The Healer

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Summary

First story in The Healing Trilogy. After a terrible gun battle that changes Major Crime forever, Blair is left with a form of amnesia that wipes 20+ years from his life and it's up to Jim, with help from the damaged MC members, to care for Blair - only who's taking care of whom?

Notes

The Healer was originally posted in June of 1999 and was followed a few months later by the sequel, The Boogey Man. Quite a bit later, a final story, Fissures, wrapped up the arc - but only appeared in the zine, Healing, which included all three stories. Fissures had never been published online until 2009. All three have been thoroughly revised.

See end notes for additional warnings.
For most of Major Crime, the day started out as any other. In fact, better than most.

For Henri Brown, the day started out twenty minutes late because when his alarm went off, he chose to ignore it, thanks to not being alone in his bed. His newest girlfriend, Susie, was curled up next to him, an event that had been a long time coming - last night being the 'big moment' when she'd suggested ending the evening at his place. Smart man that he was, he didn't say no.

Of course, his partner, Brian Rafe would have something to say about his lateness, but Henri just smiled, caressed the lovely lady next to him - and decided to be even later.

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Rafe wasn't in the least bit worried about his partner because he hadn't awakened alone either. Sure, he'd rolled over when his alarm went off expecting to see the usual empty half of his bed - but instead found Megan Connor's long, slender body stretched out beside him. He smiled sleepily while playing with her long red curls splayed out on the pillow.

Last night had been better than any fantasy he'd entertained and yes, he was still reeling from the fact that *it* had finally happened between them. Megan was a dream come true because he'd been
certain she'd end up with Jim Ellison.

But she hadn't. She'd chosen him and he was, at that moment, a supremely happy man. Happier still when Megan reached for him and he took her into his arms.

No, Brian Rafe wasn't the least bit worried about his partner.

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For Joel Taggart, ex-captain of the Bomb Squad and now a detective with Major Crime, mornings had once again become something to look forward to - now that he was working with Jim and Blair.

He was constantly learning, which was, in part, responsible for his good mood. But the real reason behind his new found joy came from watching his 'partners'. The interplay between them, their quips and equal opportunity harping, was like watching a great tennis match. Then there was the way both their minds worked so well together, in spite of coming from completely opposite backgrounds (some would say planets). Each gave something to a case, a different way of looking at each crime, even as they arrived at the same conclusion at the same time.

Joel also enjoyed watching how they looked at each other when the final clue dropped; the understanding and satisfaction in almost-twin sets of blue eyes. Jim would smile at Blair, a special smile reserved for the younger man, and then Joel would watch Blair return it in his own special way. If Joel had to describe how it made him feel, he'd have said, somewhat sheepishly, that he always felt caught between two bright rainbows. It was amazing that two men could be so in love - and so completely oblivious. Which brought Joel to the final reason his mornings - in fact, his days, had improved: observing the clueless detectives left him not only puzzling out their assigned crimes but puzzling out ways to tip the idiots off - and today just might be that day. He had a new plan so, with a smile and a whistle, Joel left for work.

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Detective Beth Jenkins started her morning in the usual manner; namely getting one husband off to work and two small children off to school. By the time the house was empty, she was left with fifteen minutes to relax, sip the tea suggested by Blair - and contemplate another day of catching the bad guys with her partner, Luis Maldonado.

Beth had been excited when, four years ago, she'd been accepted into Major Crime, a department still relatively female free. MC was the toughest department a detective could aspire to and only the cream of the crop made it. She'd tossed and turned several nights as she agonized over whether to go for it. The danger had never scared her, but what it might mean for her family had. She knew she could do the job, and do it damn well, but she was a mother with two small children.

In the end, it was her husband, Sam, and his unwavering support that tipped the scales - and she'd put in her application and, to her surprise, had been accepted. And not once in the last four years had she regretted her decision - nor had her husband's support wavered.

She was one lucky woman.

Beth was firmly entrenched in MC and wouldn't have it any other way. They were a special team - a family - and every detective knew it.

Captain Banks was their leader and Detective Ellison, their guardian.

Beth checked her watch and realized she was out of what Sam laughingly called "mommyminutes." It was time to slip into her "Detective Jenkins" mode. She smiled slightly as she wondered what her
partner had in store for Blair, their rookie. It was Luis' turn to harass their newest member and he was the most devious of them all, which was why he'd been saved for the last day. Beth almost felt sorry for Blair.

Almost.

As she grabbed her purse and keys, her grin widened. Blair was known for turning the tables on the best pranksters in the PD.

 Yep, today should be interesting.

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Luis Maldonado was feeling no pain as he ran the last 25 yards of his early morning ritual. Running kept him in shape and, lately, kept his mind off his wife, or rather, his soon-to-be ex-wife.

Turning up his driveway, he paused long enough to pick up the paper, then sprinted the last few feet to the backdoor. Entering the kitchen, the smell of bacon and eggs hit him in surprise and, stunned, he watched his sixteen year old daughter, Tirza, pile eggs onto a platter that already held several rashers of bacon and four slices of toast.

"Hey, Dad, just in time. Breakfast is ready."

He looked at the mound of food and, while wondering when she'd learned to cook, he tried to figure out how best to break it to his lovely girl that he was watching his cholesterol. As if reading his mind, she added, "Don't worry, the bacon's mine and the eggs are Egg Beaters. Perfectly healthy. Dig in."

Grinning in appreciation, he pulled out a chair and sat down. "Girl, you're a miracle."

"A real jewel, that's me."

As they ate, Tirza filled him in on her life, the current school play and her newest love, Scott. Listening to her, he could almost forget how hard his daughter had been hit by her mother's absence. She was trying so damn hard to take Barbara's place as the woman of the house.

He gazed tenderly at his "little girl" and felt an overpowering sensation of bewilderment that he and Barbara had created this beautiful, talented, caring young woman.

"Hey, pop, tell me what you've got planned for Blair today. Something wicked, I bet."

"Oh, yeah, it's good," he answered. "And foolproof. He'll never trip to this one."

"Poor Blair." She quickly shoveled more food into her mouth, swallowed, took a gulp of orange juice, then stood and gathered her books. "I'm out of here, Dad. Bus will be here any minute." She dropped a quick kiss on the top of his short buzz cut, stuffed another piece of bacon into her mouth - and was gone.

He was left alone in Barbara's kitchen.

He couldn't help glancing over his shoulder at the stove - where she'd been standing in order to take out his four-hour-old dinner while telling him that she couldn't handle their life any more, his life, and had to leave to preserve her sanity. Thank God she'd understood that taking Tirza would have devastated the girl, in spite of the love she had for her mother.

Two days later, Barbara was gone, staying with her sister, and he and Tirza were alone.
That had been three weeks ago.

He got up and walked slowly into his room. Major Crime waited.

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Detective Martin Regan gave his partner, Detective Peter Sbarro, a quick jab in the ribs but Peter never moved. Only slightly aggravated, Martin said, "Get up, you lazy bum."

An incoherent mumble was his reward this time.

"Jesus, Peter, we're going be late again and you know how I hate it when Simon waves that cigar in my face. Now come on, get up."

Sbarro rolled over, grunted and opened one brown eye. "Fuck. You're already dressed. How do you do that? And how can I pillage, plunder and ravage if you're already dressed?"

"You can't. Now get up or I leave without you."

Peter pulled himself up, ran a hand over his crew-cut and allowed the sheet to slip down just enough to show his partner a bright-eyed and wide awake cock. Martin just snorted and turned away while muttering something about brazen hussies.

"You know," Peter said as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "You threaten to leave without me at least three times a week - but we both know it's never going to happen."

"One of these days, Peter, one of these days."

Padding over to his lover, who stood in front of the dresser mirror to straighten his tie, Peter slipped his arm around Martin's slender waist and rested his chin on the taller man's shoulder. "You'd never leave without me and you know it."

Martin looked at their reflection in the mirror and marveled at the view. They were polar opposites in looks, temperament and backgrounds, and yet, fit so well together.

Peter came from Little Italy and a family of cops. He was short and stocky, but, with his blonde hair, obviously took after his mother's northern Italian heritage. Martin knew that Peter had struggled through the academy just as he'd struggled in school, but he was stubborn and, in spite of sometimes being his own worst enemy, he'd persevered. When he'd told his family he was going after Major Crime, they'd prepared themselves for his first failure but he'd surprised them all by making it. However, once in MC, his temper had nearly gotten him kicked out more than once in his first year - and might have anyway if he hadn't finally been partnered with Martin.

Calm, cool, never ruffled - that was him: Martin Regan. Or at least he supposed that was how people viewed him.

Black Irish but with no temper, Peter often told him he was 'fake' Irish. The fact that he didn't drink only cemented that opinion. He'd seen the appreciation of his dark curly hair and Irish green eyes in Peter almost from the get-go but he'd been in deep denial about his own sexual choices and had managed to ignore his partner's obvious desire.

Martin had been an overachiever from pre-school age, had always been a straight A student, graduating at the top of his academy class. He had no family of his own, but Peter's had immediately adopted him and, yes, he'd eventually accepted the fact that he was, in effect, their son-in-law.
Staring at their reflection now, at the three inches difference in their height, and thinking of the eight years difference in their ages, he couldn't help but wonder at how, together, they created an incredible person. Thank God Peter had never given up on him, had continued to pursue him, to force him to see who and what he was.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Peter gave his ear a quick nip and asked, "You think Ellison will ever get buy a ticket on the clue bus?"

"He'd better, and damn quick too. Blair's been even more patient than you." He turned in Peter's arms and added, "Speaking of you - shower - now."

"I'm going, I'm going, but Blair would never leave Ellison, he'll hang around forever, he loves the guy."

"I know and I feel for him. He doesn't know what to do about their situation."

"Well, duh. He's never been with a guy before," Peter snorted.

"Oh, and Ellison has? And didn't I say 'shower'?"

"Yes, and yes, Ellison has."

Peter started for the bathroom but was stopped as Martin squeezed his arm and squeaked out, "Ellison? Jim Ellison?"

Grinning smugly, Pete nodded. "Ellison."

"You know this - how?"

"The same way I knew about you."

"Oh, right - the infamous gaydar."

Peter just shook his head and headed for the bathroom muttering about Martin and how his gaydar was on the blink and, "…could you go to a doctor for something like that?"

Martin couldn't resist. He swatted his partner's very fine ass before pulling him back into his arms. "Shower later - fuck now, and not everyone was born with your gaydar, all right? I'm just grateful you do and that it found me."

"Good point." Then, just before kissing his partner, Peter frowned, scratched the back of his ear and said, "I'm thinking Ellison must have excellent jamming equipment."

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"Sandburg, where's my blue tie? The one with the dark blue triangles." Jim heard Blair's footsteps cross the floor below and then he was at the French doors. He peered over the rail of his bedroom and into amused blue eyes.

"And I would know where your tie was exactly how?"

"I need the tie, Sandburg."

"Well, you could try the tie rack Megan got you for your birthday," Blair suggested with a wink before turning away and walking into the kitchen.
Jim rolled his eyes but walked over to his closet and, sure enough, there hung the tie rack. The same tie rack that he’d stored in the back of his closet an hour after his birthday party last month. "You're a sneak, Chief," he yelled.

"Hey, it wasn't me," Blair disclaimed. "It was the tie elf."

Blair was slathering strawberry cream cheese on a toasted bagel and, thankful that his partner didn't have sentinel hearing, Jim snorted and muttered a promise to himself to one day 'elf' his roommate. A few minutes later, he walked downstairs, dropped his jacket on the back of the couch and joined his partner in the kitchen. As he passed Blair - on his way to the coffee - the younger man handed off half the bagel. Jim caught it deftly and stuck it in his mouth. Three bites and two coffee gulps later he finally looked at his partner.

Frowning, he said, "Chief, you're wearing flannel."

Blair looked down at his shirt and then up at Jim. "Why yes, Jim, I am. Very astute."

"You get sworn in today," Jim reminded. "Four sharp. You do not wear flannel and jeans to your swearing in."

"It's not a real swearing in, and my suit is over there."

Jim followed Blair's head movement and, sure enough, a garment bag hung on one of the pegs next to the door.

"Too bad poor Detective Ellison has court because, unlike me, he has to wear a suit all day. Sniffle."

"I feel the sympathy flowing off of you, Chief."

In answer, Blair took the last of his bagel, which Jim had been eyeing, and popped it into Jim's mouth. Before the bigger man could retaliate, he scooted around him and back out into the living room as he said, "Quit stuffing your face, Jim. We're going to be late."

With that reminder, even though in jest, Jim checked his watch and swore. "Shit. I've got twenty minutes to get you to Major Crime and me to court."

"Now, I'm just talking off the top of my head here, I'm not a real detective yet, but you could let me drop you at court."

"But…that would mean you drive the truck," Jim said, trying to sound totally offended at the very idea.

"Another astute observation from the senior detective. Man, I just learn so much from you."

Jim picked up an apple from the fruit bowl on the dining room table and tossed it, none too gently, directly at his partner - who caught it with precision.

Looking as innocent as an angel with a hairy chest can look, Blair said, "Gee, Jim, for me?"

"Jerk. And just when does the classic get out of the shop?"

"Monday."

The truck keys followed the same flight path as the apple and were just as expertly caught. "All right, then. Guess you drive, Junior."
Blair bit into the apple to keep from laughing outright.

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Captain Simon Banks climbed into his car, eager to get to work. Today, he would officially swear in his newest detective. The whole ceremony had been given the green light by the mayor, no less and, since more than a little red tape had been snipped to make this happen, it was decided that the swearing in would be private - which was exactly how everyone wanted it. Just family. The Major Crime family. His family.

A few minutes after four - Blair would be Detective Sandburg and, more importantly, Jim's permanent and official partner.

Simon afforded himself a huge grin. Yes, it was going to be a good day. His entire family was intact with icing on the cake being the fact that Daryl had agreed to re-think college before the academy.

Life was good.

And yes, while he'd never admit it, he couldn't wait to see what joke Luis had planned for their rookie. The gang had been teasing Blair all week, playing practical jokes but forced to watch as Blair deftly deflecting them back onto the perps - but Luis was the acknowledged master and consensus was that their newest detective would fall today.

Banks gave a chomp on his cigar and chuckled.

Yep, it was going to be a very good day.

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Three hours of sitting in the courtroom while waiting to testify, all for nothing. As Jim pocketed his cell phone, he strode down the hall toward the elevators, damning all lawyers and their continuances. Once in the elevator, he couldn't help but give a frustrated shake of his head even as he acknowledged that in this case, a continuance was a blessing because there was now no way he'd miss Blair's swearing in. Outside, he jogged down the courthouse steps even though he knew there was no hurry, that he had a bit of a wait for his ride. When he'd called Blair just outside the courtroom, he'd caught him at the post office, which meant at least a fifteen minute wait - which meant too much time alone with his mind - and his worries.

Leaning against the courthouse wall, senses alert for the sound of the truck, he did a quick mental review of his "Top Five Worries Now That Sandburg is My Real Partner." Starting from the bottom of the list, well, now he'd actually have to let Sandburg drive - and yes, he knew damn well that Blair was the better driver and would probably congratulate him for giving up some of his perceived control. Yeah, well, fuck his control issues, the truck was his baby.

And speaking of fucking - Jim hit number four on his list: Fucking Sandburg, the man who would soon be his official partner, which meant fucking was definitely not kosher. Not that it was happening - because it wasn't. But hell, all the signals were there - had been for months…except now Blair was official - and officially out of bounds.

Except…there was no way anyone would consider them to be 'typical' partners. He was a sentinel and Blair his - what, guide? Sure, guide. Even though hearing from Brackett so long ago hadn't exactly thrilled him, it sounded good coming from him. Seriously, he doubted he could do the job without Blair - not as long as he remained a sentinel. And didn't Simon know it as well as he did? Damn right. So it wasn't as if they'd ever be separated, fucking or no fucking. Maybe he should cross
that worry off his list? After all, he did love the guy.

Great, so moving onto number three: He couldn't make Sandburg stay in the truck anymore.

All right, he could never make Sandburg stay in the truck if he really wanted to follow Jim, so he might as well go directly to worry number two: Blair as a cop.

Blair, anthropologist - now a cop. Blair, who'd had two lives, one with Jim and Major Crime, and one at the University. Only now…now it would be one life - with him - twenty-four/seven. How soon before it was all too much for Blair?

Which, of course, led directly to Jim's number one worry - the big one, the one that scared the living daylights out of him: He could lose Blair.

He could lose him in so many ways.

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"Did he fall for it?"

Henri Brown was perched on the edge of Luis' desk, one of his more smug grins plastered across his face. Luis looked up and winked. "Hook, line and sinker, Compadre, hook, line and sinker. He's stopping at the Post Office first, then to--"

"Excuse me, is there a Detective Maldonado here?" A tall, skinny young man stood just inside the squad room, several bags in his hand, a quizzical expression on his freckled face.

Puzzled, Luis stood. "I'm Maldonado."

"We've got your order, man." With that, two other men, both with boxes piled high with white bags, joined him. All three walked in and began to deposit everything on any available open space. Then they left - only to return with even more bags and drink containers.

When everything was down, the young man who'd first spoken pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper and set it in front of Luis. "You were real lucky, sir," the youngster explained. "The guy that called to tell us the order was wrong, made it just in time. We hadn't started it yet so were able to double it. We've already delivered to Vice for you and they told me to give you their thanks." With that, he remained where he was, a very expectant look on his face even as he cocked his head toward the bill.

Luis looked at it, eyes widening in shock as the large red numbers swam across the bottom of the greasy bill.

"A hundred and twenty-five bucks?!" he exclaimed loudly.

Every member of Major Crime exploded in laughter as it hit them all that Blair had done it again. He'd successfully turned the joke around by turning the perp into the victim.

They had a new king.

With a resigned, and somewhat amused, expression on his face, Luis forked over the money; twice the amount Sandburg should have been paying when picking up what he thought was one small order for Luis and Beth as opposed to lunch for the whole squad - as Luis had planned.

"Damn, he's good" he finally mumbled as the boys left.
Beth grabbed one of the bags, plopped down opposite her partner, gave him a saucy wink and said, "Gee, partner, thanks for lunch." She then she turned to everyone and added, "Right, guys?"

They were immediately assaulted by several, "Right ons" and "Amen, sisters!" Once everyone had their lunches, Beth held up her drink and said, "The King is dead, long live the new King!"

Simon chose that precise moment to exit his office - and he wasn't smiling. The joking and bantering came to an abrupt halt, every detective recognizing Simon's expression, which said clearly that something bad had - or was - happening. They waited.

"Hostag situation at the post office on Twelfth and Alton. FBI is on their way. Rafe, you take Connor. Brown, you stay here." At Henri's baffled expression, Simon added, "I need someone to co-ordinate with the Feds. Maldonado, you and Jenkins roll with Rafe and Connor. Martin and Peter will join you - they're coming from the other end of town."

"Sir, you said…the Twelfth Street Post Office?" Luis asked, fear in his tone.

"I did."

"Simon…Blair was stopping there--"

He didn't have a chance - or a need - to finish as Simon's shoulders straightened and he said tightly, "Roll, people."

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Simon turned the corner onto Lexington and spotted Jim instantly. He pulled in toward the curb, slowed long enough for Jim to jump in before speeding off, lights and sirens on. After Maldonado's announcement, and while rushing down to his own car, Simon had made the call to Jim. He hadn't intended to disturb him at court, but with Luis' announcement, he knew better than to exclude him. Once connected, he'd given Jim the facts, told him he was on his way to pick him up. Now, glancing quickly to his right, he found Jim sitting stiffly, eyes fixed on something far in the distance.

Just when he was about to speak - to say something - anything, Jim beat him to it. "Do we know for sure?"

"You mean whether Sandburg is actually there?" At Jim's nod, he shook his head. "No, but I tried his cell - no answer. Same thing with you, right?"

"If he'd had the chance to use it - to let us know anything, he would have, otherwise, we both know he'd turn it off so as not to spook…anyone."

"Right - just what I figured."

A few minutes later, they joined the other squad cars, SWAT trucks and FBI vehicles in the parking lot of the Twelfth Street Federal Post Office. Once parked, both exited quickly and made their way to Joel, who'd been the first on the scene.

Simon came up behind him, touched his shoulder and said quietly, "Taggart?"

"The FBI have already taken over, Simon," the large man said, his disgust clearly evident. "They won't let us deploy - hell, they won't even let them out their cars. I approached the AIC, a jerk named Lister, told him one of our men was probably inside, but he brushed me off like it was nothing." He finally faced his friend. "This isn't right, Simon. We've always had a good working relationship with the Feds."
Brown eyes already fixed on the building, Simon nodded almost absently before asking, "Jim?"

"I've got them - and yes, Sandburg's inside," he answered. From the moment he'd been in range, he'd tuned everything out, hoping to hear his partner's voice - and had quickly succeeded. He could still hear him.

"Sssh, it's okay, sweetheart, don't cry."

There were at least two children in the building and Blair was doing his best to keep them calm.

Suddenly Jim's ears were assaulted by a loud, threatening, and abrasive voice.

"Shut that brat up or I will!"

He could hear the sound of footsteps, heard Blair trying to reason with the man and then winced when he heard the sharp sound of flesh hitting flesh - which was followed by more yelling - this time from another one of the thieves.

"The cops are here, Brady! The parking lot is crawling with them."

Jim was then stunned when he heard Blair whispered words.

"Jim, I'm pretty sure you're out there so listen up. There are eight of them. Terrorists, heavily armed, wearing Kevlar and...they have explosives. Their weaponry is high tech, man. I think something went wrong - I overheard one of them say that it was a trap, that the Feds were ready for them. You've got to get everyone back - all our people - or they'll be cut to ribbons."

Jim looked quickly over at Simon - but found the space next to him empty. Looking around, he spotted him moving toward the Agent in Charge. Simon was already gesturing angrily at the man. Turning back to Joel, he said tersely, "Get in your car, pull back onto the street and then tell everyone else to do the same - now."

Joel understood completely and moved quickly toward his vehicle.

It didn't take Jim long to realize that Blair's warning had been accurate, his instructions good - but unfortunately - too late.

Even as Joel got into his car, one of the terrorists lifted a blind, his gun clearly visible - which was all one angry and frustrated agent named Elkins, needed. He started firing and Jim's world exploded.

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Jim clamped his hands over his ears while trying to regain control of his senses. Even as he did this, Jim realized that the terrorists inside had quickly retaliated and were now firing on anyone - or anything - that moved. Which meant the men and women of Major Crime, all of whom were doing as Joel instructed: trying to back out of the parking lot.

