitude until finally, with a hoarse scream, Blair exploded. Jim hungrily gulped down the warm, salty stream that filled his mouth.

After opening his eyes slowly, Blair reached out toward Jim with shaky arms. Together they managed to stand upright.

Glancing around, Blair spied the fallen washcloth and stooped to pick it up, along with the bar of soap.

"My turn," he smiled as he began to scrub Jim's chest.

Blair's hand started to move lower when abruptly, Jim grabbed it, refusing to release it "Don't."

"I was just gonna..."

"Chief, any lower and I'll go off," he groaned.

Nodding, Blair handed Jim the soap and washcloth. Stepping aside, Blair grabbed the bottle of shampoo and began to wash his hair while Jim quickly washed up. While rinsing the soap from his hair, Blair noted Jim's progress. Changing places, Jim started to wash his own hair.

Silently, Blair dropped to his knees. In one swift move, he threw his arms around Jim's hips, effectively trapping him, and simultaneously enclosing Jim's still rampant erection within his mouth.

His hands dropped to Blair's shoulders and squeezed. "No, don't. I'm gonna..."

Blair moved his mouth away briefly. "That's the idea, Big Guy," he grinned.

Before Jim was able to form a coherent sentence, Blair had sucked his cock back into the deep recesses of his warm mouth.

Giving in to the inevitable, Jim moved his hands; burying them instead in the wet curls as Blair tongue began it's own form of torture, alternating with the powerful sucks.

Drawing the full length completely inside his wet mouth once more, Blair began to squeeze Jim's tight ass. Unexpectedly, his hand moved. He was now teasing the tight puckered entrance, gently probing with the tip of his finger.

That proved to be Jim's undoing. Bright lights flashed around him as he disintegrated into a million pieces.

When he was again able to open his eyes, he watched in fascination as Blair licked his groin clean.

Smiling weakly, he offered his hand to help Blair up. They quickly rinsed off in the now tepid water before jumping out of the shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blair stood in the kitchen, sipping from the bottle of beer they were sharing, watching Jim perform his nightly ritual known as 'locking up'. When Jim returned to his side, Blair handed him the bottle before heading in the direction of the spare room. He never made it that far.

Reaching out, Jim grabbed his arm and spun Blair around. Cupping Blair's face in his hands, Jim leaned down and kissed him softly.

"Come on." He took Blair's hand and led him upstairs to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't the sun filtering through the bedroom windows that finally woke Jim, but rather the ticklish sensation spreading across the bridge of his nose. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, only to discover his face awash with silky curls. Smiling, he nuzzled closer.

Yawning softly, Blair rolled over, and like a heat-seeking missile, he burrowed deeper under the blankets, nestling against the broad expanse of Jim's chest. As he wrapped his arm around his companion's waist, Blair unconsciously hugged him tighter. The slight movement brought their burgeoning erections in direct contact with each other. Sandburg's eyes snapped open. Immediately, he relaxed his arm and began to scoot backwards.

"Going somewhere, Chief?"

Raising his head, Blair looked at Jim sheepishly. "Um, no," he said, tentatively.

"Good," he said, reaching down to caress Blair's cheek. Leaning over, he brushed his lips lightly over the spot where, moments before, his thumb had been. Soon Jim's mouth was leaving a trail of kisses across Blair's forehead, eyelids and nose as he slowly worked his way toward

his immediate goal, those full, inviting lips.

Blair was moaning faintly as Jim grazed his mouth with soft, gentle kisses. But wanting and needing more, Blair began hungrily sucking on Jim's lower lip, just before plunging his tongue into the sweet abyss.

Jim struggled not to lose himself in the overwhelming sensations that threatened to overtake him as the two of them fought for control. Finally, Jim pulled back. "Easy, Chief."

"What's wrong?" Blair was clearly puzzled.

"Nothing's wrong," he said, accenting his meaning with a series of tender kisses to the sides of Blair's mouth. "Just let me..." His voice trailed off as he continued his slow, sensual seduction of the young man's body.

Blair closed his eyes as Jim began to nibble Blair's sensitive ear before moving his erotic assault to his exposed neck. The noises emanating from deep within Blair's throat intensified with each new erogenous zone Jim discovered through his efforts to catalog and memorize this sensuous creature beneath him.

When the tip of Jim's tongue teased Blair's nipple, it was all he could do to keep himself from being bucked off the writhing body.

"Oh, God...please..." Blair begged, as Jim slowly circled the hardening nub before he latched on and began to suckle. Feeling Blair tense underneath him from the onslaught of sensations, Jim only smiled to himself, before devoting equal time to the neglected side.