Stunned, Jim watched a volley of bullets hit Luis' beige Taurus just as he started to move. In the next instant, Jim wished with all his heart and soul that his eyes weren't sentinel eyes because the second round hit Luis and Beth. Jim could hear the sound of the bullets as they struck flesh, knew that Luis was hit twice in the leg, Beth in the chest and neck. The surprise was that, in spite of being injured, Luis still managed to get the car turned around and facing the right direction. But before he could the car out of range, another round took out his tires and he lost control. The Taurus struck several other vehicles before coming to deadly stop.
At the same moment, Joel's car was struck, but with great relief, Jim caught sight of the man as he bailed out and rolled safely away. He moved toward the shelter of the drive-up center, gun out and ready.

His senses finally regulated, Jim pulled his weapon just as Martin's white Buick turned into the parking lot. His vision zeroed in and he could see Martin taking it all in, observed the moment Martin spotted Luis' car and, while Jim wanted to scream, "No!" - he knew it was useless - Martin and Peter had to try to get to their friends.

Unfortunately, too many others were trying to get out of the way - namely Federal vehicles - and it was impossible for Martin to move any further. And once again, Jim was forced to watch, helplessly, as another MC vehicle was hit over and over again. He saw Peter throw himself over Martin as bullets slammed into metal - and ultimately into flesh.

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Rafe, parked at the opposite end of the parking lot and next to the spot the FBI had staked out as their command post, quickly realized his friends were in trouble. Acting quickly, he released Megan's seatbelt, opened the door and, with a hard shove, pushed her out. He then hit the accelerator, shot across the edge where parking lot met sidewalk - and directly in front of the building, thus placing his vehicle between the terrorists, the Taurus and the Buick.

Joel, who like Jim, had been forced to watch helplessly as both cars were strafed, now found himself watching in absolute horror as Rafe drove straight into. He understood Rafe's intentions immediately and started looking frantically around for help. He spotted both Jim and Simon already moving toward him, ducking and dodging bullets.

As the gunfire moved from Luis and Martin in order to concentrate on Rafe's vehicle, the three men met at the mini-center and, almost telepathically, made a unified move. With uncanny timing - and not a single word exchanged - they pulled first Luis and Beth from the Taurus and then Martin and Peter from the Buick - getting all four back to the relative safety of the mini-center.

While Joel and Simon began assessing injuries, Jim ran back toward Rafe. His Blazer, now almost unrecognizable thanks to the bullet holes, had finally slowed and come to a stop a mere two inches from the Taurus. Weaving and bobbing and, against all the odds, Jim reached the vehicle, grabbed the unconscious Rafe, and pulled him out. His only problem was how in the hell could he get him back to safety. The answer arrived in the form of a full-body armor shield wielded by Connor. She placed herself behind Jim, the armor keeping them safe as, with Rafe over Jim's shoulders, they made their way back to the others.

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Agent Lister, following the first shot, had quickly mobilized his men and the SWAT team. Then, without regard to the civilians or postal workers inside the building, ordered that they open fire. When he realized they were outgunned, he ordered a five man body armored assault to storm the post office.

Twenty minutes after the first shot had been fired - the battle was over.

For Blair - the last hour had been sheer hell. He stood, numb and dumbfounded, in the middle of the post office where three terrorists lay dead, two others critically wounded and another - well, he'd taken that one down himself. As for the last two, they'd finally seen the writing on the wall and surrendered. They were currently face down on the floor and being handcuffed.
Eyes glazed over in shock, Blair almost absently noted that two civilians were also dead - victims of the FBI assault. Three postal employees and several other civilians had received cuts and bruises, but everyone was suffering from shock.

Somehow, when things started going south, Blair had managed to keep five of the civilians safe, two women and three children, by pulling two large work tables down and using them as shields. The women were up now, shell-shocked but alive and, children in arms, were moving toward the light pouring in through the smashed front door. Blair, seeing the medical personnel moving in and realizing there was nothing else for him to do, started to follow them.

As he exited the building - it was to a scene that made his idea of Armageddon pale by comparison. Blinking in the bright sunlight, he could make out men limping, stumbling, and holding their hands over bleeding wounds as paramedics rushed from one to another. Cops and men in blue FBI jackets - all looking stunned - walked about as if they knew what they were doing - and some actually did as they started to remove remaining civilians out of the 'combat' area in order to get them whatever kind of help they needed. Blair didn't miss the cameras either. The press had arrived and, even though they were held back by yellow tape, they snapped cameras, rolled video cams and yelled out numerous, nonsensical questions to people who weren't listening.

The Day of the Locusts.

At that moment, it hit him again that Major Crime would have rolled, that Jim had to be here - after all, wasn't that why he'd whispered the information to him? Just in case?

Which meant that...that Jim...Jim... Oh, God, Jim.

Blair, heart in his throat, started scanning the injured, looking for a face he knew as well as his own.

"Blair?"

One word. One voice - and just like that - Blair's world righted. He turned around to find Jim standing tall, clothes covered in blood.

Blair immediately reached out but Jim stopped him. "Not mine. You okay?"

Relieved, Blair nodded even as he found himself being carefully steered to where a stunned Simon stood, one hand rubbing his jaw while he focused on what was happening at his feet. Blair let his own gaze follow Simon's.

"Oh, dear God," he thought as he stared at the devastation on the ground before him.

A bloodied Martin sat on the ground, Peter cradled in his arms. Even as he rocked and shook his head in denial, the paramedics continued to try to pull Peter's lifeless body away. Blair felt the hot prick of tears even as his gaze was wrenched to the right where Luis was being loaded onto an ambulance. He was alive, conscious, obviously in pain, but he was looking down, down at one of two covered stretchers, side-by-side in the sunlight, awaiting the coroner's van. Blair knew without asking that if he were to lift the blanket, he'd find their Beth.

He swallowed the bile building up in his throat even as he looked at the other stretcher, at a pale Megan who sat on the ground beside it, her hand under the blanket, a tear-streaked Joel beside her, his arms around her as he gave comfort the only way he could.

How had this happened? How could they all be...no, it wasn't possible. He shook his head - back and forth, back and forth. None of this was possible.
Even as he denied it all, Jim spoke softly, filling him in, telling him how Beth had killed instantly, the first bullet striking her in the neck. Peter had regained consciousness just long enough to see his lover's face before dying in Martin's arms - and Luis, although alive and conscious, had been hit in the leg and the paramedics didn't hold out a lot of hope for saving it.

And finally, with a voice that cracked with emotion, Jim whispered of Rafe's heroism, that he'd been dead before his Blazer had come to a stop.

Blair felt tears threatening again even though his mind and body were still trying to deny the truth of Jim's emotion-filled words. This was too much - too much loss - and therefore, in his mind, at that moment, it simply couldn't be true. He started forward, to go to whom, he didn't know, but he was stopped by a loud, angry, and accusing voice easily overriding Jim's.

"Banks, where is he? Where's the man you assholes had inside? I want him now!"

The man's rage was palpable, his face flushed red with it. Simon started forward, but Blair beat him to it even as he said softly, "I was inside."

Before anyone could react, Agent Lister, the man responsible for the yelling, flew at Blair, grabbed him by his shirt and shoved him back like a man possessed. They crashed into a concrete column, causing Blair's head to snap back, striking the concrete before flopping forward. He was barely aware of Jim and Simon, moving as one to help, but before they reached him, Lister wrenched Blair away from the wall and struck him with all the force behind what appeared to be an insane rage.

Blair lurched back, struck the wall again and, this time, slid to the ground just as Jim and Simon succeeded in grabbing Lister. Stunned, Blair sat where he'd landed, only vaguely aware of more talking and yelling because, at the moment, he didn't really care. He managed to glance over at the covered bodies again…and decided nothing really mattered.

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Simon grabbed the agent, his own anger, fears and grief finally finding an outlet. Once he had him away from Jim, he lifted the man as if he were nothing more than a rag doll and tossed him away like garbage.

Jim, once the target of his rage had been taken from him, remembered his partner and got to Blair's side just as he was struggling to stand. Putting his arm around him, he helped Blair to his feet.

"You okay, Chief?"

Turning his head with great difficulty, Blair nodded even as he moved his hand absently to the back of his head. "Fine...I'm fine."

Two other agents, seeing - and hearing - their boss, quickly joined them and were now helping Lister stand. Once on his feet, instead of backing down, he once again turned to Blair and resumed his ranting.

"This is your fault! What the fuck were you doing in there?"

Blair blinked in confusion a couple of times before his eyes widened in horror and he turned again toward his friends; at Peter, still enfolded within Martin's protective embrace - at Megan, still stroking Rafe's hand under the sheet - but before he could say anything, Simon stuck his face an inch from Lister's and yelled back, "You son of a bitch! Three of my people are dead and at least two civilians. In my book, buster, there's only one person at fault and that's you! Now get the fuck away from me..."
and my people or I won't be held responsible for my actions!"

One of the other agents began to pull Lister away, his own face flushed with shame while the other agent took in the horror around them, at Blair, before finally facing Simon, apology in his eyes. "I… I'm sorry, Captain. We'll…we'll leave you alone."

With that - he was gone.

Simon took several deep, steadying breaths, then started to reassure Blair, but before he could utter a word, Blair stumbled forward and, face contorted in pain, asked, "Is this my fault? I did…I did this, Simon?" His voice cracked with emotion as, with eyes pleading with him to say it wasn't true, he stared up at his boss, adding, "I didn't know...how could…how could I have...."

His voice finally broke and, as Blair took his hand away from the back of his head, both Jim and Simon could see the blood smeared across his palm and fingers.

Jim moved in closer, to check out Blair's injury, but his action caused Blair to turn to him and helplessly ask, "Please, Jim, man, please, I'm so sorry, so...sorry. Just...so...I don't understand… Peter...Beth.... Oh, God, Jim...Rafe…Rafe is dead…."

With that, Blair's eyes rolled back in his head, jerked sharply and then pitched forward - and into Jim's arms

***

Simon sat down in the corridor between ER and the waiting room. Drained of all energy, he dropped his head into his hands.

Three of his people dead - another might lose his leg - and still another - Blair - in a coma. After several seconds, he checked the time; and his heart clenched within his chest.

Five-thirty.

If nothing had happened, Blair would be a detective now. Although, technically, ceremony or not - he was already Simon's newest rookie. Simon just wondered if Blair would ever have the chance to finally be Jim's official partner.

Afraid of the answer, he sat back and rested his head against the wall. Eyes closed, he whispered an anguished, "Dear God."

He'd just come down from Luis Maldonado's room where he'd left Tirza Maldonado sitting quietly by her father's side; pale, brave, and aware enough to ask about Beth and her family, not to mention taking the time to reassure him that her dad would be fine, would be back on the job in no time.

She was a hell of a woman, already.

In fact, Tirza had provided the one bright moment in the hours following the fiasco at the post office. She'd shown him an expression of hope after too many faces full of shock and loss.

Like Sam Jenkins.

Simon had driven to Beth's home, to personally deliver the news to Sam, who'd stood on the porch; tall, stiff, and silent, two small children behind him. The man's face had given nothing away, but his
eyes…God, Simon could still them, dark and bruised with the grief that was starting to break through his defenses. Once the words had been spoken, there'd been little Simon could do but leave them alone to deal, to begin a life without a beloved wife and a caring, loving mother.

For Brian Rafe, there'd been no family to visit - only a phone call to make, to Rafe's brother in Colorado, but it had been no easier just because of the absence of a pair of grief-stricken eyes. Then Simon had to tell Henri Brown, the man he'd left behind. Had to tell him that his partner was dead. Henri had taken the news with uncharacteristic quiet. A scary kind of quiet.

The fact that Rafe had died saving his fellow officers might have brought Rafe's brother little comfort - but it had helped Brown. The only words spoken by the big man had been in response to that information.

"That's how he'd want to go…"

Rubbing his forehead, Simon thought briefly of Megan. He'd known that she and Rafe were attracted to each other, had watched its beginnings, observed them both as their feelings grew - not unlike Jim and Blair.

Damn, what did that say about his department? Breaking all the rules…and yet….

Fuck.

Okay, back to business, back to the ones left behind. He knew Megan was strong, tough, she'd weather this. Never be the same, never could be, but she'd come out the other side in one piece. He'd wanted to take her home, but she'd insisted on going back to the station, to work, to be with Henri.

Luis…well, Simon didn't doubt for a minute that Tirza was right, that he'd persevere, especially with her by his side - pushing.

Then there was Martin, who'd finally relinquished Peter's body after seeing Blair collapse. Once the ambulances had left the parking lot, Simon had hustled Martin into his car, instinctively knowing that he needed to be with Peter's family. Once at the Sbarro home, Martin had finally spoken as he insisted on being the one to tell them. It was an easy thing to allow because Simon had known that Peter's father, George Sbarro, a retired cop, would already know, which meant the family would know. And sure enough, when he pulled up in front of the green house on Edison, the front door had opened and six Sbarro's spilled out, crying, arms open, quickly taking Martin into their fold.

George, upon seeing Simon standing alone on the sidewalk, had immediately separated himself to join him. The two men had faced each other, silent, knowing, until George pulled Simon into his huge embrace, crying openly for his son, for Martin, for all the dead and injured…and for Simon.

The Sbarro's would help, but Martin had a rough road ahead of him - he loved Peter so damn much - and that thought brought Simon to…Jim.

Which brought Simon…to Jim. He opened his eyes and sat up straight. He needed to get back up to ICU, to Blair. And yes, he knew full well that he'd find Jim exactly where he'd left him a few hours ago.

At least Blair was alive to return to in ICU. A small miracle among all the carnage of the afternoon. And Blair was, as Simon had learned earlier, a real hero. He'd saved two women and three children - proven himself in the toughest possible circumstances, kept his head and helped keep things as calm as possible until one stupid man had fired his weapon and an egotistical bastard had ordered an all-out assault on the post office. But damn it, others might be home with their families tonight because
of Blair, but his newest rookie was in ICU thanks to one arrogant son-of-a-bitch.

"How are we going to survive this? Will we survive this?" he murmured to no one. And since there was no one to answer him - he had to place his faith in God.

Pushing himself to his feet, feeling older than his years, he walked over to the elevator.

It was time to face Jim and Blair again.

He rode silently up to ICU, stepped out of the elevator, rounded the corner toward the entrance - and came to a dead stop. He shouldn't be so shocked - but he was.

Sitting on chairs opposite the double doors were Megan, Brown and Joel. All three watched him as he approached, with Joel quickly getting to his feet. "They had to come, Simon. Henri needed... He needed to see Rafe and I couldn't stop him. Then we checked on Luis and after that...well, we came up here."

Simon glanced past his friend and at the doors that stood between them and Blair, then looked back at Connor and Brown. Yeah, he understood. "It's all right, Joel," he said reassuringly. "Has there been any news? Have you seen Jim?"

"A few minutes ago." Joel smiled wryly. "The nurses forced him to leave long enough to at least stretch his legs and he gave us an update." The grin faded. "No change. They're hoping they can avoid surgery to relieve the pressure, but...."

The 'but' hung in the air over their heads like a guillotine. Simon's gaze returned to the doors as he asked, "I take it he's gone back in? Won't go home?"

"You got that right," Henri said, speaking for the first time.

"Damn."

Simon straightened his shoulders, took a breath, walked to the doors and pushed the 'enter' button. A moment later, the doors whooshed open to reveal a nurse. Simon flashed his badge and she nodded, knowing precisely who he was there to see. She stepped aside and, as he crossed the threshold and the doors shut behind him, he felt sympathy for his people who could only wait on the other side.

Approaching Blair's cubicle, he could see Jim, silent and still - as immobile as his partner. Simon swore an oath under his breath and then murmured, "I'm not going to lose either of them. I'm not. I won't let it happen."

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Five days later-

Simon could feel the exhaustion as he parked the car in front of Cascade General. For the last five days, he and his people had kept vigil over both Jim and Blair - the only break in their routine to bury their comrades. Now, returning from Mount Hope Cemetery for the third and, God, please, the final time, Simon knew that no department should have to go through something this. Not the loss of three of their own followed by three funerals, each one only a day apart. Facing three sets of families and friends, all in shock, all so full of grief that no words, no comfort, could help.

All three ceremonies had been gut wrenching as Major Crime and the Cascade Police Department gathered to pay honor to their own, to say their final farewells. But damn it, Simon knew none of it should have been necessary. Not farewells that were bitter and full of anger because three fine
people, three individuals needed by families, friends, their fellow officers and the city, were all cut down before their time.

He thought of Beth - no - Detective Beth Jenkins - only thirty-six - and now with the dubious honor of becoming the first female officer in the history of the Cascade P.D. to die in the line of duty. He figured it was an honor both she and her family could have done without.

Then there was Detective Peter Sbarro, thirty, the second youngest on the team, giving up his life for his partner - a partner both on and off the job.

And finally - Brian Rafe - Detective Brian Rafe - thirty-three and hailed a hero by the city, his friends and yes, Simon, for putting his fellow officers ahead of his own safety and, ultimately, ahead of his own life.

For cops, risks were an accepted part of the job, everyone knew it. Suddenly Simon struck the edge of the steering wheel hard as his mind screamed, "But not this time! This time it shouldn't have happened."

Oh, sure, they'd all felt some satisfaction when Lister had been suspended and the foolish agent who'd fired the opening salvo had been terminated, but knowing that Lister would face criminal charges - and that if Blair died - those charges would include murder - well, no one wanted to go there.

For Simon, well, he'd gladly give up any sense of justice in exchange for having his people back, hale and hearty. He wanted Rafe, Peter and Beth alive, working, laughing and loving again. He wanted Blair seated next to Jim, rolling his eyes every time Simon tried to sound gruff with him. But nothing could bring them back or assuage the massive loss or intense grief - so he mourned with the rest of the men and women of the Cascade P.D., while holding on to the one remaining team member still fighting for his life.

***

Jim rested his hand lightly on top of Blair's. He knew Simon was somewhere nearby, was conscious of others coming and going, but he paid them no attention, his entire being concentrated on Blair.

Skull fracture with complications thanks to the intense beating his brain had taken. The doctors were pleased that they'd been lucky in controlling the fluid build up, that surgery wasn't necessary, but Doctor Kennedy, the primary on Blair's case, couldn't, even now, predict the extent of damage or if Blair woke up - no, when - Blair woke up, if any damages suffered would be permanent. At the swelling was finally going down and that was supposedly hopeful.

Hopeful or not, for Jim - as long as Blair remained in a coma - his life was on hold.

He knew the funerals had come and gone, but he'd missed them. No way would he leave Blair - not with the unreasoning fear that Blair would let go if Jim left. That belief kept him rooted to the chair, getting up only to use the bathroom. He slept in the bed next to his partner, sleeping and eating at his bedside. Now he ran a finger in slow circles over Blair's hand, letting his eyes roam over every feature of his face, willing himself into Blair, willing his strength into Blair by the sheer force of his gaze.

Hadn't he done it once before? And he'd do it again - he'd bring his partner back.

Suddenly Jim felt the fingers move within his grasp. Leaning forward to encourage Blair, he was shocked when his partner's eyes flew open.
It was nine-thirty in the morning and it had been six days.

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Blair blinked a couple of times, yawned, looked slowly around the room, frowned, and finally looked at the man sitting in a chair by his bed. The man was holding his hand and he found that it felt good - but strange. Confused, he gazed about the room again before asking, "Where's mommy?"

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Jim watched confusion enter the blue eyes staring at him and, worried, observed Blair as he looked around the room, almost as if searching for someone. Then, in a voice strangely young and hesitant, he asked, "Where's mommy?"

Mommy? Mommy?

Suddenly scared shitless, Jim nevertheless leaned over and, in a voice as gentle as he could make it, asked, "Blair, do you know where you are?"

Blair took another look around and finally guessed, "Hospital?"

Before Jim could ask anything else, the doctor on call, Dr. Nichols, along with Blair's ICU nurse hurried in, alerted by the finger monitor.

Seeing his patient awake and apparently aware, Dr. Nichols said softly, "Well, looks like Mr. Sandburg has finally decided to wake up."

Blair looked past him and the nurse, past the open door, obviously still searching for Naomi. This was confirmed when he asked again, his voice impossibly vulnerable, "Mommy, where's my Mommy?" His fingers instinctively closed around Jim's hand as he added, "And Deva, where's Deva? I need Deva, please."

Surprised by the youthful sounding voice and obvious regression, Dr. Nichols looked at Jim, who could only give a worried shrug. Turning his attention back to his patient, Nichols asked gently, "Do you know your name?"

Blair gave him what could only be considered a disgusted look and answered, "A'course, silly. Blair. I'm Blair." Then he glanced back at the empty doorway and asked, "Is my mommy away?"

Nichols moved to the other side of the bed and put down the railing. Placing a hand on Blair's shoulder, he said, "I'm not sure where your mother is, Blair, but we'll find her, don't worry. Can you tell me how old you are?"

Blair looked at everyone in the room as if they should know, but obviously decided to play the grown-up game anyway, so he held up the five fingers on his right hand and as he wiggled one on his left, said, "Six. I'm six." But then he dropped his eyes and added somewhat grudgingly, "Almost. I'm almost six." Then he glanced back up and asked hopefully, "Can I have Deva now?"

Jim, fear was forcing his heart to beat so hard, he was certain he was going to pull an Alien act any minute, but still, he managed to say gently, "Blair, I'm Jim, a friend of your mother's. She's away right now, but I know she'll get here as soon as possible."

"Oh." Then more thoughtfully, he asked, "Are you mommy's boyfriend?"

Smiling at that - and remembering Blair's anger with him the first time he'd made an appreciative
remark about Naomi, Jim shook his head. "No, just a friend - and yours too."

Blair seemed to consider that for a moment before accepting it wholeheartedly. With a bright smile, he said, "'Kay. So you can get me Deva?"

Nichols looked over at Jim, his expression clearly stating that somehow, Jim should know what Blair was talking about, but all Jim could do was give another puzzled shrug and shake his head.

The doctor turned his attention back to Blair for some more skillful questioning. Smiling, he said, "Blair, I'm Dr. Nichols and I'm here to take care of you. I'd like to get this 'Deva' for you, so maybe you could tell us just who Deva is?"

"My best friend. Je pro-teks me. Please, can't I have him now?"

"Well, can you describe him for us so that Jim can locate him?"

Blair actually rolled his eyes, but it was far from the grown-up version - so far that it was like a punch in the gut for Jim.

Using the kind of patient voice usually reserved for parents addressing children, he answered, "He doesn't look like anything. He's my jagwar and he's soft and keeps me warm." Blair frowned and wagged a warning index finger at them. "But he's not a panther or a leopard, he's jagwar. Don't call him a panther or a leopard or he'll gro-o-w-l." Holding up his hand and wrinkling his fingers like claws, he proceeded to make a low growling noise deep in his throat to illustrate his obviously very important point.

Looking properly chastised, Nichols asked, "Er...just how big is this...this jaguar?"

"Little, like me - and stuffed." Then with a smug grin, Blair added, "He's not real, silly."

The red flush currently creeping up Dr. Nichols neck told Jim that the man had, even if just for a moment, believed 'Deva' was indeed, real. He could also see the instant he relegated Deva to the category of 'imaginary friend'.

"Well, I'm sure Jim, here, can find this jaguar for you. In the meantime, I need to check you out because you took quite a bump to your head, okay?"

"But my head doesn't hurt - although I'm thirsty. May I please have some water?"

"We can certainly take care of that." Nichols turned to the nurse, who nodded and hurried out. He then looked over at Jim and, indicating the door, asked, "Detective, would you step out for a few minutes?"

Leaving Blair was the last thing Jim wanted to do and he wanted nothing more than to refuse, but then Blair, who'd been clinging to his hand like a life preserver, suddenly released him. Chin lifted slightly, he said rather boldly, "It's okay, I'm very brave."

Unable to help the smile, Jim found himself nodding. "Yes, you are. But I'll be right outside if you need me." At Blair's answering - if somewhat tremulous - grin, Jim got to his feet and, with a backward glance at his partner, left the cubicle. He could have remained standing by the nurses station, but he knew his friends were waiting for word and they deserved to know that Blair was awake - they deserved to know everything.

Out in the corridor, he found Connor and Joel, both looking almost as haggard as he felt. He barely had time to prepare himself before Joel was on his feet and asking, "Any change?"
Looking from one to the other, noting Megan's pale features and red rimmed eyes, he suddenly wondered if he should tell them everything - or simply tell them Blair was awake - and knew who he was. He'd just about decided to do just that when Megan joined them. Looking at their faces, at the anxiety and worry etched into their features, he understood that he owed them - and everyone else waiting - the truth.

Rubbing his eyes, he finally said, "He's awake but he's not--"

"Brain damage?" Megan gasped out. "Say it, Jim. Just say it."

"He…he's… He knows who he is…but he…it's as if he's…"

Jim stopped, took a deep breath, and spit it out. "He's the five-year-old Blair."

Both his friends were stunned, to say the least, both giving quick, disbelieving glances at the ICU doors before looking back to Jim again.

Remembering Blair's need for the stuffed animal, and in effort to stem any further questions for which he had no answers, Jim quickly asked, "Joel, could you do me a favor and head down to the gift shop, see if they have a stuffed black cat?"

Joel's expression at the request nearly tore Jim apart. The odd request went the distance to giving his earlier words credence and Jim suddenly felt as though his legs could no longer hold him. He sank into the seat just vacated by Megan and lowered his face into his hands. A hand squeezing his shoulder was followed by a whispered, "You okay?" from Joel.

"I'm…fine. Blair…he wants… I guess he had this stuffed animal when he was young and I'm hoping… He really wants it, Joel."

The words were spoken so softly, so gently, and with so much love, that Megan felt the tears that seemed to be a constant threat lately - spill down her cheeks. Choking back the lump in her throat, she said, "I'll go, Jim. Henri took…he took Bri's brother to the airport so maybe Joel can let everyone at the station know?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course, that would be… Tell everyone…tell them…thanks for me, okay?"

Both Joel and Megan nodded and, as Joel took her hand in his, they walked away.

Watching them disappear behind the elevator door, Jim cocked his head in order to listen to the doctor working with Blair. He might be gone, but no way would he be left out of any loop concerning his partner. At the moment, Blair was answering every question in what had to be the five-year-old Blair's 'brave' voice. Listening to him seemed to refuel an old anger - one he'd thought he'd long since stamped out.

His anger with Naomi.

And not just because they'd still been unable to find her, although that was certainly more than enough. No, there was also his fury at the number of times Blair had been left alone as a child while Naomi trotted off to some new land in order to 'find' herself. Sure, she'd taken her son with her often enough, but it was the times she hadn't that bothered him.

"Detective Ellison?"

Jim had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he'd allowed Blair's doctor to approach without his awareness. Jumping to his feet, he asked, in a less than steady voice, "Well?"
Nichols indicated the chairs and, after both were seated, said, "Keeping this as basic as possible, I believe the injury to Mr. Sandburg's brain has damaged some cells - which may be the cause of his regression. Although...it's also possible that what we're seeing is psychological. In either case, the last thing he remembers is playing in a backyard." The man glanced away for a moment, gave a small, disbelieving shake of his head before adding, "Whatever the medical or psychological reason, as far as Mr. Sandburg is concerned - he's five years old."

The doctor wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already figured out, thank you very much. Which made him mad. Very mad, because the man looked as though he was finished - done. Nothing more to say. In fact, he was getting up.

Sorry, bud, no way. One question - one very important question - not answered. Jim grabbed the doctor's arm, a bit tighter than intended and, swallowing the lump in his throat, he asked, "How long?"

That was it. The question. No need to elaborate, the doctor knew exactly what Jim was asking.

"Detective, I'd be a fool to try to give you any kind of accurate answer to that question until we're sure of the cause. I've ordered another scan and a couple of other tests that will hopefully shed some light on what's going on. In addition, a psychologist will be seeing him later today. That's all I can give you for now," he finished, the touch of regret in his voice audible to Jim.

With no choice but to accept the man's words, Jim got to his feet. "May I go back?"

It was a testament to the depth of his shock and fear that he was asking rather than telling, and it didn't skip the doctor's notice. Smiling faintly, Nichols answered, "Of course. In fact, what with all the testing, well, we're dealing with a child, for all intents and purposes, and he seemed to trust you instinctively, so you can help prepare him."

With a wry grin, Jim said, "Hell, I'd have to do that if we were dealing with the adult Sandburg. He hates - hated - hospitals. Although he loved the nurses." With that, he got tiredly to his feet and headed back into ICU and Blair's cubicle.

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Jim's exhaustion seemed to drain away when he saw the huge smile on Blair's face at Jim's entrance. It went a good distance toward reassuring him that even though this Blair had no memory of him, he was already not only accepted, but wanted.

"You came back!"

Taking what he now considered 'his' chair, Jim re-claimed Blair's hand, prying it gently from the blanket Blair was currently strangling. "Yep, I'm back and plan to stay as long as you want."

At his words, Blair's muscles relaxed, but then he started fidgeting as he shifted his eyes away from Jim's face and said apologetically, "I...I don't remember you, do I? I should, though, shouldn't I?"

"It's okay Blair, your took a nasty bump on the head." That was all he could say - the only explanation possible for why the five-year-old Blair shouldn't remember him.

Eyes full of curiosity, Blair asked, "How did I get hurt this time?"

Jim didn't like the 'this time' and vowed to find out more about it, but in the meantime, he answered, "You fell. It was an accident."
Blair seemed relieved by the answer, but then his eyes darkened as he asked, his voice even more vulnerable, "Mickey wasn't there, was he? Mommy promised she'd make sure he didn't come over anymore and I know she'll get mad if he was there."

Puzzled that he'd never heard a reference to this 'Mickey' fellow, Jim shook his head. "No, no, Blair, there was no Mickey. Again, it was just an accident."

A sudden delighted squeak from Blair stopped further conversation as Blair reached out eager hands and exclaimed, "Deva!" as Megan walked in, a stuffed black cat in her hand. She put it into his arms and, once there, Blair hugged the stuffed cat to his chest, dropping his cheek onto the soft, furry head. His eyes closed dreamily as he cuddled and rocked gently.

Jim shot a grateful glance at Connor, who was watching Blair, eyes wide and moist.

"You found him, you really found him," Blair crooned.

Megan could do nothing but stare at the full grown man, her friend, who was now acting like a small boy. But at least, at the moment, a happy boy. She thought her heart might break all over again. Blair looked up then and the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen spread across his face as he looked at her with immediate love, trust and acceptance. It nearly took her breath away.

Smiling at the interchange between them, Jim decided introductions were in order. "Blair, this is Megan Connor, a friend of mine - and yours."

"Megy, you found him."

"Well, in all honesty, it was Jim who told me where to go," she said as her mind reeled at being called 'Megy', a name no one had used but her family. Feeling tears threaten again, she brought her hand up and roughly rubbed them away.

Looking guilty, Blair turned to Jim and said sadly, "I forgot Megy too, didn't I?"

"It's all right, she understands. Friends always understand."

"Okay," he said happily before holding out one of Deva's paws toward Megan. "I'm Blair and this is Deva and he's my friend and keeps me safe."

Megan shook the proffered paw while smiling back at Blair. Once done shaking, he turned the cat back to face him and placed the plastic black nose up against his own. With a gently scolding tone, he said, "But he didn't do a very good job this time...a'course, he were lost." He then added softly, "Not your fault, though. Nope, not your fault."

Blair finally lifted his head, covered the cat's ears with his hands and whispered, "He gets so sad if he thinks he hasn't pro-tec-ted me, but this wasn't his fault - was it?"

Jim stared at the animal and felt as if someone had just ripped out his guts. How could he not have seen it immediately. A black jaguar. A protective black jaguar. Jesus. His spirit guide? With five-year-old Blair?

How had he missed it? The moment Blair had described Deva, he should have known. God, Blair with a black jaguar. His spirit guide with Blair.

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He watched as Blair groomed Deva; cooing softly while picking out bits of dust and combing through the fur with his fingers - between major hugging.

Megan was gone, having reluctantly taken her leave when the nurse arrived with Blair's first meal, but, before saying goodbye, she'd learned far more about the difference between jaguars from South America, panthers from Asia, and leopards from both Asia and Africa then she could possibly have wanted to know. Jim was still grinning at the memory of how both of them had marveled at the information rattling around in Blair's five-year-old brain. It had always been so easy to accept that he was a fountain of information at thirty, but that was a far cry from realizing how much he'd already stored up as a child.

Jim's grin broadened as he pictured the moment Connor had dropped a kiss on top of Blair's head in preparation for leaving and then been cajoled into kissing Deva as well after Blair whispered something about how, "He'll be in 'possible to live with otherwise."

She'd left the room humming.

It had been a good moment.

Almost as much fun as watching Blair eat his first meal; cereal and juice. Even while eating, he staunchly refused to put Deva down. Instead, he talked to him, told him juice was bad, very bad, for jaguars and no, he couldn't have any cereal either...all of which was followed by a sly look up through his lashes at the nurse as he'd murmured that maybe she might bring some chocolate for the feline. The nurse, not about to be hoodwinked, had immediately clucked and told Blair that chocolate was bad for cats.

Grinning, Blair had nodded in agreement and the proceeded to tell her that, "Devah was 'speshal and could eat chocolate, but that you should never give chocolate to a regular cat or dog. Never."

The nurse, knowing she'd just been bested, had given him a knowing nod before telling him she'd see what she could do about scrounging up some chocolate, "...for Deva of course - and would Mr. Sandburg maybe like some too?"

Blair had been thrilled to be called 'Mr. Sandburg' even as he'd appeared to give the question great thought - as if he hadn't wanted the chocolate all along - before finally telling her that maybe he could eat some too, just so Deva had company. After all, "...you should never eat chocolate alone."

"This isn't the real Deva, you know."

Jim blinked, coming back to the present with a jolt. He should have known they couldn't fool Blair, but he'd hoped. So, now, like any good - parent - he obfuscated while feigning cheerfulness. "Why, sure it is."

Blair just shook his head gently. "Nope, Megy bought him, but it's okay 'cuz the real Deva just hopped right in. I saw him. He was sitting right over there," he pointed to a spot behind Jim, "and when he saw this one, he just jumped in." He tried to wink conspiratorially, but both eyes kind of closed, one squinting shut tighter than the other. "You see, this is a leopard, but Deva doesn't mind." Then he gave Jim a worried glance before asking, "Do you?"

"Me? No, I don't mind. Why should I? As long as you two are happy, I'm happy."

Blair seemed to puzzle over this a minute, because evidently, Jim should mind. Finally, face all scrunched up, he said, "But...this Deva is your Deva."

"O-kay...then I'm very glad he's with you."
That was obviously the correct answer because he was immediately rewarded with a dazzling smile. Blair raised his right hand, hunched low over the cat and, wiggling his fingers to indicate that Jim should come closer, Blair whispered, "Deva's purring." He then took Jim's hand and placed it over the cat's chest. "Can you hear it?"

Jim felt the warmth of Blair's hand, the steady flow of blood through his veins, felt - and heard - the steady heartbeat.

And then, amazingly enough, he did feel a low, soft rumbling coming from... actually coming from the cat. A sound that could only be called - purring. It didn't last long, but he couldn't deny he'd felt it, or hide his delight in the fact.

Seeing the joy in Jim's face, Blair kicked happily under the covers as his laughter bubbled up. "I knew you would hear it too! Mommy always says she hears and feels it, but I know she doesn't. But your speshul - just like Deva."

It was at that moment that Simon walked in.

***

Simon had been trying to get his department back on line, bringing in temporary replacements for the lost while trying to reduce the number of hours the survivors were working. He'd been playing father, councilor and priest, and yes, he knew he looked as exhausted and drained as he felt. The stress of the last several days was evident in his body language even as he held back his own grief in the face of his surviving detectives, most of whom were now entering the stage of grief that brought forth anger. In other words, his people were sullen, silent and tired.

He'd enjoyed a slight respite today, thanks to stopping off at the park by the hospital and indulging in a few quiet moments with a hot dog and soda from a nearby street vendor. The weight of command was put temporarily on hold as he ate and watched people strolling leisurely by his bench. Eventually, though, it was time to leave the peace of the park and head over to the hospital.

Once inside, he stopped off briefly to see Luis, only to find him sound asleep. A nurse let him know that Tirza was down in the cafeteria, so he figured it was time to check in on Jim and Blair.

He was, in no way, prepared for what greeted him as he walked into Blair's cubicle. He'd missed Joel's call, hadn't checked his messages in the last couple of hours, so walking in and finding Blair not only awake - but giggling? Then Blair's words - and the strange quality to his voice, all combined pull the final rug out from under him.

He reacted accordingly.

"What the hell!?” he exclaimed, his voice loud, booming.

***

"What the hell!?”

Blair, who was in the process of holding Deva out to Jim, froze at the angry tone of the large man standing in the doorway. Deva dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers as Blair, whose lower lip had begun to tremble, bit down hard.

Jim, seeing Blair's reaction, jumped to his feet just as Blair began to chant, "Didsomethinwrong, didsomethinwrong, I'm sorry, didsomethinwrong...."
Blair's breathing started to hitch as tears welled up and spilled over. He reached out blindly, fingers searching for Deva as he continued his sorrowful litany. "Did something wrong, did something wrong...."

Jim gave Simon a choppy cut-off motion with his hand before quickly sitting down on the bed. He picked up the stuffed cat, placed him in Blair's questing hands before taking him, cat and all, into his arms. "It's okay, Blair...it's okay. You didn't do anything wrong, nothing at all." He stroked Blair's back as Blair gasped and stuttered out, "Yes, yes, did something wrong, did something wrong...but I'll be good, be good, don't hurt, be good."

At the frightening idea that Blair thought anyone would hurt him, Jim shot Simon an agonizing, almost pleading look as he silently begged him to do something - anything - to help.

Simon came back to Earth with a thud, recovered his equilibrium and, because he was a father, he reacted instinctively - even though he had no clue what was going on. He moved slowly into the room and, in a voice softer than most of his people would have believed possible from such a large man, said, "You are good, Blair. Very good. This was my fault, not yours."

The gasping breaths slowed to a few hiccoughs and, even though Blair still wasn't looking at him, Simon continued in the same gentle tone he'd often used on his son. "You know...I was just wondering...how in the heck my..."

He paused and looked at Jim who, smiling, mouthe the word 'jaguar'.

"...my jaguar got here because I could have sworn I left him at home. Of course, now that I see him up close, it's obvious he's not mine. Nope, not mine at all."

Blair took in a few small gulps of air as he cautiously slid around to blink up at Simon. Keeping a tight grip on Deva, he lifted his head to gaze up at Jim from under wet lashes, his face both questioning and trusting as he asked, "Not...bad?"

Pulling back enough to make eye contact, Jim ran his thumb over tear-streaked cheeks, wiping the moisture away, and said, "Nope, not bad, Blair. You're very good and this," he glanced over at Simon, "this is Simon, my boss. He's very good too...except when he thinks he's lost his stuffed cat and mistakes a five-year-old's--"

Blair waggled one finger at Jim, who quickly amended, "Sorry, an almost six-year-old's cat for his, then he's a bear."

Simon gave a slight insulted-sounding huff, causing Blair to look at him. With the open appraisal only seen in children, he inspected Simon and finally came to what was apparently a positive conclusion about him. He held Deva out to Simon and said, "Wanna pet him? He won't bite, he's stuffed."

Feeling only slightly odd, Simon carefully reached out and scratched behind the cat's ears. Blair giggled delightedly and wiggled in Jim's arms, "He likes you, that's his favorite thing in the whole wide...world." The last word was stretched out thanks to a long yawn.

"Blair, do you mind if I sit with you and Jim for awhile?"

Clearly tired, Blair shook his head slowly even as Jim continued to make gentle circular patterns over Blair's back while he rocked ever so slightly, back and forth, back and forth. Blair's breathing quieted, finally evened out, and he slept.

After several minutes, Jim gently backed off the bed and lowered Blair's head to the pillow. Blair
stirred slightly, but only long enough to pull the cat closer to his chest and bury his face in the soft, fake fur.

Jim stood and motioned that they move outside.

***

The two men sat across from each other in the cafeteria, both with large cups of coffee in their hands.

After leaving Blair's room, Simon decided Jim needed food and coffee and, ignoring his protests, had herded him into the elevator and down to the cafeteria. Now, twenty minutes and two helpings of bacon and eggs later, they sat quietly, letting the day catch up to them.

Eventually Simon had to know what the hell was going on, so he broke the exhausted and strained silence. "Tell me everything and what the hell was that "done something wrong" shit? I've never heard anything that scared me as much as listening to him like that."

"I wish I could tell you, but I don't have a clue. The one thing I do know is that Naomi never lifted a finger against Blair. Never." He took a sip of his coffee before adding, "Earlier, when he first woke up, he asked how he'd been hurt this time and asked if someone named Mickey had been there and how Naomi had promised not to him come back. I'm guessing it's all connected somehow, but I'm sure as hell not going to ask."

Jim paused then, taking deep breaths to re-center himself, subconsciously listening to Blair's guide words, letting them wash over him, soothing him as he readied himself to give Simon all the information on Blair's condition.

***

"...so that's basically it. He has all of his five-year-old memories intact, doesn't seemed to be surprised that Naomi isn't here or that he's been left with someone, but he doesn't know where here is."

"Shit."

Jim nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that about sums it up. The doctor's scheduled more tests for later this afternoon and, hopefully, we'll know more then."

"Okay, so this isn't necessarily mean any of...of what I saw in there...is permanent? He could wake up tomorrow and be our Blair again, right?"

"Our Blair?" Jim asked, smiling slightly at Simon's choice of words.

Grinning for the first time in days, Simon said, "Okay, so this is our Blair too, but you know what I mean. Let's face it, no other department has anyone even remotely like him - or you either, for that matter."

There was nothing Jim could say to that, so after a moment, he asked rather tentatively, "How is everyone?"

Sighing, Simon looked down at his coffee and said, "As well as can be expected. Luis came through the surgery with his leg intact and they think, after several weeks of therapy, he could make a full recovery. Sam is holding up, his sister is him and the kids. As for Connor, well, you know how she is - right now, she's keeping everything close to the chest but somehow, she and Henri are helping each other--"
"Breathe Simon." Jim admonished gently.

His head jerked up. "What?"

"I said, breathe."

Simon swiped a hand over his face and said, "God, I sounded just like Sandburg, didn't I?" He massaged his right temple as he went on. "Martin is staying with Peter's family right now. He's…he's the one I'm really worried about. He's so angry, holding it all in…."  

"Yeah, I can see that. He's mad at Peter."

Simon looked up in surprise. "How the hell…why would he--"

"It's how I'd feel. Mad at Blair for letting himself get killed instead of me, for protecting me instead of himself. Martin wants Peter back, wishes it had been him instead. Simple."

Simon looked hard at Jim, decided now wasn't the time to get into relationships, especially not the complicated one that defined Jim and Blair. Maybe it was time for Jim to take some time away from the hospital - to see his friends - and yes, to say goodbye to those they'd lost. He reached over, took Jim's now empty coffee cup, got to his feet, and said, "Listen, my friend. Blair's asleep and will probably stay that way for a good couple of hours. Why don't you let me sit with him while you go home, shower, shave, change and--"

"I'm not leaving."

Simon went on as if he hadn't heard him, "and then head over to MountHope."

Jim exhaled sharply at Simon's last words.

Mount Hope.

Slowly he slid his chair back and shakily to his feet as Simon watched him cautiously. "Thanks, Simon… Just…thanks."

"Go. I'll take care of him."

***

Jim knelt before the final headstone. The earth was still fresh, many of the floral arrangements still in place. Now as he stared down at the fresh earth, he thought back to the first headstone; to Beth's. He'd run his finger over the etched cross as he'd read the simple words:

Detective Elizabeth Jenkins

1963 - 1999

wife - mother - friend

Jim hadn't been able to stop the memory of the first time she'd sauntered into the locker room, a towel wrapped around her while all the men, Jim included, scrambled over each other to find something to cover themselves up with. She'd watched, grinning like a Cheshire cat until, just as every man could be considered 'presentable', she dropped her towel.

She'd been wearing a black Speedo bathing suit.
From then on, she'd been one of them.

When he'd left her grave, he'd found Peter's - and more freshly turned earth. He'd almost broken down then as he'd flashed back to Peter's first months with Major Crime. Openly gay, cocky as hell, always in trouble, challenging anyone and everyone, and carrying the biggest chip Jim had seen since his own. But he'd also remembered the joy of observing Peter woo Martin, of watching the two men fall in love. The tears had burned behind his eyes, but hadn't fallen - until now, here.

At the last gravestone.

Brian's.