Reluctant to completely desert the sensitive peaks, Jim hovered momentarily and lightly blew a puff of air over each. Blair hissed as he ground his teeth in frustration and arched his back.

Pleased with his efforts, Jim finally moved his exploration lower, twirling his tongue around the silky hairs on Blair's abdomen. Raising his head for the moment, he watched in fascination as Blair's head tossed relentlessly across the pillow, while Jim playfully tweaked the still responsive nipples.

"Are you...trying...to kill me?" Blair struggled for each breath.

Jim stilled his hands completely. "I'm sorry, Chief," he said, as he shifted his weight slightly. "I thought you were enjoying yourself. I guess I'll just..."

"Don't stop!" he begged frantically, his ragged breathing accentuating his request. "Please...don't..."

"I won't," he promised, lowering his head for another kiss.

Blair sighed heavily. He opened his mouth to greet Jim's questing tongue and began to suck on it greedily. Hoping to distract his tormentor, Blair continued to increase the intensity of the kiss, as he made his move. Snaking his hand between their bodies, he arrived at his goal and began to stroke Jim's rigid cock. Unexpectedly, his hand was batted away.

"Jim...", he pleaded. "I...need you."

"Ssshhh," he soothed. "We'll get there eventually, babe. I want our first time to be nice and...slow," he emphasized.

"I...can do slow," Blair said hesitantly.

Ellison chuckled as he gazed down at the hyper kinetic sprite, glistening with perspiration, beneath him.

Lightly trailing his fingertips down the furry abdomen, Jim slowly slid his palm around Blair's still thickening erection. His sensitive flesh throbbed at the contact and Blair gasped. Lowering his head, Jim began to lave the entire length.

"Oh, man...I can't ...hold out much...longer," Blair wailed.

"Easy, babe." Jim released his prize, but continued to gently rub one of Sandburg's thighs as he leaned over to the nearby night stand. Opening the drawer, he quickly retrieved what he was searching for.

Straightening up, he positioned himself between Blair's splayed thighs. Glancing down, Jim was struck by the beautiful sight that greeted him. He lowered his head once more and drew Blair's cock into his mouth.

Sandburg's hips bucked off the mattress, driving Jim backwards. "Jim, please," he begged pitifully.

"Ssshhh." Regaining his balance, Jim gently raised his lover's legs and wrapped them around his waist. Squeezing some of the gel on his fingers, he slowly pressed a single digit at the dusky pink entrance. He felt the muscles relaxing around his finger as it was absorbed into Blair's tight, hot body.

"Now, Jim!" he demanded. "I need you now!" Blair raised and lowered his hips, trying to increase the stimulation from Jim's thrusts.

"Just a little longer, babe." He added a second finger, scissoring them back and forth to stretch the constricted passage. As he felt around, he

quickly found the rounded protrusion and began applying pressure to it. The reaction was instantaneous.

"Oh, God!" Blair jerked as he screamed. "Please...now..."

Slowly removing his fingers, Jim added more gel to them. This time he returned with three fingers, continuing to methodically stretch the muscles, in addition to alternating strokes against Blair's prostate.

Panting in desperation, Blair clutched at his swollen cock, frantically seeking relief. Firmly, Jim removed Blair's hand.

Tears welled up in Blair's eyes from frustration as he silently pleaded for release. When Jim removed his fingers, Blair bemoaned their loss.

Jim applied a generous amount of the gel to his own distended erection, before carefully positioning himself. Taking several deep breaths, in an effort to calm his own racing heart, Jim finally pressed forward, using slow, measured thrusts, allowing Blair a chance to adjust to his size.

When, at last, his balls were resting against Blair's rounded ass, Jim released his breath and waited for a sign from his lover. "Are you okay?" he questioned nervously, fighting his body's impulsive insistence to thrust.

"Give me a minute here," he panted.

An eternity later, he finally received his response when Blair moved his legs slightly and began to wiggle his butt. Jim reached out, enclosing Sandburg's somewhat deflated erection in his hand, and began pumping it in a steady rhythm that mirrored his own thrusts into that welcoming hot channel.

"JimmMMM.....soooo good..." Blair cried out from a pleasure-induced haze caused by the twin stimulation of his lover's hand firmly stroking his swollen cock and the continuous pounding his oversensitive prostate was receiving every time Jim plunged his own engorged shaft deeper inside.

With the next thrust, Blair completely lost whatever control he had and tumbled over the abyss screaming Jim's name in a never-ending mantra. Feeling the powerful inner muscles contracting around him propelled Jim into one of the most powerful climaxes of his entire life as he collapsed bonelessly on top of the young man

\* \* \* \* \*

When he awoke again, Jim immediately realized he was alone in the huge bed. Grabbing his robe from a nearby chair, he pulled it on as he made his way downstairs. He was so intent on reaching the kitchen and the fresh coffee he smelled, he almost collided with Blair, who was rapidly approaching from the opposite direction, having just completed his shower.