Finally, as he knelt in front of Rafe's gravestone, the tears coursed down his cheeks, unchecked. He rested a hand on the fresh dirt and once again let his mind go back to a young man he'd bumped into while on a case, a kid with tons of questions about being a police officer. Evidently Jim had answered correctly, because Rafe had applied and been accepted to the Academy. He'd started as a beat officer, always there in the background but stepping forward and getting the job done before being asked. Eventually he'd made detective and that led to his ultimate goal: Becoming a member of Major Crime. He'd worked hard, taken all the jokes about his choice of GQ clothing - made a few of his own about Blair's wardrobe - and then he'd fallen like a tree when a certain Australian exchange officer had ended up in Major Crime. She'd taunted him, bullied and teased him, and ended up completely ensnaring him.

Brian - Beth - Peter.

Jim had been forced to say good-bye to so many in his life - and now these three good friends.

He honestly didn't know how many more good-bye's he had left in him.

Jim closed his eyes, said a final prayer, and then straightened. He walked slowly back to his truck but, at the last moment, his hand on the door handle, he had to look back at the serene beauty behind him. Doing what only he could do, he found each gravesite again and whispered, "I'll miss you."

Jim climbed into the truck and made his way back to Cascade General Hospital and Blair.

***

"Why?"

"Because the doctor needs to know that noggin of yours is okay, that's why."

"I know it's okay. It's hard, see?" To illustrate that fact, Blair knocked on the side of his head.

Jim bit back a laugh and tried to remain serious as he said, "I pretty sure it's okay too, and I know it's hard, but let's make Dr. Nichols happy, okay?"

Blair screwed up his face. "I don't want to make him happy, and Dev says no too!"

Jim cocked his head, raised an eyebrow and warned, "Blair…"

The young man looked down, a little flush in his cheeks. "Kay. Maybe Dev didn't exactly say no." He jerked his head up and, hair flying and stubborn chin in evidence, he said stubbornly, "But he's thinking it."

Jim sat on the edge of the bed and took Blair's hand. He could feel the clamminess, could hear his
heart racing and knew just how scared Blair really was. Time to try something else. "Look, do me a favor and let Dr. Nichols run his silly tests, okay? Do it for me?"

Puzzled, Blair asked, "For you?"

"It'll make me feel better."

Looking disgusted, Blair muttered, "Won't make me feel better."

"Blair, the tests won't hurt."

Blair's stubborn chin made another appearance. "I know that, and don't care if they do, I told you, I'm brave."

"Oh yes, I forgot. So then, for me?"

Blair buried his face in Deva, but naturally Jim heard the mumbled, fur-muffled answer.

"Okay."

"Thank you, Blair."

Blair shrugged but then he twisted his head enough to look at Jim - and suddenly he looked all the world like a real five year old, shy and scared. "You sure it won't hurt, right?" he whispered.

"I promise it won't."

"And you'll stay?"

"I'll be with you every step of the way."

"And I can take Dev too?"

"Wouldn't do any of it without him. Although…I might have to hold him a couple of times. Do you think he'll let me?"

Without any preamble, Blair automatically held out the cat. "He loves you, course he'll let you hold him. Here."

Jim gently took the animal and held it against his face. The cat smelled of Blair and was warm with Blair's heat.

Smiling knowingly, Blair said, "See? Told you so. Grownups can be so silly."

Jim peered at Blair over the top of the cat's head and winked at him. "Yeah, but don't spread it around, okay?"

Blair giggled wildly before drawing a line across his lips. "Our secret."

Just then, a nurse came in then and, smiling at her charge, said, "Well, love, we're off for some tests. You ready?"

Blair looked at her, then at Jim, then imploringly at Deva. Jim immediately handed him back and, once resting securely within his arms, Blair said, "I'm ready."

***
It was a long afternoon and Jim didn't know which of them were the more exhausted. Jim's head and jaw were throbbing from all the clenching, unclenching and teeth-grinding. For Blair's part, he'd been very quiet through most of the tests even as he won over every doctor, nurse and technician. Whenever possible, though, Blair clung to Jim with one hand, and Deva with the other. Which reminded Jim that it wasn't only his jaw that ached. He flexed his hand and grinned. Blair might be five as far as his mind was concerned, but it had definitely been the hand of a thirty year old that had been gripping his like a life-line.

The good news of the day had come with the last test when Dr. Nichols informed them that Blair had been moved out of ICU and they'd be returning him to a private room (courtesy of the FBI) on the third floor. For Jim, it was close to heaven. Quieter, and a better chair. Blair must have felt the same because he'd no sooner been moved to his bed, than he'd fallen asleep. Simon had shown up a few minutes after that, but one look at Jim's face and he'd gone on a coffee-food hunt. Which left Jim alone - and waiting impatiently for Dr. Nichols and the test results.

It also left him alone with his thoughts. Not a good thing. The trip to the cemetery had brought him no peace - in fact, he now had a darkness inside of him, one that he knew instinctively Blair would have been able to fill - the grown-up Blair. Instead, here he was, in a hospital room, staring at his partner who was sleeping with a stuffed animal.

Before he could really work up a good case of pity for himself, Dr. Nichols appeared. Seeing that Blair was asleep, he indicated with a nod of his head that Jim should join him outside. Heart in his throat, Jim got up and followed him outside.

"Detective, this is Dr. Gail Marin. Dr. Marin, Detective Ellison."

Jim looked at the physician, a woman in her fifties, short, with shaggy short brown hair streaked with gray. She wore a stylish but conservative suit and, at the introduction, immediately stuck out her hand in greeting. Jim took it, with some hesitation, as all his alarms went off.

"Detective Ellison, Dr. Marin operates The Marin House."


Dr. Marin glanced at Nichols and suggested, "Ben, maybe we should go to your office?"

"Yes, that would probably be better. Detective?"

Jim nodded, but the knot of fear that had been steadily growing, now reached epic proportions.

***

"...so we agree that Marin House is the best place for Mr. Sandburg. At least until his mother can be reached."

Jim had sat quietly through Dr. Nichols entire recitation, the upshot of which was that Blair had no other problems physically. They'd determined that his motor skills were excellent, as was his speech, hearing and mental agility. The CAT scan had shown the doctors nothing more than what they'd already known, that there was still some minor swelling at the base of Blair's skull. So Blair was fine - other than the small wrinkle of his thinking he was the five-year old version of himself. Dr. Nichols went on to say that Blair would need bed rest for several more days but that gradually they would increase his physical activity.

So - that left two still unanswered questions. Time to ask again. Jim leaned forward and asked tersely, "Is it permanent?"
Dr. Nichols glanced over at Dr. Marin and nodded. "We believe so, yes."

Jim closed his eyes against the words. Oh, he'd known the answer - couldn't deny it. But that hadn't stopped him from hoping he'd hear something different. Not that it mattered. The doctors could say anything they wanted - he knew the truth. He knew his Blair would come back, but now wasn't the time for that discussion.

"When can I take him home?"

Nichols sat forward. "Perhaps you didn't understand everything? Blair will never--"

"I understood perfectly and I repeat: When-can-I-take-him-home?"

Dr. Marin cleared her throat and said, "Detective Ellison, you're in no way capable of handling Mr. Sandburg. He's a child in every way that counts, a small child. It's not like he can be left alone when you leave for work. You're simply not prepared to take on this kind of responsibility - but Marin House is. Do you understand?"

"Completely. Now, when can I take him home?" He raised a hand to stop Dr. Nichols who was about to speak. "It's my turn to make something perfectly clear. Blair will come home with me. I will take care of him. He will not go to some home with complete strangers. He will be protected and I'll provide for him. He'll have everything he needs and will want for nothing. And more importantly, he'll be cared for by someone who loves him more than life - more than anything or anyone in this world or the next. Is that clear?" When neither doctor responded, Jim got up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going back to his room and I'll assume that since all he needs is bed rest followed by gradual exercise - I can take him home tomorrow."

With that, he left to doctors with their mouths hanging open.

***

"Jim, this is crazy. You can't possibly believe you can handle Blair under the current circumstances. For God's sake, he needs constant care and professional help."

Against his better judgment, Simon was helping Jim get the loft ready for Blair's return. Jim had explained everything the doctors had told him and then exactly what he intended to do about it. Simon had been able to see just how committed Jim was to caring for Blair, but that hadn't stopped him from trying to talk some sense into his friend. Even while they'd been shopping for Blair's room, he'd tried. But so far, Jim was adamant about his decision. As of tomorrow, Blair would come home.

Now they were in Blair's bedroom and Simon was still trying to get Jim to see the truth while Jim continued to exchange Blair's set of plaid flannel sheets for dinosaur-patterned ones. He'd already tidied up the room and, with slower movements, had removed most of Blair's books, journals, academy study material and some of his scarier artifacts.

He'd completed this task in silence, lips pressed together in a straight line and Simon knew exactly how he was feeling - because it was how he was feeling. It was as if they were putting one Blair away in order to make room for another.

It was killing both of them.

Every time Jim touched a book - like the police manual, already dog-eared, laid open and highlighted, or picked up one of the many items Blair had collected over the years, his hand would falter, shake slightly, but then he'd clear his throat, blink several times as if to clear his vision, and
They both picked up pencils and pens with tips chewed by an obsessive Blair, several notepads filled with Blair's sprawling handwriting, Post-It notes with scribbled reminders about police procedure, laws and codes...and for Simon, it was like another chink of armor was falling - leaving him frail and open, all defenses down. And if he felt that way - it had to be a hundred times worse for Jim - who was already looking completely drained - stubborn, but drained.

Eventually, they were done. The sheets had been replaced, there was a new comforter with a picture of several jungle cats on the bed - and sitting on the desk, instead of reminders of who Blair had been, there were now items for who he was now.

As Simon looked around the room, at the comics, the small toys and children's books, he had to admit that even while ranting and raving about Jim's lunatic idea as they'd walked down every aisle of the store, his own experience as a father had come in pretty handy. He'd helped Jim pick out the kind of items a bright, intelligent five-year-old would enjoy - and all right - more specifically, that Blair would enjoy.

Now he watched as Jim patted the comforter, straightening it even more than it already was, taking more time than even his military training or his own anal perfectionism required. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was simply trying to keep his fingers busy, hands occupied, mind focused on the mundane. Simon gave a small shake of his head and decided to give it one more try, to attempt to make Jim understand.

"Okay, so now you have a room for a kid - except Blair isn't. He may have the mind of one, but he's still--"

"Simon."

He paused mid-lecture, short circuited by the plea behind the simple use of his name. "Jim, I'm just trying to--"

"Do you really expect me to leave him at that home with strangers who don't know him? With people who don't understand him or love him? Is that what you would do?"

Suddenly, in the face of Jim's simple, heartfelt words, all of Simon's arguments, logic and careful reasoning flew right out the window. He dropped down onto the bed, legs suddenly weak. "No...no, of course not." He glanced up at his friend, one final question, more rhetorical than anything else, because the answer didn't matter. "But how?"

"Obviously I'll need some time off, time to find the right person who can come in during the day, but it will work. And you know this is where Blair belongs - here - with me."

Truth was truth and even Simon had to accept it. Somehow, Jim would make it work. But there still other issues to deal with and now was the best time to talk about them.

"You know he's going to have questions as he starts getting out - notices the differences between himself and others. Will you be prepared to answer them? And what about Naomi? What happens when she finally shows up? And what about the daily tasks like...well, like shaving, for instance? Shit, Jim, this is just too damn complicated."

Jim sat down next to Simon, close enough that their shoulders just touched. "Simon, according to Dr. Nichols, Blair sees himself as he was at five - he isn't going to notice any differences. Besides, you've seen how easily he accepted me, how easily he accepted everything." He looked down at the
comforter, smoothed his hand over it again, and added, "It will work, trust me. Oh, and...there's one other thing - something I never really mentioned before, about the whole Sentinel thing--"

"Yeah, about that. How are you going to--"

"Simon, will you listen?" At Simon's reluctant nod, Jim went on. "Look, I have something Blair called a spirit guide. It's a...you're not going to believe...Okay, look, it's a black jaguar, okay? I guess it's part and parcel of the Sentinel package." He looked hard at Simon. "Now do you get it? A black jaguar just like Deva - protecting Blair - keeping Blair safe when he was a child?"

Simon's mouth dropped open. Slowly his mind put all the pieces together - in spite of his discomfort at anything sentinel related. "You're saying that Blair picked a black jaguar to protect him when he was a kid?" In spite of asking a question, Simon's voice held a note of amazement and wonder.

"Yeah, I do. Now - do you really think I should - or could - abandon my partner?"

There was only one possible answer - so Simon gave it. "No."

"Right." Then Jim's expression changed, softened. "You need to understand something else, Simon. Partner in this Sentinel thing or not, I'd have him here because he's more than just some...some kind of guide...though all of this. He's more than a friend too. He's my other half, Simon. I love him."

Simon had known - probably before Jim had, so again, there was only one thing to say. "You're right. This is his home, this is where he belongs. This is right."

They finally looked at each other...and smiled. It seemed to Simon that, in that moment, so much passed between them, not the least of which was love, one borne of comrades in arms, of a newly forged connection and of a shared goal.

"I'll do everything I can to help, Jim," Simon finally said.

"I know. And thank you. You're a good friend."

"I'm a sap and Sandburg would be the first to say so."

They both laughed then - a good laugh - and the first step toward some sense of normalcy.

***

Simon was trying to clear up a few reports on his desk before heading over to the hospital to pick up Jim and Blair but he wasn't making any headway. It was a lost cause, but at least he'd managed to escape his crew and the thousands of questions that had hit him the minute he'd walked in earlier.

"How's Blair?" - "When's he being released?" and "Is it true, he really thinks he's only five?" were the top three and, when he'd finished answering them - over and over again - the fourth question popped up. "How's Jim going to handle him?"

Realizing no one would get any work done if he didn't settle things down, he'd spent the next thirty minutes filling his people in, including the fact that Jim was, indeed, taking Blair home and that he'd put in for some vacation time in order to get organized. Once he'd satisfied their need for answers, he'd quickly escaped into the inner sanctum of his office. That had been over two hours ago and, in those two hours, he'd accomplished exactly...nothing.

A gentle rap on his door brought his head up just as Joel peeked in.
Simon, if you have a minute, would you join us in the briefing room? It's important.

Puzzled, Simon got up and followed him next door, where he found most of his people lounging in chairs and perched on tables. Except Megan and Henri who were standing somewhat nervously in front of a dry-erase board.

Simon looked around the room, at each detective, then back to Connor and Brown before asking, "What's going on, here, people?"

Megan stepped forward, clearly taking the position of speaker for the group. "Sir, we've been working very hard on a particularly difficult project, one that involves all of us. We've been making phone calls, getting information, soliciting volunteers...and well, we'd like to introduce you to," she and Henri moved away from the board, "The Blair-schedule!"

Flabbergasted was a good word, Simon thought. Yep, it summed up his feelings at that moment to a tee. He somehow managed to walk closer, to get a really good look at the board, letting his eyes fly across the marked-up surface.

It was a monthly schedule of every detective in his squad, one that plotted out their work shifts as they corresponded to Jim's, whose normal shifts were in green. Every detective who was off - when Jim was on - were slotted into a special column - with specific times - and written in red. The heading for that particular column was titled, "The Blair Shift."

"Simon? What do you think?" Joel finally asked.

Hardening his expression, Simon said, "It's no good." He turned to face his people and, scowling, added, "I'm extremely disappointed to find my name missing. Fix it. Now."

With that, he walked out, a huge grin replacing the scowl.

***

Blair was slurping and Jim knew darn well he was doing it on purpose. His clue came in the form of small sidelong glances Blair kept shooting at him - but when Jim caught him, Blair would move his gaze innocently up to the ceiling, wall or the television.

Then he'd slurp again. Loudly. He'd suck all the milk and Rice Krispies into his mouth like a Hoover vacuum. Finally Jim put his paper down, folded it neatly, and said, simply, "Blair."

Innocent blue eyes stared up at him. "Mmm?"

"You're slurping. Not good."

Blair cocked his head, wrinkled his face as if in deep thought and finally asked, "I don't slurp good? I should slurp more good? Like this?" Then he gave his best slurp yet, really drawing it out and 'milking' it for all it was worth, before giving him an expectant look.

Jim would dearly have loved to tell everyone that he'd handled the whole thing like an expert parent, but he didn't. He burst out laughing as his 'slurper' giggled.

Eventually the giggling died down and Blair took a regular spoonful, swallowed it and said, "Yuck. They fibbed, you know. It doesn't snap or pop - it just crackles. That's all, just a boring crackle. And
Jim looked hard at Blair, who'd gone back to his cereal with a somewhat disgusted and disillusioned look on his face. Shit, where should he go with the fact that somehow this Blair knew what he was - in his own five-year old way? Since he didn't have a clue, he decided to do what he did best - ignore it for now and, instead, tell Blair about leaving the hospital.

"Blair? I've got some good news."

Blair stopped eating, the spoon clutched in his fist and halfway to his mouth. "Are we going home today? Please?"

Damn, even as a kid, Blair could surprise him with his intelligence and intuition. He nodded. "Yes, you're going home."

The spoon dropped onto the tray as Blair looked frantically around over at the door and then, disappointed, back to Jim. "Mommy's here? But where? Where is she?"

Realizing his error in how he'd told Blair, Jim immediately moved to the bed and sat down on the edge. "No, I'm sorry, Naomi isn't here yet - what I meant was that I'm taking you and Deva to our-my-place today."

"So she's not here?"

Jim could feel steely fingers gripping his heart at Blair's simple, pleading question. Evidently, even a mother who was frequently gone, was a mother who was needed. At the moment, Blair looked completely lost as tears sprang up. He blinked them back, trying so hard to keep them from falling.

"I'm so sorry, runt. If I could bring her to you right now, I would. But I promise, I'll take good care of you until she comes."

Suddenly Blair threw himself into Jim's arms. "I want to go home with you. Don't want to move again. Besides, Dev says you need me to take care of you and I will, I promise."

"Blair, you don't have to take care of anyone but yourself, okay?"

Blair shook his head wildly back and forth. "No, no, must take care of you, will take care of you."

"Okay, okay," he said helplessly as he patted Blair's back rather awkwardly. "We'll take care of each other - and Dev will take care of us. Deal?"

Blair didn't lift his head, but he did snake his hand out and put up his little finger. "Gotta shake."

Jim wound his finger lovingly around Blair's and they 'shook' even as Jim mumbled into Blair's hair, "Let's go home."

He was rewarded by a muffled but strong, 'Kay."
back seat was full of flowers, stuffed animals and balloons. While Blair had been in ICU, all the get well flowers, etc. had been kept at the nurses' station but, once he'd been moved to a regular room, the gifts had joined him - and of course, they had to go home with him. Unfortunately, the flood of presents had grown during the time Jim wheeled him to the elevator. Nurses, orderlies and doctors had stopped to say goodbye, all bearing more presents that ended up in Simon's arms.

Now they were finally on the way home and, as Simon negotiated the mid-day traffic, Jim was enjoying Blair, who was bobbing his head up and down and from side to side like an over-sized bobble-head doll. His eyes were darting in every direction because no sooner would he glimpse something interesting, than something else would catch his eye.

Oddly enough though, even though his energy level was high, he wasn't saying a word. No questions, just looking - and gripping Deva so hard that if he'd been real - he'd be dead.

Jim had turned his sense of hearing up a notch in order to monitor Blair's heartbeat and respiration the moment they'd left the hospital. He had hope that once on their way, Blair might…that maybe he'd recognize something and somehow…but of course, that was ridiculous and Jim knew it, but still - he listened. Which was why he could now hear the kind of rapid heartbeat that meant fear. He could smell it too.

Blair was scared to death - but hiding it well.

Jim slowly lifted his left arm and let it drop behind Blair to rest on the back of the seat. Then - after a few seconds, he dropped it to rest lightly on Blair's shoulders. Blair relaxed slightly and even gave Jim a grateful look before going back to his task of trying to see everything at once.

***

Simon pulled up in front of 852 Prospect, shut down and sat back, allowing Jim to take the lead.

"This is it, Blair - home. You ready to go up?"

Nodding, Blair gripped Deva even tighter to his chest.

"Okay, then, let's go."

***

Jim unlocked the door to the loft and, with his hand resting on Blair's back, he gently guided him inside.

Blair slowly walked in - only to stop. His gaze took in everything - and finally Jim heard his heartbeat settle down.

Looking back at him, Blair gave him a brilliant smile and said, "Home."

Surprised and inordinately pleased, Jim nodded as his throat constricted, preventing any kind of verbal response. Blair walked the rest of the way in while both Jim and Simon put all the goodies on the table.

The last of the balloons were tied to a chair just as Blair suddenly spoke. "Bed? Deva's pooped."

This succeeded in breaking the residual tension and both Jim and Simon chuckled as Jim took Blair's arm and led him to the open French doors. They didn't go right in, instead, Jim let Blair look around.
Eyes wide in amazement, Blair took in the books, comics, the bed with its jungle motif and, finally, the toys, neatly arranged on the desk. He actually squeaked at the grouping of Transformers and Hot Wheels - but then his gaze strayed upward, to a shelf above the desk - and two dolls together on a wooden stand.

They were the only items Jim had left in the room - of the old Blair. Hand-carved Chopec warriors Blair had brought back from Peru after he and Jim had rescued Simon and Daryl. Blair had caught sight of them in a stall outside their hotel on the day they left for home and he hadn't been able to resist them. One was taller than the other and in full war paint, clearly ready for battle. The shorter warrior stood to the left and slightly behind the taller, his hand on the back of the warrior in front of him.

Now, seeing them, Blair pulled away from Jim and walked somewhat unsteadily toward the desk. Jim, holding his breath, waited, unsure if he'd made a terrible mistake. When Blair reached the desk, he simply stared at the carved warriors and Jim, remembering that Blair was seeing the world through the eyes of a five-year old, took the dolls down and held them out to him.

Staring at them in awe, Blair tucked Deva under his arm and took them, oh, so carefully, from Jim. His gaze never leaving them, he said, "Won't drop them, never drop them. I'm big, I can hold them."

"I know, Blair."

Nodding, Blair walked carefully over to the bed and then placed them lovingly on the nightstand. Once they were down safely, he let out a breath and flopped onto the bed. He looked over at Jim and said simply, "Nap."

Jim could see Blair's exhaustion - it was visible in his pale face, drooping eyelids and the fine sheen of sweat across his forehead. He walked over to him. "Nap is right, I can clearly see that poor Deva is indeed pooped." He then bent down to help Blair, who was struggling to get his shoes off, his fingers clumsy with fatigue.

Once he got Blair's shoes off, he discovered that Blair wasn't so tired that he couldn't be ticklish. Blair wiggled his toes through the socks and giggled - which was an unusual sound, to say the least. But Jim couldn't resist it, so he ran his thumb up Blair's arch, which set him off into gales of laughter.

In the doorway, Simon had been watching, silent, unsure and very nervous, but now, seeing the two men together and observing the ease with which Jim was handling Blair, not to mention the complete trust Blair obviously had in Jim, Simon felt the last of his lingering worries fade away. He turned away, feeling almost as if he were intruding and, with hot tears stinging the back of his eyes, he walked back into the living room.

***

Blair was still wiggling his toes, but only halfheartedly, so Jim flopped down beside him and, for a few minutes, they played a game of hide and seek with Jim hiding his face behind his hand and Blair hiding his behind Deva. Eventually, Blair's movements slowed again and Jim figured it was time to get him under the covers. He started tugging Blair's Jags sweatshirt up, tickling him lightly as he did so, and when Blair held up his arms and Jim pulled it over his head, Blair mumbled, "Lights out!"

Chuckling, Jim folded the shirt and set it on the nightstand, got Blair under the comforter and, as Blair pulled Deva back into his arms, he said, "Not gonna sleep long, 'kay? Just a little nap for Dev."

"Right. And you'll let me know when Deva is ready to get up?"

Blair yawned a "Yes", rolled onto his side facing the nightstand and the two dolls - and was asleep in
For a moment, Jim stood watching the gentle rise and fall of Blair's chest under the blankets, which were pulled up under his chin. One hand rested on the top of Deva's head, Blair's fingers curled around the fake fur. Jim could see the faint ruffle of the flannel pillowcase as Blair breathed easily and deep. He stroked back some hair from Blair's face - and then kissed him lightly on the cheek before joining Simon in the living room.

***

"He's asleep."

Simon was in the kitchen and, at Jim's voice, he faced him, an accusatory frown on his face. "While you two children were playing your game of hide and seek, I've been checking the kitchen. We bought toys and books but you've got nothing suitable for a kid."

Smiling, Jim leaned back against the counter. "What are you talking about, we've got plenty of food."

"Why do I not think a five-year old will want an algae shake or beer? Jim, you've got no bread, no peanut butter, no sliced cheese, no cereal and no bologna. In other words - no food."

Jim straightened and made a face. "Shit, I thought of everything but that. Wait, maybe this Blair will like algae shakes."

Simon picked up his jacket and snorted. "I don't think the thirty year old Blair really likes the damn things, okay? Look, I'll run down to Martini's now, pick up enough to get you through the weekend. Oh, and by the way, your Blair-sitting problems are over."

Jim pushed himself away from the counter, surprise written on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"It seems Major Crime has put together a little something they call a Blair Schedule. When you're on duty, one of us will be here with Blair. And trust me, they were very discerning about who was chosen to Blair-sit with the primary consideration being that they had to have kids. The second condition - actually, there was no second condition, although I noted that Megan, Henri and Martin were all put on the schedule even though they don't have a pet turtle between them."

Jim was stunned - humbled - and more importantly, grateful. But it wasn't right. "Simon, I can't let them---"

"You can and you will. They, no, scratch that - we - need this, Jim. Believe me. We've been hit hard and we're down for the count, but it isn't over. This might be just what we need so be gracious and accept."

He started for the door, making a mental list of groceries, when Jim threw out a parting shot.

"Megan raised her sister's children before coming here and Martin raised his younger brother, not to mention all of Peter's nieces and nephews. Henri? Well, H is a kid."

Jim could hear Simon's laughter down all three flights of stairs.

***

"Gr-r-r-r."
Jim looked up from the magazine he was reading.

"Gr-r-r-r."

Grinning, he closed it, got up and strolled toward the French doors to find Blair sitting in the middle of the bed, covers tumbled around him as he held Deva up in front of his face. He wiggled one of the cat's paws and followed it with another growl.

"I take it Deva's ready to get up?" Jim asked, trying hard not to laugh outright.

Blair lowered the animal to reveal a rested, sleep-flushed face framed by a riot of curls.

"Yep. All rested 'n hungry."

"Mmm, well, the doctor said bed rest for a few days, but he also said you could lie on the couch if you're good - and you look pretty good to me. In fact, you look good enough to eat - and tickle." Jim then mimicked Blair's earlier growl and pounced. Blair laughed delightedly as he dove for cover, but Jim was too fast, his fingers finding the ticklish spots immediately. Blair's giggles filled the small room and reached their peak when Jim got a hold of Blair's arm and planted a big raspberry on the inside of it.

"Okay," Jim said before Blair could tire. "I declare myself the tickle king so why don't we get you in a robe and out to the couch. Sound good?"

"Sounds very good!"

Blair got up and into a robe he didn't even know was his. It was his old flannel one and, for just a moment, Jim felt caught between two different worlds. But then Blair picked up Deva and marched out into the living room where he immediately made himself at home on the couch. He gave Jim a very expectant look as he indicated the fire place. Jim got the not-so-subtle message and once he got Blair settled with a pillow and afghan, he got the fire going.

Standing up, he rubbed his hands together in front the flames and, thankful for Simon's earlier run to the store, said, "Okay, we need to think about dinner. Since it's a rainy day, I'm thinking grilled cheese sandwiches and soup? How does that sound?"

Blair leaned forward, propping his chin on one hand. "Mmm, I think peanut butter 'n banamas with noodle soup instead!"

Jim almost groaned at the combination just rattled off by Blair and, making an exaggerated face of disgust, he asked, "Peanut butter and bananas? Together?"

Hair bouncing, Blair nodded vigorously. "Tasty," he said as he then smacked his lips.

"Would 'noodle' soup be…chicken noodle soup?"

"Mm-mm good."

"Right. Okay, so Chef Ellison is on his way to the kitchen."

As he started past the couch, Blair gave a small chittering sound and said as if Jim should know, "TV?"

Frowning, Jim checked his watch. Okay, it was four - he was never home at four on a weekday - and certainly had no idea what might be on that would capture Blair's interest - but before he had to
think to much about it, Blair said, "Animal World - gotta watch Animal World."

Jim's face cleared. This was good. He actually remembered that show from years ago, and while it was no longer on, there was a cable channel called Animal Planet. He made a quick detour, grabbed the remote, clicked the set on and punched in channel thirty-nine. The screen was immediately filled with whales.

"We don't have Animal World, but we do have Animal Planet. Will that do?"

Blair, already deeply absorbed by the whales, offered no answer. It was obvious none was needed and Jim offered up a little prayer of thankfulness for cable channels that ran for 24 hours. All right, time for soup and the rather daunting task of creating peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

***

Tray full of food, Jim walked into back into the living room. He stopped in front of his patient in order to put the tray down, and immediately noticed how Blair moved to his right in order to see around Jim. Grinning, he said, "Dinner is served, Mr. Sandburg."

"No, no - Blair," Blair said even as his eyes remained glued to the set.

"Oh, pardon me. Dinner is served, Mr. Blair."

He giggled. "No - just Blair."

"I see. Well then, dinner is served 'just Blair'."

This time Blair snorted, "Silly, Blair. I'm Blair."

"Funny, you don't look like someone named, 'Silly Blair' - wait, come to think of it, you do look a little like a silly Blair."

Grin in full bloom, Blair shook his head adamantly. "Nuh-huh. You're silly." Then he cocked his head and added, "And you're stomach just growled."

"Oh, right, my stomach growled. I guess we'd better feed it before it starts looking at you."

Blair's response was to show Jim just how good a raspberry he could make. Laughing, Jim put the tray down and they settled in to enjoy their dinner. Jim was proud that Blair didn't slurp his soup once - but on the other hand, it was fascinating to watch as Blair took the bananas off the sandwich, plopped them into his mouth, then rolled the peanut butter-smeared bread into a tube and shoveled it in right behind the bananas.

Future meals promised to be very enlightening - and messy.

While they ate, the Animal Planet showed a program about Golden Eagles, followed by the 'Life of Foxes' - and finally, just as Jim started to clear the dishes, an episode about wolves came on. Blair perked up at once and began to watch avidly. As Jim took the dishes into the kitchen, he couldn't help but notice how Blair nodded his agreement as the narrator discussed a myriad of facts pertaining to wolves, showing a wolf den and three young pups scampering about and chasing each other. In the kitchen, as he cleaned up, he enjoyed the sound of Blair's laugh so much that he actually decided to finish later and join him. This sounded too good to miss.

Watching the antics of the pups, Blair huffed a little into Deva and said, "See, wolves are powerful. You'd like them and maybe, just maybe, you'll have one of your own."
One of the big questions Jim had been mulling about since the whole Deva thing started, was why his animal spirit would be 'protecting' Blair and not his own. Maybe he was about to have the answer. If he asked the right questions.

"Blair, why would Deva want to play with a wolf? Wouldn't he rather have another jaguar as a playmate?"

"No, no. He wants a wolf - needs a wolf. They'll play and have fun and wolves are very powerful and loyal. A'course, Dev just growls, but I know what's best for him and he'll like the wolf. I just know it." He turned his attention from the wolves on the screen and asked, "Don't you like wolves?"

"I love wolves. They're my favorite animal in the world - with Jaguars coming in second, of course."

"Ha! See, Dev? I told you so."

"So…why didn't you have a stuffed wolf for Deva? Or a stuffed wolf instead of Deva?"

Looking all the world as if Jim should know better, Blair huffed a bit before saying, "Silly Jim. I'm just a little boy - I won't find my wolf for a long time." With that, he returned his gaze to the set, leaving Jim stunned. He wasn't sure he understood - but that was nothing new whether he was dealing with the grown-up Sandburg - or this one.

At that moment, the show took on a more serious note as a young woman began to discuss how the gray wolf was endangered, partly due to being so misunderstood. She talked about how they needed our protection from poachers and ignorant ranchers.

Watching, a small frown creasing his brow, Blair suddenly said, "Deva will protect them. Bad poacher, bad." He sniffled a bit and that was followed by a little hitch in his breathing. It didn't take a sentinel to know that he was trying hard not to cry.

Jim put his arm around Blair and said gently, "Wolves are pretty smart, buddy, and more people are becoming aware of their plight and working hard to save them thanks to shows like this one."

In a voice that telegraphed stubbornness, anger and hurt, he said, "People are bad. They hurt animals and don't know they're hurting themselves. I hate them."

Listening to him, Jim could see exactly how his activist Blair had originated. Which didn't help now. He gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "You don't really hate them because you understand they don't know any better. But maybe some are watching this show, like us, and they'll learn."

He tugged Blair closer and, together, they watched the rest of the program, quiet and still. When it ended, and during the commercial, Jim watched Blair's head drooping, eyes getting heavy. He glanced back at Blair's room and, for the first time, almost wished he was actually only five. That Blair he could have easily carried into his room. This one, not so much. Blair might be only five foot seven in his bare feet, but he was stocky and, thanks to prepping for the Academy, was much more muscular than the Blair of a even a year ago.

Scratching his head, he muttered to Deva, "Guess I'm about to find out if I can carry a full-grown Blair." Too bad a fireman's carry wasn't appropriate.

Jim separated himself from the sleeping man, got to his feet and then gathered him - and Deva - up in his arms. He made his cautious way to the bedroom, got him down on the bed and then covered him, making sure Deva was right where he belonged - in Blair's arms.

Back in the living room, he stood for a moment, contemplating the empty room and, for the first time
in days, allowed himself to miss Blair. To miss the rookie detective - to miss his partner, their bantering and yes, even Blair's humor. He missed his mind, the intelligence - and he missed the man that he'd been, the man Jim loved.

Finally, having no desire to do anything but push the world away through sleep, he turned off the fire, locked up, turned out lights, walked upstairs, got undressed and into bed.

Hands clasped behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling and allowed himself to remember, to conjure up pictures of Blair at various moments in their past. Like that time at the doctor's office when Blair was trying to teach him to meditate. He could see him so clearly, balancing himself on the arms of the chair in order to pull his legs up and cross them under him, then spooking him just as the meditation worked.

Like a movie, more pictures played across his mind: Blair playing basketball with the Jags, his ponytail flying, short, lithe body moving easily in and around the taller men, throwing the ball to Jim and excited when he scored.

A press conference, Blair standing behind a podium, cameras rolling while he told the world he was a fraud, stumbling over Jim's name, giving up fame and fortune for his Sentinel.

Slowly - the tears flowed unchecked down Jim's cheeks.

***

Jim's two week 'vacation' seemed to fly by in spite of the relative quiet of its first few days - days where Blair was still confined to either bed or the couch. Looking back, Jim found them oddly joyful. He'd actually had a lot of fun watching Blair watch cartoons - especially The Road Runner. Who knew that Blair could do a mean imitation of infamous, "Beep-beep"? And when something wicked happened to, say, Wiley E. Coyote, Blair would deepen his voice and intone, "Don't try this at home, kid-deeeees."

Jim was pretty certain that he'd never laughed so hard in his life - and considering that the grown-up Blair had always been the one to make Jim really laugh, that was saying something.

Of course, while stuck watching television, cartoons hadn't been the only item on the menu. There'd been a liberal sprinkling of nature shows and, even at 'five', Blair was fascinated by any program about other countries and cultures. The real surprise, however, was Blair's fascination with Science Fiction - and the cheesier the better. This love had been unveiled on day four of his confinement. Blair had been getting antsy and just plain ornery so Jim, in an effort to occupy the Machiavellian monster, had started channel surfing in the desperate hope of finding something, anything, that would quiet Blair down. Suddenly the screen was filled with rubber suited aliens, their costumed zippers clearly visible. Blair went absolutely wild. He started pointing while giggling almost hysterically, tears eventually streaming down his face.

But he watched - and Jim found himself thanking the gods of television for something called Science Fiction Theater 2000.

But now, finally, it was time to get Blair up and outside - time to put his physical therapy to work. Jim's choice for the day was simple: A picnic in the park. He just prayed the weather would hold. He remembered all too well how he and Steven had acted when rain forced them indoors. He didn't dare imagine how such an event would affect Blair, who was already complaining.

Jim tucked the last of their picnic into the basket and, satisfied, closed the lid. And yes, he was very aware of Blair's eyes on his every move.
Strangely enough, their plans for the day had gotten off to a very bad start. Blair had awakened earlier than usual, excited and eager for his day in the park. He'd gotten out of bed and had, for reasons known only to himself, decided to help Jim out by making breakfast. He'd decided to start by making Jim's coffee, then pour his own cereal and even make his own toast. After all, hadn't he watched Jim every morning of the last five? Hadn't he figured he could reach everything that needed reaching?

Of course he had.

So Blair had managed to grab his Tarzan bowl, a spoon, his Cheetah cup, and place them very quietly on the table. He'd then gone back for the box of cocoa puffs and, finally, the milk. Once everything was ready, it was time to tackle Jim's coffee - which was when things had gone south.

After staring at the complex coffee maker, he'd opted to go for the easiest first: Jim's mug. He'd just taken it out of the drainer and placed it on the counter when Jim, finally awakened by Blair's movements, hurried downstairs. Seeing Blair in the kitchen had surprised him so much, Jim had yelled his name.

What had then happened would probably haunt Jim for a long time.

Blair had whirled around so fast, his hand had swept the mug across the counter, causing it to skitter to the edge and topple over. It hit the floor, shattered and, as Blair gasped in surprise, Jim had moved toward him on the run. At the edge of the kitchen, he'd skidded to a stop, not because of the mess on the floor, but because of the way Blair had looked.

He was backed up into the far corner as if trying desperately to disappear, all the while murmuring in a heart-wrenching voice, "Sorrysorrysorrysorry...."

Jim had quickly taken stock of the situation, namely that he was barefoot while Blair had on socks. He'd raised a hand in supplication as he'd murmured gently, "It's okay, Blair, it's okay. This was just an accident - all because I scared you. Now, I need to clean up the broken glass, so will you stay right where you are while I get shoes and the broom? Promise me you won't move until I get back? I don't want you to cut yourself, okay, buddy?"

Blair had stopped muttering at Jim's first word, thank God, and at Jim's request, had nodded. "Stay. I'll stay. Won't move 'til you tell me."

"Good, very good. I'll get the broom and be right back."

"Shoes - don't forget your shoes."

"And shoes. Thanks for the reminder." He'd hurried back upstairs at that point, slipped into his loafers and then back down for the broom, during which time, Blair never moved an inch. When Jim got back to him, he was still huddled in the corner, eyes wide, but quiet.

Jim had planned to sweep up before getting Blair into the living room, but one look at him had Jim going with his gut. He'd lifted Blair, felt him give a small jump, and hadn't been surprised when he'd wrapped his arms around Jim's neck. Somehow, Jim found himself 'carrying' Blair once again. But it had seemed the right thing to do - even when Blair had wrapped his legs around him and buried his face in Jim's neck.

He'd taken him to the couch and, after a bit of awkward shifting, managed to get both of them down. He'd been pretty certain that Blair was sniffling - an odd sound coming from a grownup, but from that Blair? It had been enough to cause Jim to stroke Blair's back, patting it gently while cupping the
back of Blair's head with his other hand. They’d stayed like that for several minutes - Jim rocking and murmuring meaningless words into Blair's ear - until finally Blair stopped shaking. Then he'd turned his face toward Jim's ear and whispered a sad, "No picnic now."

It hadn't been a question so much as a statement - one that Jim correctly translated as meaning that Blair believed he was going to be punished. Jim reacted immediately by pushing Blair back just enough so that they could see each other - but Blair had his eyes shut - tightly.

"Blair, would you look at me, please?"

Blair hadn't moved so Jim just went ahead and said what he'd thought needed saying.

"Blair, listen to me. It was an accident. You didn't mean for the cup to fall, so you didn't do anything wrong - which means that we are going on our picnic, okay?"

Blair's eyes had shot open then and, surprised, he'd asked, "Not a bad boy?"

"Definitely not. You're a very good...boy."

Slowly, Blair had grinned. "Good 'nuff to eat?"

Jim had answered the only way possible: he'd ruffled Blair's hair right before planting a huge and very loud raspberry on Blair's neck.

Blair had giggled a bit before quieting down enough for Jim to ask something he'd wanting to find about since the hospital. "Blair, does Naomi spank you when you have a boo-boo?"

Blair, who gone back to resting against Jim, shook his head.

"Okay, did...anyone...spank you...or...strike you?"

Blair had then tightened his grip on Jim - right before whispering, "Mickey."

Jim had frowned at that - he couldn't remember Blair ever mentioning any one named Mickey. "Can you tell me who this Mickey is?"

"My almost daddy."

Figured. Another one of Naomi's many conquests. Except this one had hurt Blair.

Jim had somehow managed to tamp down his anger enough to ask, "So you lived with Mickey and if you dropped something - he'd spank you?"

Blair nodded.

"Did Naomi know?"

"Found out. Came home early. I was hiding under the bed so he couldn't reach me. He hurt me and mommy swept him away and then promised she wouldn't let him back in. But we had to move again."

Jim couldn't honestly say that he'd always understood the adult Blair - but making sense out of all that was even more difficult. But hell, he wasn't a detective for nothing. A few more questions and he'd had the entire picture.

"Okay, so when Naomi went work, Mickey stayed home with you?"
"Yup."

"And if you did something, like…?"

"Spill or drop or play."

"Like, spill or drop or play, he would be angry and hurt you?"

Blair had nodded again.

"But one day, Naomi came home early, after you'd...?"

"Dropped a glass of chocolate milk."

"Right. And Mickey hit you but this time, you ran away and hid, and then Naomi came home and found him trying to get to you, right?"

Blair had nodded again and added, "He was trying to poke me."

"Ah, got you. With the broom. So Naomi grabbed it away from him."

"And whacked him," Blair had said, unable to hide his pride.

Jim hadn't been able to help himself from a bit of pride in Naomi himself as he'd thought, "Score one for her."

"But it was my fault, I was clumsy."

"I bet Naomi never tells you that."

Blair had smiled then. "She's my mommy."

"But they tell the truth - and so do I - and I'm telling you that you're not clumsy or bad. And no one is going to hurt you again. Ever. You have me now - and Deva - okay?"

Blair had seemed truly happy then as he'd nodded firmly. "Okay."

But Jim had questions he'd still wanted answered - curiosity that needed satisfying, so he'd taken that opportunity to ask them.

"Blair, when did you get Deva?"

"After we moved. He came to me in my sleep, said he would protek me from bad men. I told mommy and she found him the next day. I won't ever let him go, or you."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"I'll never let you go either. Ever. And that's a promise."

"An you always keep 'em. I know."

"Yes, I do. So, are we ready for breakfast, runt?"

"Yep. But I wanted to make your coffee, surprise you."
"And I appreciate that, but will you make *me* a promise now? Promise to let me be the kitchen half of this partnership and you be the bedroom half?"

"So I'm in charge of my bedroom?"

"You are."

"But I can help you sometimes?"

"Okay, we'll help each other. Partners?"

"Pardners. But we *have* to shake." Naturally he'd waved his pinky finger in Jim's face again, so of course, he'd taken it and they'd shaken.

They'd finally had their breakfast and, while Blair had still been a bit subdued, he'd eaten all his cereal and toast. Later, Jim had allowed him to 'help' tidy up the kitchen before they'd gone into the bathroom for their morning ritual of teeth brushing and what Jim had come to call 'pretend' shaving (the only way to keep - let alone explain - the need to actually shave Blair each morning).

Blair's natural exuberance had quickly reasserted itself and the bounce was back. He'd made little chittering noises (presumably replicating the animals he expected to see at the park) and had asked a million questions, like, would there be ducks - and did the park have a merry-go-round - a zoo? And could they have hot dogs?

Jim had originally planned to take him - and several tuna sandwiches - to Frasier Park, but the questions forced his brain to go through every park within a reasonable distance - that had ducks, a merry-go-round, a zoo and, of course, hot dogs. He'd finally remembered CarverPark, which had it all and, in a way, Jim was kind of glad because he'd been dreading what Blair might want added to his tuna.

Yep, they'd definitely had quite a morning. Now Jim took out a couple of waters from the fridge, as an afterthought, and added them to the basket before closing the lid again. He turned toward the living room and asked, unnecessarily, "So, we ready for the park?"

Blair did a Roadrunner "Beep-beep" and was standing out in the hall before Jim could blink.

***

So far, their day in the park had been perfect which pretty much ensured that Jim would be spending a lot of his spare time in parks. What amazed him was how he'd managed - so far - not to lose the whirling dervish that was this youthful Blair. Even more surprising that, at the age of forty - he was able to keep up with him. Sure, he was in great shape and come on, a cop, but still, Blair was Blair and at five - he was even worse.

According to Blair's rules - and he had quite a few, so many in fact, he put Jim to shame in that department - but anyway, Blair's number one rule at a park was to do everything. Twice.

Except the Merry-go-round - that they had to do four times because it had both a loping panther and a leaping wolf and they had to take turns on them.