"Oh, hey, man, guess you're in need of a caffeine fix, too?"

"You got it, Chief." Jim reached for the coffee mugs when, abruptly, his hands stopped in midair as he gazed wide-eyed at the young man standing next to him.

"I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed some of your clothes until I can wash mine. All my other stuff's over at Susie's place."

Ellison was forced to stifle a laugh. The sight of Sandburg in the turquoise shirt which was obviously several sizes too large and the oversized sweat pants was overwhelming.

"No problem, Chief," he snickered. Jim had to turn away, his eyes beginning to water from suppressed merriment. "Hey!" He winced when Blair's fist connected with his upper arm.

"That's it, Big Guy, laugh it up," Blair said indignantly. "It's not my fault I'm such a runt."

"You're not a runt, Sandburg," he chuckled. "Just a little short."

"That's vertically challenged, thank you very much." Blair squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height, before turning away from Ellison. "Besides, we wouldn't even be having this conversation if all my stuff hadn't been destroyed when my place blew up." He poured coffee into two mugs, sliding one cup closer to Jim.





With a heavy sigh, he reached over and drew Blair into a tight embrace. "I'm sorry, Chief," he said as he nuzzled the damp curls.

"Skay, Big Guy," he responded softly. Raising his head, Blair kissed Jim's exposed throat eagerly.

Momentarily giving in to the exquisite sensations which Blair's lush mouth was inflicting upon his neck, Jim threw his head back further. However, the smell of the freshly poured coffee tempted him sorely, and he soon allowed rational thought to take control.

"Chief, as much as I'd dearly like to indulge in this lovefest, I'm afraid that if you don't let me have some of that coffee, I'm gonna have to kill you," he laughed.

"I hear ya," he snickered. Blair released his grip on Jim and quickly grabbed one of the cups.

## EPILOGUE

When Jim entered his Captain's office on Monday morning, he had Sandburg in tow. If Simon was surprised by this development, he hid it well as he pour himself a cup of coffee and offered some to the two men in his office.

"I take it you're well rested after a few days off and ready to get back to work, Jim?"

"Yes, Sir. But I need to talk to you about work. Actually, we have a proposition for you."

"We?"

"Sandburg and I, Sir. Simon, you know the story about the trouble I got into with Major Crimes because there were times I couldn't seem to focus. That's why I ended up here in High Tech Crimes."

"That and the fact that you are knowledgeable in computers, Jim," Simon quickly reminded him.

"Yes, Sir. However, as you are also aware, Sandburg was working on his doctoral degree in anthropology at the University before he left to pursue a career in computer engineering. His area of study dealt with individuals with heightened senses."

"Whoa, you just lost me here, Jim."

"Allow me, Captain," Blair volunteered. "I believe Detective Ellison is a Sentinel. Someone who possesses all five senses heightened. His lack of focus was due to the fact that he couldn't control these senses. With my help, he can be taught to control them. This will also make him an even greater asset to the police department. As a Sentinel it's his mission, if you will, to protect the tribe. In this case, the city of Cascade. We've been talking it over and we think that with his knowledge of computers, he is performing a valuable service to the city in this capacity, he also could be working equally as well back in Major Crimes.

"You see, Simon, what we're proposing is that Sandburg work with me, as my partner, to guide me with my senses and that we split our time between High Tech Crimes and Major Crimes."

"But Sandburg isn't a cop."

"I know, Sir. We were thinking something along the lines of an observer. He's going to be applying to be reinstated as a graduate student at the University."

"Not to mention the fact that I do know my stuff with computers, Captain," Blair grinned happily.

Simon pulled a cigar out of his leather pouch. "Let me give this some thought, gentlemen. I'll have to run this by the Chief and see if I can sell him on the idea. We'd also have to discuss this with Joel and see what he thinks about it. In the meantime, Jim, I've already briefed Rafe on your newest case. You might talk to him to bring you up to speed."



"Yes, Sir."

Both men turned to leave the office.

"Oh, Sandburg, could you stay here for a minute?"

"Sure." He waved Jim off and walked back to the Captain's desk.

Simon stood up and pointed to his computer. "I assume you know all about computer viruses and how to fix the damage?"

Blair sat down in Simon's chair. "Does this mean I have the job, Sir?"

He laughed easily at the young man. "Possibly. I had anticipated your request before you and Jim even came in this morning."

"How?"

"Sandburg, I was a detective long before I was ever a Captain," he grinned. "Now fix my computer, dammit!"

The End.

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