But they fed every goat, goose, gosling, pig, burro, donkey, horse, chicken, rooster, rabbit, llama and camel in the petting zoo. Twice.

So far, Jim hadn't really given much thought to how they looked to other adults, how others would perceive them or react to a big man following behind a bouncing, chattering 'boy'. Now, as he
looked around him, he caught a few open, curious stares and yes, more than a few disgusted looks. But, for the most part, he was happy to see nothing more than mild curiosity in most - a curiosity that quickly turned to sympathy and, for some, to sadness. Then there were the very few who continued to watch, allowed themselves to be pulled into Blair's world, even briefly. Their sadness quickly changed to an open joy as their expressions relaxed, their smiles broadened.

Right now, it was time to eat and, thank God, they didn't have to do that twice.

Jim guided Blair over to what he deemed the perfect spot, under a huge elm, and, after laying out the blanket and setting out all the picnic paraphernalia, they set off for the snack stand, about twenty yards from their tree. The line was short, for which Jim was very thankful - since Blair was currently play-acting like a sleeping stork - meaning that he was hopping around on one leg. When Jim got up to the window, he glanced over at his new 'pet stork' and asked, "So it was chiliburger, right?"

Blair snorted - a very un-flamingo-like snort, and said, "Hot dog, silly."

Rolling his eyes - fondly - Jim ordered two jumbo dogs, a large soda for him and a juice box for Blair. He paid for them and they both stepped aside to wait for their order. Blair was still hopping, but his eyes were taking in everything around him - just like the grown-up version would have done. Jim's number was called and, after picking up the dogs, he guided Blair over to the condiment table. Once there, Blair stopped hopping and chose instead to watch avidly as Jim unwrapped his dog, heaped mustard, relish and onions on it, and then carefully wrapped it up before returning it to the carry-out box. Jim purposely waited to see what Blair would do - if anything of the real Blair was there. Would he skip the relish like he would normally do? Add a ton of ketchup?

A moment later, he had his answer as Blair promptly copied everything Jim had done. He carefully unwrapped his dog and put exactly the same amount of mustard, relish and onions on it before wrapping it just as carefully and setting it down next to Jim's in the box. As they walked back to their tree and blanket - Jim should have been disappointed - he knew that. But he wasn't. He was oddly pleased - and a bit humbled.

Once they were seated, Jim pulled out the paper plates followed by the other items he'd added at home, namely napkins, chips, fruit and, of course, Oreo cookies. He also took out the waters, knowing Blair would want some later.

"Mmmm good," Blair said as he gazed happily at the spread.

"Agreed. Let's eat," Jim said as he unwrapped his loaded hotdog.

Nodding, Blair took his dog from the box - but instead of eating right away, he watched Jim take his first bite - then - and only then - did he take his first bit.

Jim was halfway through his hotdog when he realized that Blair was copying his every move. Wondering if he was imagining it, he decided to run a little test. He scooped up some relish from the top of what was left of his dog - and plopped it in his mouth.

Blair promptly did the same.

He tore off a piece of bun, dipped it into his cup of soda, and plopped it into his mouth.

That stumped Blair for a moment, since he had a juice box. Finally, he simply sucked on the straw, pulled it out, and let the juice dribble onto a torn-off a piece of bun before plopping it into his mouth.

Grinning mischievously, Jim started to push the whole rest of the hotdog into his mouth and wasn't
the least bit surprised when Blair did the same.

Eyes twinkling with mirth, Jim smiled at him - and was rewarded when a huge grin split across Blair's mustard-slimed face.

"Gomnod," Blair managed through a mouthful of food.

Since he was the adult, Jim swallowed before saying after smacking his lips, "Tasty."

Nodding his agreement, Blair said, mouth still full, "Tasnmpty." He would have smacked his lips too, but there was too much food in his mouth.

They finished off the chips and cookies and, while Jim tidied up, Blair dropped down to watch to watch the sky and name the clouds. When everything was either put away or tossed, Blair patted the ground next to him and said, "Play."

It was a simple word - but the command was definitely there - and who was Jim to argue? It seemed the perfect way to spend some time while their food digested. So he laid down next to him and turned his gaze to the sky.

"G'raffe," Blair said as he pointed straight up.

Jim shook his head. "Nope. Hippo."

Blair giggled, reached out, took Jim's arm and moved it slightly to the left before saying firmly, "Hippo."

"Right," Jim said smugly. "Two hippos."

"No, no, no. One hippo - one g'raffe!"

"Then what's that?" Jim pointed off to the right, to a formation of clouds that looked, to him, like, well, clouds.

"Seals," Blair said with great certainty. "Swimming and playing."

Jim narrowed his eyes - and had to agree. That particular set of clouds did, in fact, now look like seals. Must be the power of suggestion - or something.

***

"Do we have to go home now?"

"We do. It'll be dark soon and you've had a long day. Time to get you home."

Blair made an expression that Jim would have bet was the five-year old version of a pout, but he didn't argue. They headed for the parking lot at a leisurely pace when Blair suddenly spotted a big, shaggy dog and, before Jim could stop him, he took off on a run. When he reached the animal, he dropped down in front of it.

The golden dog was leashed and sitting obediently next to its owner, a woman of about sixty, who was resting on one of the benches. Blair, without any warning or permission, immediately threw his arms around the animal and was rewarded with a wet tongue lapping up the side of his cheek.

As Blair buried his face in the massive, fur-covered neck, he murmured, "Good dog, good dog."
Jim hurried up to them and started to apologize to the woman, but she held up a hand, her expression one of kindness.

She and Jim watched for a moment before she finally said, "His name is King. What's yours?"

Blair turned his head towards her and, grinning, answered, "Blair."

"Hi, Blair, I'm Cora."

"Hi, Cora. You're lucky, big dog. Nice dog."

"Yes, I am. He's three years old and keeps me company. How old are you?"

Cora had seen the innocence shining from Blair's eyes and it was clear to Jim that she believed she was dealing with a special needs adult - until he answered.

"I'm five, almost six."

Surprised, Cora looked up at Jim and touched her head in question. He nodded and introduced himself. "I'm Jim Ellison and Blair here, is my owner."

Blair snorted into the dogs chest as he muttered, "Humph."

Cora got to her feet then and, letting out a bit of the leash, indicated that Jim should follow her a few feet away from Blair. Once they could speak without being heard, she asked, "He was injured?"

Jim nodded, his face clouding over. "Yes, a few weeks ago."

She looked back at King, who was now rolling around on the ground, and at Blair who was rubbing the dog's tummy and cooing softly.

"Your brother?"

"No…my…partner."

Cora glanced up and into his eyes then - and saw more than Jim realized he'd revealed. She placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "He's a gift, Mr. Ellison. Don't ever forget that. And remember, the ways of this earth are mysterious and varied." She cocked her head, regarded him again, and added, "But somehow I suspect you already know that."

Staring at her, he finally stammered out, "I…I…yes."

She squeezed his arm. "Take care, Jim, and yourself. And be patient." She glanced back at Blair. "My daughter is always telling me I have the gift of extra sight - if I do, it's telling me that he'll come back to you but in the meantime - well, just take care of yourselves."

With that, she walked back to Blair, who realized he'd have to say good-bye to King. Cora knelt next to him. "Don't worry, Blair, King and I are here all the time and I'm sure we'll see you again."

As she straightened, Blair followed suit and, with one hand resting on top of King's head, he held out his hand in his best "grown-up" manner. Cora took it, squeezed it and repeated what she'd told Jim - to take very good care of himself and Jim.

Nodding solemnly, "I will. Very good care."

She hugged him tightly, waved goodbye and then walked away with King.
Jim was expecting sadness on Blair's part - so he was surprised when he smiled, took Jim's hand, and headed for the truck.

***

"No."

Had Jim ever noticed this stubborn streak in the grown-up Blair? He didn't think so. Somehow, with age, Blair had learned that subtle worked better than what Jim was seeing now. He knew he'd never seen a time when Blair's chin had been set just so, or his lips pursed together in what could only be a very stubborn pout - one that telegraphed quite clearly that Blair wasn't willing to give an inch.

In their years together, he'd been the recipient of Sandburg's pleading, cajoling and yes, even nagging. He'd observed Blair weigh options, consider and struggle - and he'd certainly seen him angry - but he'd never seen this - this stubborn-as-a-mule act.

On the other hand, he now knew exactly why that phrase was used - Blair looked exactly like a stubborn mule.

He was standing by his bedroom door, arms crossed defiantly over his chest, chin sticking out a mile, legs slightly parted but firmly rooted to the spot. And, if that weren't enough - Blair was refusing to make eye-contact with him.

Taking another deep breath, Jim tried again. "Blair, we discussed this and you know I have to go to work now." He cocked his head and decided maybe a bit of bribery was called for. "After all, if I don't go to work, how could we afford peanut butter and bananas?"

"Hate peanutbutternbanamas"

"You know that's not true - you love peanut butter and bananas and you know you liked Megan. She's a lot of fun and I know you'll have a great time with her today. Besides, I'll only be gone a few hours."

Now he looked at Jim, his eyes blazing. "All. Day!" The d was punctuated with a hard shake of his head and the stamping of one foot on the hardwood floor.

Hands on hips, Jim glowered down at Blair and, in what he hoped was a firm, parental tone, asked, "Young man, do you know what a temper tantrum is?"

Blair's eyes narrowed as a wicked gleam entered them. In that moment, Jim knew he'd blundered. Worried, he watched as Blair went back into his room and, a few moments later, the first pillow flew out the door to land on the floor. It was quickly followed by two more and then several rolled-up pairs of socks.

Blair came back out and, after re-crossing his arms over his chest, said simply, "Yes."

Jim knew he couldn't laugh. Absolutely-could-not-laugh. Should not laugh. Big no-no with parental control flying right out the window - again. He felt the corners of his mouth start to twitch as they tried to turn up so he bit down on his lips, stifling the laughter. When he felt more in control and less likely to ruin the 'firm but fair' attitude, he said, "Blair, I will go to work and Megan will stay with you and I will be home early."

Slowly Blair's lower lip started to tremble - which really threw Jim for a loop - so he quickly added, "But I'd give anything if I could stay with you, I swear. Heck, if it were my choice, I'd be here everyday - with you."
Looking only slightly suspicious, Blair asked, "Truth?"

"Cross my heart." He ran his finger across his heart to punctuate his statement.

Blair walked slowly over to the first pillow and picked it up, then the others and finally the socks. Jim didn't miss the glistening of tears that had yet to fall.

As Blair picked up the last pair of socks, he mumbled, "Dev is very messy."

Letting his grin show, Jim nodded wisely. "Mmm, yes. You should teach him that temper tantrums are for babies."

"Your fault. You asked."

That did it - he chuckled and then laughed outright. He was relieved when the corners of Blair's mouth started to turn up.

Jim crooked his finger at him and said, "Come here a minute, please?"

Blair walked over, eyes downcast. Jim tipped his face up with a finger under his chin. "I'll be back and you know it, right? I'm not going away, just to work."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Jim held out his little finger and Blair grabbed it like a life preserver.

As they shook, Jim said softly, "I love you, Blair."

"Luv you too." With that, he launched himself into Jim's arms, his own wrapping around Jim's waist. Which was the precise moment Megan knocked on the door.

"Megy's here but I can't let her go unless you let me go."

"No."

"Ever?"

"Never."

"Well, in that case, answering the door could be tricky."

"Nuh huh."

"O-kay, let's give it a try."

Just then, Connor knocked again so Jim took one step - sideways - and Blair did the same. Connor knocked again.

Jim took two sideways steps this time, his shadow matching him step for step - but Jim didn't miss what sounded suspiciously like a giggle coming from his shadow.

Connor knocked a fourth time - hard enough to make Jim wince - but at least he was now within reaching distance. He bent back just enough, grasped the handle and pulled the door open - catching Megan with hand poised for a fifth knock.

At the sight that greeted her, she smiled. Jim shrugged and said, "Sorry, Connor, but I have a Blair
stuck to me and I simply can't un-stick him."

She gave each of them a look, noticed that Blair was resolutely refusing to look at her, and decided it would be a good idea to play along. She clucked a bit and then said, "This could be bad because of course, you have to go to work, but Blair and I are expected at the Cascade Aquarium and I have it on very good authority that the whales and dolphins are waiting for Blair."

Blair turned to face her - smiled shyly, and said, "Dofins?"

"Yep, and whales."

Eyes brightening, Blair suggested, "Glue dust. Must use glue dust."

Frowning, Megan asked, "Where does one find this...glue dust?"

"Pocket, silly."

"Oh, of course, silly Megy."

Exchanging amused looks with Jim, she reached into her pocket, pulled out some imaginary "glue dust" and sprinkled it on Blair. He immediately made a loud sucking sound as his arms miraculously "popped" loose.

For a moment, they stood together, a bit awkwardly, but then Blair ran into his room and came back with Deva, whom he held up to Jim. "Kiss good-bye."

Knowing better than to refuse, Jim dropped a kiss on the cat's nose and followed it up with a kiss on the top of Blair's head.

"Blair, why don't you tidy up your room while I show Megan a few things?"

Blair nodded, but as he went into his room, both Jim and Megan heard him whisper - rather loudly - into Deva's ear. "Can't fool me. Grow-up talk."

Both detectives burst out laughing as Megan managed to say, "You certainly had the wool pulled over his eyes. Not!"

They both chuckled some more as Jim steered them toward the couch. When they sat down, he took in her pale appearance and the loss of weight, and asked gently, "How are you doing?"

Her smile faded as she shrugged. "Good days and bad days." She glanced down at her hands. "I...miss him. So damn badly."

"I know."

They were both silent for a moment, remembering - but then Jim asked, "How are things at the station?"

Megan had clasped her hands but now she balled them into fists. "Not good, Jim. There's so much anger and everyone is snapping at one another. There's just so much resentment and guilt." She paused a moment, then added, "Martin came back last week but if anything, having him back has made things worse - he's so closed off that it hurts just to look at him. Maybe you can help him today?"

Wondering what on earth he could do, he nevertheless said, "I'll try, but this is going to take a while, for all of us."
"You think I don't know that? But damn it, in the meantime someone - else - could get killed."

"Shit. It's that bad?"

"Worse. And Simon hasn't a clue what to do - none of us do." She pushed some curls behind an ear. "Simon is like a walking zombie."

"I wondered…he hasn't stopped by in several days. What about…Luis?"

She smiled briefly. "He's the one bright spot. Barbara's back and they're trying to work things out. It's going to be a few months before he's fit for desk duty - so they're using the time to put their marriage back together."

"A silver lining, but not the only one," Jim said as he glanced over his shoulder at Blair's bedroom. Understanding his look, Megan nodded before tapping her wristwatch and noting, "You're going to be late on your very first day back."

Jim jumped to his feet, confirmed the time by looking at his watch. "Fuck."

A moment later, from the bedroom, came a clearly said, "Oops." Giving Megan a sheepish look, Jim said, "I think I just failed at setting a good example."

"I won't tell a soul," she promised just before they both broke into laughter.

Jim hurried over to the door, fished his keys from the basket and, as he pulled his jacket from the hook, said, "Okay, before I leave, you need to know the 'Golden Rule of Blair-Sitting' - which, quite simply, is: Once you step outside, don't take your eyes off him for a second. Got it?"

She crossed her heart, then held up her right hand, two fingers up. "Guide's honor."

"Guide's?"

"Australia's version of the Girl Scouts," Megan said as if he should know.

"Oh, right. How did I not know that," he responded sarcastically. He pulled on his jacket and called out, "Blair, you can come back in now."

Blair immediately poked his head out and asked, "Grow-up talk done?"

"All done. I do need to warn Megan about Deva." At Blair's questioning look, he added, "How messy he can be, especially if he's eating hotdogs."

Blair sniggered at that and Jim found himself torn between wanting to stay with Blair - and the need to go to the station. He supposed this was how any new parent felt when leaving their child for the first time. Swallowing the sudden lump in his throat, he said, "You'll make sure Deva behaves for Megan, right?"

Blair gave him a very solemn nod so Jim opened the door and said, "Okay, have fun and I'll see you later this afternoon." Then, before he could change his mind, he left.

***

Megan was exhausted. So far, their day at the Aquarium had been an experience Megan would not soon forget. She'd been around children all her life but nothing could have prepared her for this...
particular incarnation of Blair. Within the first two hours, she'd already nicknamed him "The Blair-i-cane".

She'd always accepted that fact that Blair evidently had a never-ending store of batteries - after all, how else to explain his ability to work full-time with Jim and yet put in all the required hours at the University? Yep, he was legendary in that regard, but as a five-year old, he actually managed to make his older self look sedate and settled.

Since their arrival, neither his mind nor body seemed to stop and she was constantly being dragged from one exhibit to another - never staying long as his attention would quickly be captured by something new. He also asked as many questions as she discovered him able to answer. But the best part by far was his all encompassing love for every creature they came across.

Now, here they were, at the last exhibit of the afternoon: the whale tank. She was both grateful - and a little sad that their day was coming to a close. And based on Blair's sudden quiet, he was feeling the same way. But then she really looked at him….

He stood silently in front of the huge tank, his face pressed up against the glass, hands flat against the tank as he watched the whales float by.

The odd thing about it all - was that it seemed to Megan that the whales kept…pausing…in front of their window. They seemed to float effortlessly, eyes on Blair. She would have chalked it all up to her imagination - except other spectators were gathering around them, whispering and pointing at the three whales - and Blair.

She watched, fascinated, as Blair caressed the glass with his fingers - and would have sworn to anyone who asked that the mammals seemed to react to his 'touch' - to undulate happily, almost as if they could feel his fingers - which was absolutely ridiculous.

Finally Blair murmured softly, "Bye, guys." He then removed his hands and stepped back - which seemed to break the spell as all three whales resumed their movement away from the window and through the tank.

Blair turned to Megan and asked quietly, "Home now?"

Puzzled, she nodded, took his hand, and they left.

On the drive home, Blair seemed restless and impatient but once they arrived at the loft, he completely relaxed. She got him settled on the couch and asked, "Hey, how about a snack?"

"Ice cream?"

"You got it. I'll put your goodies away and then we'll sit down to bowls of Ben and Jerry's."

Megan hadn't been able to resist buying a few souvenirs for Blair and now she walked into his room to put everything away, except the items Blair had insisted they buy for Jim - those she wisely left out so that Blair could show them off to him later.

She was just about to put Blair's new whale sweatshirt away when he surprised her at the door and said, "Nuh-huh. Must stay out with the hat and my new whale." He grinned disarmingly. "Play and eat."

"Ah, of course. Can't eat ice cream without playing our new toy, can we?"

"Z'xactly."
Then she indicated the shirt and cap on the bed, wondering why he didn't want them put away.

"So Jim can see," he said as if she should know.

And she should have. Blair would naturally want everything laid out for Jim's enjoyment.

"Right. Okay, then, all done here, which means on to the ice cream."

***

Megan and Blair sat companionably at the table as they enjoyed their bowls of Chunky Monkey. Of course, Megan couldn't help slurping hers, which caused Blair to giggle each time until he finally said, "Slurp contest, now!"

Eyes narrowing at the challenge, Megan started to stir her ice cream to get it even softer. Naturally, Blair did the same. When both were satisfied that the goo in their bowls was smooth and creamy, Blair, using his fingers, counted out, "One - two - three...."

And then gleefully added, "Go!"

The slurping contest was on.

They were both slurping away when Megan realized how rusty she'd become. She not only lost, but she knew she was covered in ice cream. For that matter, so was the table, floor - and Blair - who could have posed for the "Got Milk?" campaign.

She knew this was a time for being stern, but since she was part of the problem, Megan decided to join Blair in laughing and flicking Chunky Monkey toward each other.

***

Jim entered the lobby, his hearing zeroed in on his apartment. As he took the mail from his box, he frowned at the odd sounds - which resembled...slurping? Now he could hear both Megan and Blair laughing and, as he and his two companions got into the elevator, he tried to figure out what was going on. He'd pretty much succeeded by the time all three of them exited on the third floor - so much so, that he was prepared for the sight that greeted them the minute they walked in the door.

Unfortunately, his two companions weren't sentinels.

As they stepped inside, both Megan and Blair turned in surprise. Blair had his hand in the air, waving an ice cream-dripping spoon while Megan's eyes were rounded up by +3. Then Blair dropped the spoon, grinned broadly, pushed away from the table and ran full throttle into Jim's arms.

Henri Brown and Martin Regan remained just inside the door, watching, both a bit stunned at seeing Blair, covered in ice cream, arms and legs wrapped around Jim as he squealed, "You're home!"

"I sure am, but I'm not alone," Jim answered even as he quirked an eyebrow at Megan.

Blair pushed away just enough to see Henri and Martin. Smiling, he waggled his fingers at them in such a way that both of them found themselves smiling back - with Martin going so far as to waggle his fingers right back.

Still grinning, Blair cupped his hand around his mouth and, in a whisper loud enough to wake the dead, said, "Messy Megy!"
Which of course, drew their attention to their ice cream-covered friend.

Raucous laughter burst forth from all three men and, while Megan tried to think of a subtle way of flipping them the bird, she said with as much dignity as her appearance allowed, "Excuse me while I go clean up." She pushed her chair back and walked stiffly into the bathroom, muttering something about never entering a slurping contest again - until she'd had more practice.

Jim let Blair unwind himself until he was standing next to him and asked, "Do you remember Henri? He visited you in the hospital."

Even though he was still smiling, Blair moved a bit closer to Jim before nodding shyly.

Henri grinned back at him. "Hi, Hair - er…hi, Blair."

Jim indicated Martin. "And this is Martin."

"Hi, Blair. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to visit you."

"That's okay, hospitals are icky." He illustrated that fact by wrinkling his face up and pursing his lips. Then he grabbed Jim's hand and began to pull him into his room. "Ya gotta see, gotta see everything."

"Okay, okay," Jim agreed even as looked hopelessly over at Henri and Martin. "Why don't you guys make yourselves comfortable while I check this out?"

"Sure, no problem. We'll rag on Connor once she comes back. Don't worry about us," Henri said with a wink.

Rolling his eyes, Jim followed Blair into his room.

Once inside, Blair proudly announced, "My soo-vi-neers."

"Wow, looks like you bought the place out." He walked over, examined everything, then lifted the sweatshirt, held it up against Blair's chest, and said, "I think you need to change into this now, don't you? Show it off to the guys?"

He'd barely gotten the words out before Blair began to tug at his shirt in an effort to get it off as quickly as possible. With Jim's help, he succeeded, discarded it, and pulled the sweatshirt on. Jim tugged it down a bit before leaning back to survey the results. He gave a low whistle of appreciation and turned his thumb upwards. "Very nice. Come on, lets go show everyone."

They went out into the living room where they found a presentable Megan who'd just finished cleaning up the ice cream mess. Henri was standing by the door, holding out Megan's coat.

Frowning, Blair said, "Stay? Please?"

Henri gave him his best smile. "Hey, don't worry, runt. Connor and I have the nightshift but Martin is staying for awhile. Besides, we'll all be over this weekend to visit." He ruffled Blair's hair and added, "Now that we've seen your slurping abilities, you can bet we'll bring ice cream. I'm pretty sure I can beat you."

Blair brightened at that and Henri added, "By the way, killer sweatshirt, dude. Gotta get me one of those."

Looking just like a peacock, Blair preened even as Megan held out her arms to him. He didn't
hesitate to move into them and hug her right back. Then he whispered, "Don't worry, I'll teach you to slurp better, okay?"

Smiling back at him, she whispered, "Thank-you. Against these guys, I'll need all the help I can get. Then we'll team up and beat the…and beat them. Badly."

She slipped into her coat and, with a final goodnight, she and Henri left.

***

"Hey, Blair, how does pizza sound for dinner?"

Blair was sitting on the floor, legs outstretched in front of him, a group of toys between his legs and Deva on his shoulder. Without looking up he replied, "Cheesy!"

Jim chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes. Martin, you'll stay? Join us?"

The two men were sitting on the couch and, as Jim extended the invitation, Blair looked up and entreated, "Please? Dev says yes too!"

The look on Blair's face won Martin over and he realized he really did want to stay.

Work had been rough since Peter's death - and had only improved slightly with Jim's return. He'd spent his first hour back regaling everyone with tales of Blair's antics and, for the first time in weeks, laughter returned to the squad room. Martin had been particularly impressed by Jim's total lack of self-pity. Instead of being upset at the damage to Blair's mind, he was sharing the joys of the last two weeks at home with Blair.

Everyone had then started asking about when they could visit, which was when Martin, who said little since his own return, had offered up the idea of starting up the Saturday night poker game again, only earlier in the evening so they could all spend time with Blair. The idea had been immediately embraced by the whole gang and Martin still remembered the look of thanks Jim had thrown his way. Even Simon had seemed more himself after that. And for Martin - the idea signaled the first stirring of anticipation for something other than death. And now, he was being given the chance to spend some time with Jim and Blair - and again, he found himself happy at the prospect.

"How can I turn down an invitation like that? I'd be honored to join you guys for pizza."

***

Dinner was over and Jim had both a clean kitchen and a clean Blair. It seemed that the five-year old version could handle slurping ice cream and remain relatively clean, but a greasy, cheesy pizza was altogether different, especially with Martin setting the example on how to properly eat a slice.

Blair had immediately become fascinated by the way Martin ate pizza. While Jim simply folded it between his fingers and took his bites, Martin let the cheese 'string' out as he held the pizza away from his mouth - and then he'd eat the cheese back to the slice. Naturally, Blair had to try it too, so he'd take a bite, then pull - and pull - pull. But in his case, he'd felt the need to rush, fearing that the cheese would break, so that meant attacking from under the cheese, which resulted in mozzarella in his hair, all over his face, hell, Jim even helped get some out of his eyelashes.

Of course, during the eating process itself, Blair hadn't minded at all, thought it hilariously funny, and with Martin laughing hysterically, Jim had begun to wonder if he might be the only adult left in the world.
Now Blair was in his 'sleeping' sweats, on the floor a few feet from the warmth of the fireplace. He was playing with toys, which were scattered about but all within easy reach, while Jim and Martin sat on the couch, talking quietly about Peter.

Martin rubbed his eyes tiredly as he said softly, "You know what's so hard? I can't touch his stuff yet, can't stand the idea of packing it up, of putting…."

He let the words trail off as he swallowed hard and glanced down at his fingers wrapped tightly around the neck of beer bottle. He shook his head. "I can't put Peter away. I can't do it, Jim, I just can't."

"No one is asking you to."

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong. That's exactly what's happening. I'm being asked every day. And God forbid I should cry. It's as if the period of acceptable mourning is over for me because I'm a man. Like, I should be ready to pack him away…like, maybe, Time's up, you know?"

Jim was at a loss on how to help his friend, what words he could use to bring comfort. He was just about to say something, when a soft voice from the floor said, "Crying stops when you don't cry anymore and nobody can tell you when to stop."

Both men looked over at Blair, who still sat on the floor, head down as he worked on one of his Transformers. Frowning, Martin got up, walked to where Blair sat, and slowly lowered himself to the ground. He crossed his legs, picked up another transformer and started to 'transform' it.

From the couch, Jim watched silently, his heart in his throat, although he'd never be able to explain why - he just knew something was about to happen.

"Blair, what did you mean?" Martin finally asked.

Keeping his head down, and concentrating on the toy in his hand, Blair answered simply, "It's your hurt, no one else's, so you cry until you don't."

"Can anything help?"

He nodded.

"What?"

"Hugs. Hugs help - a lot."

Before Martin could ask another question, Blair shifted so he was facing both men. But he didn't look up as he said, "Mickey ran over my dog." Blair began to studiously tear apart his transformer. "And I cried - a whole lot, but he said I shouldn't, that I was a 'bay-bee'. But it hurt and mommy hugged me and that helped. She said I would always have Luli." Blair finally looked up and, with tears in his eyes, but a tender smile on his face, he added as he put his hand over his heart, "And I do. Luli is right here."

Blair reached over and gently touched Martin's heart. "Do you have someone there?"

"Yes, I do," Martin answered, his voice breaking.

"Do you need a hug?"

"You know, I believe I do. A really big one."
Blair leaned forward, arms outstretched, so Martin moved in. He pulled Blair close to his chest and rested his head against Blair's. They both stayed like that for several seconds before Martin finally moved backward. Smiling, he said, "You're right. Hugs help."

Blair nodded solemnly. "A whooooolo lot."

When Jim walked Martin out, an hour later, he noticed his steps were lighter - and maybe Jim's were as well.

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"And I can stay up?"

"Yes," Jim answered for the hundredth time. "You can stay up."

"Really, really, really late?"

"A whole extra hour."

"A whole hour?"

"Yep."

"Can I play?"

"With your Hot Wheels, Transformers and coloring books," Jim said with a grin, knowing exactly what Blair had meant. He watched the pout start to form on Blair's lips.

"Wanna play pokur," Blair muttered.

"And I already explained that you'll probably find it very boring. Not like the other games we play."

"So not like watching…Jungle Book?"

"Definitely more boring than The Jungle Book."

Blair smirked. "Good. You play pokur and I'll watch Sher-kan."

Jim signed. Yep, he'd just been masterfully manipulated - again. So much for no television on poker night.

They were at the table finishing lunch after having spent the morning getting ready for that night. Watching Blair finish his sandwich, Jim thought back over their trip to the supermarket. Their first one together. Jim had been dreading it, worrying about what he'd do if Blair wanted to ride in the cart. Fortunately, once there, he'd only wanted to push the thing. Fortunately, once there, he'd only wanted to push the thing.

As they'd rolled it down the various aisles, Jim had given Blair a new nickname: Sticky Fingers. He'd been truly shocked by how sly Blair could be about getting items he wanted into the cart. Oreos, Fig Newtons, popcorn, Bugles, all managed to make it into the cart without Jim's notice. And he was a sentinel, for God's sake. Yeah, shopping with Blair was a real experience. And the opposite of how it had been…before.
In order to escape his sudden thoughts about…before…Jim picked up his plate and carried into the kitchen - even though he hadn't finished eating. As he tossed the now unappetizing food into the trash, his mind couldn't help but think of the ironic fact that a grown-up Blair was always taking items out of the cart, while this one was always putting them in.

***

They had forgone a trip to the park because Jim knew their guests would provide more than enough stimulation for Blair - but now he found himself wondering if maybe Blair still needed a nap. In spite of not actually being five years old, Blair still seemed to tire easily, to get cranky if he didn't take a nap, and considering he'd be up later than usual…yeah, maybe he should suggest it.

"Since you're going to be up so late tonight - I'm thinking - nap," he said in a voice he hoped was devoid of trepidation.

"Please, watch Bambi instead?"

They'd picked the movie up the day before but had yet to view it. Jim didn't really think now was the time either. Trying to sound like reasonable, he said, "It's going to be a late night for you so I think a nap would be better."

The look Blair gave him said maybe not.

Jim found himself giving in - mostly because he'd promised they'd watch Bambi together, Friday night, but a case had kept him at the station so that by the time he'd arrived home, Simon had already put Blair to bed. And now, without saying a word, Blair was kindly reminding him of that fact. Man, he was good.

"Okay, okay, but," he held up a finger in warning, "you lie down on the couch, with a pillow and your blanket, and we'll watch Bambi."

Grinning that 'I know I've won' grin, Blair nodded, got up, ran into his room, grabbed a pillow and his blanket, came back into the living room, set everything down - and then looked expectantly at Jim.

"Right. So. Bambi it is."

"Sxatly."

Resigned to his fate, he got up, got the DVD, popped it into the machine, turned on the set and hit play. He sat back down and pointedly looked at the pillow and blanket. Blair simply picked up the pillow, dropped it onto Jim's lap and promptly made himself comfortable.

***

Okay, this wasn't half bad, Jim thought. In fact, it was fun. Especially listening to Blair repeat after Thumper and Bambi.

When Thumper said, "Burd", Bambi wasn't the only one to repeat it. So did Blair. And he managed to sound exactly like both Thumper and Bambi.

Giggling, he pointed repeatedly at the screen, at the antics of all the baby animals, mimicking their voices, chirping, whatever. He watched in wide-eyed wonder, amazement and joy floated across his face almost as fast as the cartoon played across the screen.
Unfortunately, Jim forgot all about the fact that Bambi lost his mother in the story.

When the shot rang out, Blair froze. And so did Jim. He waited, unsure of what to do. When Bambi lay alone and crying, Blair cried - and hard, but just when Jim was thinking he'd better turn it off, Bambi's father appeared. Strong and dark against the backdrop of the forest, he urged Bambi up and on - and Blair's hand crept into Jim's, tightened a bit as he sniffled, but he kept watching. A few minutes later, Jim was very glad he'd kept it on.

***

The last of the credits were rolling by and Jim thought maybe he and Blair should talk about the movie. He was just about to start when Blair, always one step ahead of him, said, "Don't like hunters. They're bad. But mommy saved Bambi and then it was daddy's turn and then Bambi became the daddy."

Succinctly put. Jim doubted he could have said it better.

Blair yawned - a huge yawn, and Jim figured if he stayed very still - Blair would take that nap after all.

And he was right. Minutes later Blair was sound asleep.

***

The gang began arriving earlier than planned, thanks to being eager to see Blair.

Simon, Connor and Brown arrived together, with Martin, Perkins, and Stevens showed up within minutes of each other. Joel arrived last, but was forgiven since he brought the dessert; strawberry shortcake, which solicited an "Oh, goody!" from Blair.

As their friends entered, Blair stayed behind him, shy but smiling, however, in less the ten minutes after everyone's arrival, he was on the floor, surrounded by big, burly, tough cops, all playing with his collection of Hot Wheels and Transformers.

Within ten minutes though, he had every big, burly, tough cop down on the ground, playing with Hot Wheels and Transformers.

Connor was the only one not joining in, choosing instead to stand against edge of the kitchen island while Jim put out all the bowls of poker necessities like popcorn, peanuts, cashews, and pretzels. Even though Jim was working, both he and Megan watched humorously as Simon made hooting noises at Joel who was trying to speed his Hot Wheel past Simon's fire truck. Next to them, Martin and Richard Perkins were battling with Blair over an imaginary planet called, "Blairrules".

Both Richard and Martin were losing badly to Blair's superior tactics - which went something like, "No, that's mine. That's mine too. No, you can't land there, I hid Spider-bombs there and they'll hatch and eat you up."

What could two intelligent, brave detective's do?

Both Connor and Jim laughed when they surrendered to a cackling Blair.

As for John Stevens, he sat on the floor with his back against the couch, a Xena coloring book in his lap, studiously coloring inside the lines while trying hard not to drool.

Eventually Jim had to end the 'play time' so, with a hand in the air, he said, "Guys, I know it's rough
to give up Transformers, Hot Wheels and," he sent an arched look at Stevens, "Xena coloring books, but I think it's time for some poker."

He pretended not to notice a certain reluctance on the part of his friends as they sadly got to their feet and ambled over to the table. With a grin, Jim put in The Jungle Book, ruffled Blair's hair, and headed over to the game. He had every intention of cleaning a few pockets.

***

"...so I tell the little dweeb, 'Drop it or the raisin elves will get you!' - and damn if he didn't believe me and drop the gun!"

"Oops."

Everyone at the table quieted even as they shot dagger looks at Stevens who, with an apologetic look toward the couch where Blair sat, said quickly, "I mean darn - he dropped the darn gun."

Blair turned around, wagged a finger at him, and said, "That's better. Don't want soap in your mouth."

Seven Major Crime detectives and their captain erupted in laughter.

***

"You know," Jim said as he tapped his cards. "I think you're bluffing, Simon. I don't think you have that full house you've been hinting at."

"Then I suggest you put your money where your mouth is, Jim. The cards don't lie and I never bluff."

This remark was followed by a loud snort coming from the couch.

Looking over at where Blair was now lying down, Simon asked gruffly, "Are you implying, by that snort, that I do bluff?"

"Who, me?" Blair asked in a small voice that couldn't quite hide his smile.

"So no more snorting. Understood?"

Blair's rather forlorn response was a simple, "Yes."

Moving his cigar back to the corner of his mouth, Simon said smugly, "So Jim, as I was saying, put up or shut up."

Unfortunately, that solicited another snort from the peanut gallery in the living room.

"Young man. I believe we're supposed to go to the zoo tomorrow?"

"Mmm, yes?"

"Then you should know that I do not take snorters to the zoo because the elephants always try to eat them."

Blair sniggered, Simon rolled his eyes, Jim called him - and Simon lost. He had his full house, all right, but Jim had four sixes. He chomped down hard on the cigar as Megan pulled the cards toward her for the next deal and Jim raked in the chips with a wink towards Blair, who was now peeking
over the back of the couch. Grinning, he slipped back down again.

***

"Is he really asleep?" Megan asked as she got her coat.

Jim, handing Joel his jacket, nodded. "Soundly."

"Need help with him?" Martin offered.

"No, don't worry, I'll take care of it later. And you know, guys, you don't have to whisper, he sleeps through anything."

Jim's helpful hint didn't stop everyone from keeping their voices low as they said their goodbyes and gave a final peek at the sleeping figure on the couch. Blair, who was on the floor and wrapped in an afghan, waved his goodbye before going back to trying to tickle Simon back to wakefulness.

***

Simon and Jim collapsed on the couch with heavy sighs. Blair was finally asleep.

"Okay, so the zoo was fun - I readily admit it," Simon said through a yawn. "But damn, I'd forgotten how exhausting following a kid around could be."

"Yeah, it's been awhile for you, hasn't it?" Jim asked with mischievous grin.

"If you're implying that I can no longer keep up with Blair - you're right. But then, let's be honest, I never could." He shared a fond look with Jim as he added, "It was fun watching him run from exhibit to exhibit, asking questions non-stop, making us read every single post on every single animal--"

"Don't leave out the mimicking. He's a crackerjack mimic when it comes to cartoon characters and zoo animals," Jim said proudly.

"Thank God for the gorillas. By the time we reached their enclosure, I would have killed for five minutes of standing still."

Jim couldn't argue. The only few quiet minutes of the day were thanks to the gorillas. Blair had been fascinated by them - and they by him. He'd stood by the railing, smiling and, of course, mimicking their every move - but he'd been content to remain there, allowing Jim and Simon some breathing space and a chance to rest. Not to mention watch the show. One large silverback had been positively entranced by Blair and started copying his every move. Then he'd scratch - Blair would scratch. Blair would yawn, the gorilla would yawn. Eventually the animal moved closer and chose a boulder closer to the railing. Once there, he'd scratched the top of his head - and waited. He hadn't been disappointed as Blair promptly scratched the top of his.

At that point, Blair had turned to Jim - and the smile he'd given him had left him almost paralyzed by the pure innocence. Then Blair had giggled, turned back to the gorilla and stuck out his tongue. No one had been surprised when the gorilla did the same - and they were off again. The final showdown was Blair, throwing back his head and letting out with a loud guffaw. The gorilla pounded his chest and yelled. Although, to sentinel ears, the yell had definitely sounded good-natured.

Jim had finally suggested that they needed to move on if they were going to see the rest of the exhibits - and as they did, it had been a toss up as to who was the unhappier; Blair or the gorilla.
When their day was over, Simon had broached the subject of dinner and it had been voted that they stop at Chin Lees and indulge themselves in all their favorites.

Now, sated and relaxed, Simon sighed, prompting Jim to give him a quizzical look. "Not regretting joining us today, are you?"

"Not at all. Like I said earlier, it brought back wonderful memories of similar trips with Daryl."

"Then why the slightly aggravated sigh?"

"Only you would recognize one type of sigh from another." Simon shook his head good-naturedly. "Honestly, though - I was thinking of Naomi."

"Ah. That says it all. Not good thoughts, I assume?"

"Well, I am starting to see why she felt the need to take so many trips. Blair can really wear a person out."

"Come on, we both know the fact that you slept here last night - on the couch - may have had more to do with that than anything else." Jim managed not to snicker.

"Fuck you."

"Oops. Soap for you."

Simon gave him a half-hearted smile before glancing back at the small room where a very tired Blair slept the sleep of the innocent - and the well-fed. "All right, here's what I was really thinking. I was wondering how in the hell Naomi could ever leave him. I don't want to leave him when you get home and I don't want to leave now. How could Naomi do it for a day, let alone weeks? How could she give up a minute of the joy, of his energy and the excitement in the discovery of everything that surrounds him?"

He looked over at Jim then, who was nodding, a slight smile touching his lips. Seeing the agreement in Jim's eyes, he went on. "He accepts so much on faith, yet manages to questions everything else. He loves unconditionally and gives of himself like no child I've ever known. What's his is yours - and yet, Naomi routinely left him. How?"

"I have a better question. How the fuck could she stay away so long now? We can't even find her in order to tell her what's happened. And it's not like this is the first time. She can go for months without a call, a letter or an email."

Now it was Jim's turn to glance back at Blair's room. He could easily see through the slats, could see the glow of the nightlight fall on Blair, who was cuddled up with Deva. His voice taking on an edge, he said, "On the other hand, I'm glad we can't find her because I'm not giving him up."

"That's hardly realistic and you know it. As far as I'm concerned, this is no different than if we'd been married when this happened. And a spouse trumps a mother every time."

"That's hardly realistic and you know it. If she does show up, he's her son and no matter what we think about her choices in how she brought him up - he is hers."

Jim turned in his seat, putting his arm on the back of the couch. "You don't get it, do you? As far as I'm concerned, this is no different than if we'd been married when this happened. And a spouse trumps a mother every time."

"Except...you and Blair...weren't."

"But we should have been," Jim said stubbornly. "Would have if I hadn't been so damn afraid."
He got to his feet then and walked over to the windows. With his back to Simon, he struggled to rein in his emotions before speaking again. When he finally felt some semblance of control, he said, "I couldn't make it without him, Simon. Even now, he manages to ground me. I keep my senses turned down all day - until I come home." He turned back around. "Even though he has no knowledge of the Blair we know - of the one who guided me, for want of a better term, he still helps. How do you explain that?"

"I can't and don't intend on trying - I just know that Naomi is his mother and if she wants him...."

"I disagree. In my opinion, she's given up her rights. You think she's stayed away all this time just because she wanted to travel? No way. It's because she knows she screwed up so she pretended to be happy when he became a cop. But in reality, she hates it and she's punishing him."

"So you'd what?" Simon demanded. "If she comes back, wants her son, you'd refuse? Take her to court? And if you do, what about him? How the hell do you think it would affect him, Jim? You can't be thinking of what's best for him."

"Damn it, I am thinking of what's best for Blair." He took a step forward. "Do you honestly think he'd be better off with her?"

"I didn't say that, Jim. But--"

"But nothing. She can't have him." He faced the windows again, head lowered, slight tremors coursing through him. "I keep…I keep having the same dream. I walk in the door and he's sitting where you are. He hears me, turns, and says, 'Hey, you're home. How about Thai for dinner?'…and then I wake up."

Simon got up and moved to his friend's side. He placed a hand reassuringly on Jim's shoulder. "Jim--"

Jim shrugged off Simon's hand. "I feel so damn guilty. Like I'm turning my back on this Blair because I want…I want…Chief."

This time, Simon draped his arm awkwardly across his friend's shoulders and they stared out the windows at their city.

***

For Jim, most of the next week passed in a flurry of activity, both criminal and personal. By Thursday, any thought of Naomi's possible return wasn't even a blip on his mental radar.

Now, as he sat at his desk, typing up his last report before going home, the doors to Major Crime opened and Luis was wheeled into the squad room by his wife, Barbara. Tirza was beside her, both of them beaming. Every detective in the room was up in seconds and had them surrounded. The two women immediately stepped back to allow them all better access.

After everyone's questions were answered regarding Luis' progress - and the other detectives had brought Luis up to speed on their case load and lives, Barbara checked her watch and held up a hand to interrupt. "I'm afraid we've got to get Luis home - we only stopped by based on his promise not to overdo things."

Everyone nodded understandingly but, as Barbara took control of the wheelchair, Luis looked up at Jim. "Follow us to the elevator?"

"Sure."
Jim was pretty certain he knew why his company was wanted. Luis wanted to know about Blair and seconds after the doors to the Major Crime closed behind them, Luis confirmed Jim's theory.

"Look, Simon's kept me up to date on…things…so how's Blair doing?"

"He's fine, wonderful, in fact."

Luis studied him for a few moments and finally asked, "You think I might be allowed to visit? I'd like to see him."

"Come on, you don't even have to ask." The elevator arrived and, as the door slid open, he added, "But you'd better know how to play with Transformers."

Luis’ face lit up like a Christmas tree. "I love Transformers!"

***

Friday was a day straight from Hell. It seemed that every criminal in the city decided this was the day to try to outrun Jim, who'd been forced to chase down three separate suspects. Exhausted, not even the prospect of seeing Blair could speed his movements. He trudged up the three flights, thanks to a broken elevator, wanting only one thing: a shower - a very hot shower. Okay, two things. Blair and a hot shower. As he approached the loft, he was disturbed to hear a conversation between a very firm Joel and a very stubborn Blair.

"No. Don't want to."

"Blair, you made the mess, you need to clean it up."

"No. Not going to."

Jim didn't like Blair's tone. Not because he was acting up, but because it the total opposite of Blair's behavior - so much so that Jim was worried. When he unlocked the door and stepped inside, he found Joel cleaning up the floor and Blair stomping into his room and slamming the French doors.

"Whoa, what's up?" Jim asked as he took off his jacket and tossed the keys onto the table.

Joel straightened and, with an expression of both relief and concern, said, "Oh, man, am I glad to see you." In his hands, he had a dustpan full of spilled macaroni and cheese.

"What the heck happened?"

"I wish I could explain this. He's been…well, peevish is the best word to describe his behavior. He's been cranky and contrary all day - kept wanting me to call you and insist that you come home. I almost did, but I guess I wanted to try to handle it myself."

"So what just happened?" Jim asked as he joined him in finishing the clean up.

"Well, I set his dinner in front of him and then…he just refused to eat. When I asked him if there was something wrong, he just said no, so I told him to eat. That's when he accidentally swept his plate to the floor. I was trying to get him to clean it up and when he kept refusing, I…well, I…I sent him to his room." He shrugged helplessly. "It's what my mother always did when we acted up."

Jim frowned throughout Joel's recitation. Now of the behavior was Blair in the least. He tossed the sponge he'd been using on the floor into the sink and then walked toward the French doors.
"Blair, would you come out here, please," he said firmly.

The doors slowly opened and, just as slowly, Blair walked out, head down, hair obscuring his face. Jim's gaze drifted downward - and his eyes widened. Blair was dragging Deva by the tail.

Really worried now, Jim still needed to deal with the issue at hand, so he said quietly, "You made quite a mess."

Blair nodded.

"You should have cleaned it up."

"No."

Jim's eyebrows shot up. Unsure of where this sudden rebellion was coming from, he decided to try another tack. He pointed at the stuffed cat and said, "Deva can't be very comfortable."

"Dev's gone," Blair answered forlornly.

This was not good. Jim could feel a strange unease moving through him. "Blair, what do you mean?"

"Deva's gone. Just a stoopid stuff'd cat now."

Jim gently took the animal out of Blair's listless hand. He studied the cat for a moment and was about to try to reassure Blair when he realized that Deva did look different. He looked…scruffier and…somehow…empty.

Suddenly Blair said, "Head hurts. Head hurts bad."

He looked up at Jim then and he could see the pain visible in Blair's eyes.

"Hurts bad, bad."

Jim dropped the cat and took Blair into his arms. As Blair rested his head against Jim's chest, Jim asked, "Blair, when did the headache actually start? How long ago?"

"Now. All day. But now, hurts bad. Very bad."

Jim turned toward Joel and mouthed the word 'hospital', which was all Joel needed. He grabbed the keys from the table and got the front door open.

"Blair, I think we'd better go see your doctor, all right?"

"'Kay." It was the barest of a whisper.

As Jim guided him toward the door, Blair reached out and touched Joel. "I'm sorry," he said sadly.

Joel tweaked curl. "It's okay, buddy."

By the time they got down to Jim's truck, Jim was ready to lift Blair and carry him, but he made it and they both got him inside. With one look from Jim, Joel nodded and quickly moved to the driver's side and climbed in while Jim slid in next to Blair.

***
A good chunk of the ride to the hospital was a nightmare for Jim. Vehicles and pedestrians seemed to deliberately slow them up and the traffic signals were definitely against them. But then Blair groaned and seemed to fold in on himself - and that's when Joel shoved Jim's police light onto the dashboard and Jim made a frantic call ahead to warn the hospital. By the time they pulled up in front of the Emergency entrance, Blair was unconscious and totally unresponsive. With Jim and Joel helping, the orderlies got him onto a gurney and then rushed inside where Dr. Nichols was waiting.

As the gurney was pushed into ER, the doctor took Jim's arm, stopping him from following. "Detective Ellison, I've got everything ready, we'll run some tests and hopefully I'll have an answer for you, but for now, you need to wait here, all right?"

"But…I need--"

"I'll come out the moment I have anything to report, I promise."

Joel took Jim's arm. "Come on, let's go sit down and wait. Blair's in good hands."

Senses reeling, Jim nodded and allowed Joel to guide him into the waiting room and then into a chair.

As Joel sat down beside him, he tried to concentrate, to find Blair; to listen, but he seemed incapable of filtering out all the sounds of a big city ER. Head pounding, he did the only thing he could - he dialed down.

***

Joel wanted to go outside and call Simon, but he didn't dare leave Jim. He looked terrible, was clearly in shock, and Joel suspected that Jim wasn't able to use extraordinary senses to listen in on Blair's care. He would have liked to try to help, but he knew how much Jim valued his privacy - and his secret. Even though it wasn't much of one. Just about everyone in Major Crime knew or suspected the truth - but now wasn't the time to share that information.

"Joel, you should call Simon. He needs to know."

Because Jim's words represented his own thoughts, Joel thought maybe he could go long enough to make the call. He got to his feet. "I'll be right back - don't do anything, Jim. All right?"

Jim just nodded, his mind blank.

Joel moved quickly outside and used his cell phone.

Twenty minutes after he made the call, Simon strode in and took the seat opposite Jim - and by the end of the first hour of their wait, the room had filled with their friends.

Joel looked around and nodded to himself. The guardian was now the guarded, the protector - now the protected.

***

Dr. Nichols stepped inside the waiting room - but could go no further. It was full, with literally no available space other than where he now stood. Heads turned in his direction and, without a word passing between them, the men and women of Major Crime created a path between Nichols and Jim.

When he reached the man's side, he placed a hand on his shoulder. "Detective Ellison?"
Jim raised his head slowly, blinked a couple of times, focused his gaze and, seeing the doctor clearly, got to his feet. "Tell me."

"We did an MRI and the results disclosed a small bone fragment lodged at the base of his skull. Now, there are two explanations for why we didn't spot it before. Either the previous swelling obscured it, or it's moved to a point where it's now visible. I'm inclined to think it's latter due to the suddenness of Blair's headache."

Jim's expression reflected his inner fear as he asked, "Surgery?"

Nichols nodded. "We need to remove the fragment." He touched a spot on the back of Jim's neck. "We'll enter here."

He went on to explain the surgery but for Jim, he'd already said enough to give him the slightest bit of relief. It sounded easier than he expected.

"What are the risks?" Simon asked quietly.

Nichols shrugged helplessly. "The fragment could move, become more dangerous. But we're already prepping him and, to be honest, I helped pioneer this technique and I believe that, if all goes as planned, you'll be able to take Blair home tomorrow."

"Is it possible that this fragment caused the...regression? That once you remove it...." Jim let his hope trail off.

"Anything's possible, but if you really want my opinion - I believe the cell damage is permanent. I'm sorry." The he added, "As soon as we're done, I'll be right out and give you what information I can and once we've moved him out of recovery, you can sit with him."

Dr. Nichols gave Jim a rather brusque pat on the shoulder and left.

Simon took a cigar out of his pocket and, as he fiddled with it, said, "Well, that sounded simple and hopeful. I'm sure he's going to be fine, Jim, just fine."

Jim's gaze traveled upward to fix on Simon. At the same time, it seemed he was suddenly aware of the men and women standing there, smiling and nodding, and hopeful and united.


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The procedure took a little over an hour and a half, the fragment successfully removed and now, Jim sat, once again, at Blair's bedside. Blair was sleeping soundly and, according to Nichols, it was a good, normal sleep.

The room was dark, with the only light coming from the hall outside. But Jim didn't need illumination. Now that he was here, with Blair, his senses had settled and he was using them to monitor Blair - to observe him. He stretched a bit and checked his watch. It was almost midnight. As he dropped his gaze back down to Blair, the younger man stirred, moved a little, sighed…and slowly opened his eyes. Jim immediately reached up and pulled the chain to bring up the overhead light, but on its lowest setting.

Blair blinked sleepily, looked around the room and finally at Jim. He smiled broadly. "Not hurting anymore. All better?"
Smiling tenderly, Jim nodded. "Yep, all better. Go back to sleep and in the morning, if all goes well, the doctor will let me take you home, okay?"

Blair nodded even as heavy lids started to slip down - but then they immediately flew open again. "Why did Deva leave?"

Jim took Blair's hand and said hopefully, "I don't know, but maybe by the time we get home, he'll be back."

Content with Jim's answer, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Jim pulled the chain again to darken the room - and allowed the tears to fall.

Here, in the darkened room, he could admit to himself that he'd prayed - believed - that Blair would his "Chief" when he awakened.

***

It was late afternoon before Nichols gave Jim the word that he could take Blair home. The release didn't come a minute too soon. Blair had awakened at seven and, once up, had been wired all day. He was antsy and eager to go home - so much so, it was hard to believe this was the same person who'd been so ill yesterday. It was also hard to believe he was being released so soon after surgery. Okay, Jim thought as he got Blair's clothes out of the small closet, the incision was small, and there was only a square bandage to mark it, but still, surgery was surgery. On the other hand, the sooner he had Blair out of here, the better - for both of them. All day long, every time someone had come in, Blair had asked, "Home now? Go home now?" And every time, Jim had to shake his head.

Now he put the clothing on the bed next to Blair, who was sitting up and swinging his legs. "Okay, let's get you out of that thing," he pointed with disdain to the gown, "and get you in your sweats. Then it's home-sweet-home."

"Yay!" Blair pumped his arm up and down but quickly stopped when he realized it was interfering with Jim's ability to help him get dressed.

By the time he was in his sweats, the nurse was there with the wheelchair and the release papers for Jim to sign. Thanking God, not for the first time since Blair's injury, that he and Blair had both made the other their 'agent' and 'legal guardian' in a medical emergency, should other family members not be available. Without that, all of this would surely have been an even worse nightmare.

"Okay, all ready," Blair said as he tugged at the shirt, adjusting it to his satisfaction.

"I guess you are. And now," he finished signing the release, "you're officially free."

He handed the clipboard back to the nurse, who then gave him his copies and two prescriptions. Looking them over to make sure they matched the antibiotic and pain medication Nichols had prescribed, Jim added, "But looks as though we'll have to stop at the pharmacy downstairs first."

Blair eyed the wheelchair with obvious delight and said, "So I'll have to stay in that, right?"

Unable to stop the grin, Jim nodded. "'Fraid so, buddy."

Rubbing his hands together gleefully, Blair said, "I'm gonna do wheelies."

"Wheelies?" Simon asked as he walked in. "You do wheelies inside the hospital and I'll have to give you a ticket, young man."
Blair giggled but the twinkle in his eyes said he was going to try at the first opportunity.

"Simon, you didn't need to come--"

"How did you think you were getting home?" Simon interrupted. "Joel had to take the truck."

Groaning at his forgetfulness, Jim said, "I might have been a bit…pre-occupied."

"No, any of us could have taken him, but he wanted to stay even after the doc showed up with the good news and, since I had a meeting with the Commissioner, we agreed on this as the solution for getting Joel home last night, and you and Blair home today."

"Well, no matter how it came about - thanks for the lift. We just have to stop downstairs for these," he held up the prescriptions, "and then home."

"Then let's head out."

***

It was after six by the time they walked into the loft. Blair was dragging so, after a quick but simple dinner of soup and crackers spread with peanut butter, Jim was able to get him to bed without a fuss. Blair did pick Deva up from the ground where he'd left him, but it was clear from his expression that nothing had changed - Deva was just a toy - and no more.

Now, with beers in their hands, Jim and Simon sat in what had become their usual spots, both quiet and somewhat contemplative. Although, it hadn't skipped Simon's notice that Jim was on his third beer. In fact, he'd been debating himself for the last fifteen minutes as to whether he should say something. Then it hit him. Jim was…disappointed…and hiding it with the beer. Or maybe…numbing it would be a more appropriate description.

He didn't believe allowing Jim to stew about it would do the man any good, so Simon finally said, "You really believed that it would be Sandburg that opened his eyes in the hospital, didn't you?"

Following a heavy sigh, Jim nodded.

"I'm sorry," Simon said, feeling desolate that he couldn't offer more.

"I just feel so damn guilty again. No matter what I think - or how I feel - I'm ultimately betraying one of them."

"I think I get it." He put his empty bottle on the coffee table and added, "But you know, I really wondered if we'd be able to put Major Crime back together again after the shootings - if we'd survive. I think the Blair in that room had a lot to do with the fact that we have. He gave us all someone else to concentrate on. Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, we played war games with Transformers and Hot Wheels." He grinned. "Kind of a miracle, in a way."

Jim couldn't deny Simon's words - but he'd really have preferred a different kind of miracle last night.

He'd been counting on it.

***

Jim moved slowly through the loft, turning lights off and locking up. Simon had left over an hour ago, but not before offering to stay, to keep Jim, who'd had another two beers, company. Jim had waved him off while assuring him that he was fine - but he wasn't. Not by a long shot.
He stopped in front of Blair's room…and finally went in.

For several minutes he remained by Blair's bed, just looking down at him as memories floated across his mind - memories of both Blair's warring for dominance.

In the end, neither won - because there, in the dark, listening to Blair's even breathing, Jim understood that they were equal - they were both Blair. With that acknowledgment, a strange sort of peace settled over Jim. As he stared at Blair, he felt the most complete love he'd ever experienced.

And it was enough. He was content.

Jim let go of the past, let go of a future that could never be, and held onto the present and the gift he'd been given. Bending down, he kissed Blair's warm cheek and whispered, "I love you."

As he headed upstairs, he really regretted that last beer.

***

He woke up with a throbbing head and a mouth stuffed full of cotton.

Coffee, he needed coffee. He stumbled out of bed and, on the way to the kitchen, decided a pit stop was required. When he was finished, he left the bathroom and headed groggily into the kitchen while trying to remember just how much he'd had to drink the night before.

He plugged in the coffeemaker and was just reaching for his cup when a shadow fell over him.

"Didn't we have an agreement about how I need to be in the kitchen with you?"

"Gee, Jim, I know we do almost everything together, but don't you think this is taking it a bit too far?"

Jim stalked into the kitchen and was in the middle of pulling out the cord when Sandburg's words hit him. He froze for a moment before allowing his hand to drop to his side. He turned around and looked down at the man in front of him.

As Jim's eyes bore into his own, as he moved into Blair's personal space, Blair knew instinctively that something strange was happening - and that he needed to allow it to happen. So he kept still, let Jim do this - whatever this was. He watched as Jim seemed to drink in every inch of his body and face and then, as impossible as it seemed, he moved even closer to Blair. He reached one hand up, let it hover next to Blair's face - so Blair nodded slightly, even thought he didn't completely understand what he was saying yes to. He only knew it was necessary.

Jim rested his hand gently against Blair's beard-stubbled cheek and, slowly, almost as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, ran his hand down Blair's jaw. Then the most joyous and beautiful expression Blair had ever seen moved over Jim's face as he breathed out one word as if it were the most beautiful, miraculous word in any language.

"Chief."

***

"Jim?"

It had been several minutes of allowing Jim to do whatever it was he was doing and now, at Blair's voice, Jim tenderly tapped Blair's lower lip. They were still in the kitchen, Blair with his back to the
counter, Jim standing over him, their bodies just touching. There was no pressure because Jim wasn't actually leaning against Blair - he was just sort of - there.

Blair closed his mouth against all the questions as Jim trailed his finger across Blair's lower lip before whispering, almost reverently, "I promised myself that if you ever came back to me……"

Jim lowered his head and rested his lips against Blair's. The moment was pure, simple and yet, spoke volumes for both men. When the kiss finally ended, Blair opened his eyes to see Jim grinning down at him, looking all the world like a man who'd actually been given everything he'd ever asked for in life.

"Okay, this has been weird, but that was, you know, nice - and all, but maybe you could tell me what the hell's going on now? And what do you mean if I ever came back to you? Just where have I been?"

Jim could have wasted a lot of words, but he decided that showing might prove quicker than telling. He took Blair's hand and lead him to Blair's bedroom. When they got to the French doors, he stopped, lifted Blair's hand and guided it to the bandage on the back of his neck.

Eyes widening in shock, Blair said, "What the hell?"

Jim turned him to face the bedroom and said softly, "I'll assume that when you woke up, you were your usual 'can't see straight until I've had my coffee' self, so you probably didn't get a good look at your room. Now might be the time to do that."

Frowning, Blair looked.

Okay, his bed, toys, books….

Toys?

He walked inside and looked closer.

He had…dinosaur sheets and a jungle cat bedspread? He rubbed his eyes, looked again. Yep, the toys were still there, lined up on his desk. And there were comic books and coloring books where police procedual books used to be - and anthropological books.

His legs gave way and he dropped down onto the bed even as he continued to comb every inch of his room, questions bombarding his mind, but still too stunned to voice them.

On some level, he realized he was sitting on something and absentely reached under his leg, rooted around until his fingers found it and he pulled it out. He looked down and found himself staring into the black eyes of a stuffed cat. As he focused on it, a memory, vague but persistent, from his childhood, hammered at him - and with it came a name.

"Deva," he whispered. He lifted the cat to inspect it more closely. "Jesus. I'd forgotten all about him." He his head and rubbed his cheek across the top of the animals head.

Watching, Jim felt tears stinging the back of his eyes, but he didn't bother trying to stop them as they finally overflowed. Instead, he walked rather unsteadily to the bed and sat down next to his partner who, while still resting a cheek on the furry head, faced him.

"What happened, man? What's this all about?"

"Can you tell me the last thing you remember?"
He frowned, tried to reach back….

"A…call. A phone call to…Wonderburger." He snapped his fingers, "That's it! Luis and $65 worth of hamburgers. His practical joke." Then he smiled wickedly, "But I doubled the order and had half delivered to Vice. Luis must have shit a brick."

"Anything else, Chief?" Jim gently urged.

Blair shook his head…but then added thoughtfully, "Wait. The post office. I stopped to mail something to mo…Naomi…and….

"And?"

Blair's face clouded over as sudden visions, fast, stark and horrific, bombarded him. The memories assaulted him, pounding relentlessly and, without realizing it, he cried out as his face contorted in pain. "Jim!"

He felt Jim's arms wrap around him, strong and comforting, the stuffed cat trapped between them. He shut his eyes tightly as he said, "Beth…and there's so much blood…she…she's dead. And I can see Peter in Martin's arms and he's rocking back and forth…won't let them take Peter…and oh God, Rafe…Rafe is dead, Jim!"

The truth came out in wrenching sobs and all Jim could do was hold on, let Blair remember….

Suddenly, Blair started shaking his head and saying, "Myfaultmyfaultmyfault--"

Jim held him away and said firmly, "No, Chief. No. It wasn't your fault, do you understand? Listen to me--"

"Didsomethingwrongdidsomethingwrong--"

Jim had no choice, he had to stop this, so he gave Blair a slight shake, careful of the stitches. "No! Now I want you to look at me - look at me."

The litany of self-accusation stopped as Blair opened his eyes and focused in on Jim, who then said quickly, "You did nothing wrong, do you hear me? Nothing. The FBI blew it, understand? One stupid agent fired when he shouldn't have and we had a war on our hands. Our people were trapped, caught in the crossfire. There was nothing anyone could do. You just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Although," he added, "several civilians would disagree. You saved lives that day. Women and children. Do you understand, Chief?"

Blair frowned as he raised his hand to the back of his head, eyes asking what he could not find the words to say.

"Yes, you were hurt, but not during the fighting. It happened later. An FBI agent by the name of Lister decided to hide his own blunders by finding a scapegoat. When he heard we had a detective inside, namely you, he decided to play 'tag, you're it'. He shoved you hard, you hit your head…it was…it was bad. You were in a coma for several days…we thought we'd lost you, but then you woke up. Only…"

He touched his forehead to Blair's. "But you came out of it. Only…there was some damage and you were…a child. You, but the you at five."

Worried, Jim watched as it all sank in, as Blair's face reflected the myriad of emotions he was experiencing. And then anger. Cold and hard, his eyes darkening with it. "Tell me he's dead or in
prison - just tell me that, man."

Shocked by Blair's question and the emotion behind it, he almost didn't know what to say - but then he realized that, unlike the rest of them, Blair hadn't had all these weeks to mourn the loss of Beth, Peter and Rafe. To him, this was now, today. There was no five-year old to soothe Blair, to heal him or bring him peace.

"Chief, he was fired and criminal charges *have* been brought against him - he may even serve time."

"It's not enough."

"Look, it was a massive FBI screw up." Jim took a few minutes to fill Blair in on the tip the FBI had received two days earlier, a tip that terrorists were going to hit Centennial Private Academy, a school located two blocks from the post office. It catered to the sons and daughters of diplomats and foreign dignitaries who made Cascade their home. But the agency had accidentally tipped their hand too soon and the terrorists were alerted to the trap, so moved their action to the nearest Federal Building; in this case, the Twelfth Street Post Office.

"There are rumors that Lister deliberately provoked the terrorists, that he wanted a shootout, wanted the whole thing to blow up because he wanted every terrorist dead - killed by our people and his. He didn't stop to think about you or the others inside, let alone our people - he just wanted to cover his colossal blunder in allowing his agents to move too soon. When that didn't work, he blamed the P.D. by blaming our man inside. You. But that blew up in his face too, big time. He's going down, Chief."

"Yeah, but they're still...dead. Gone," Blair whispered in anguish.

"That's true - and nothing will bring them back, but Rafe saved Luis and Martin - and Peter saved the man he loved; he saved his partner."

They were silent then but Jim noticed Blair's fingers, which were unconsciously ruffling the fur on the cat in his arms. Eventually, Blair asked quietly, "How long?"

"It's been...it's been almost two...months."

Blair looked at him then. "And you took care of me?"

Jim shrugged. "I had help, Chief. Lots of help."

Blair frowned in puzzlement so Jim added, "I guess you could say you had a series of...sitters. The gang made a schedule so that when I was at work, one of them was here with you. Joel, Megan, Henri, Martin, Jeff, others - and of course, Simon. Almost everyone took a turn."

"Shit." But surprisingly, he was grinning.

"Okay, what's so funny?"

Now it was Blair's turn to shrug. "Mom would be the first to tell anyone what a holy terror I was as a kid. I was just enjoying the thought of a little payback for all the practical jokes. I bet I ran the whole gang ragged." He chuckled at the thought.

Jim tweaked a curl and, using the strand, gently tugged Blair closer. "Trust me, at five or thirty - you're a holy terror - but you're *my* holy terror."

"Speaking of *my*, maybe now would be a good time to talk about that kiss? Not that I minded - I just
thought an explanation might be nice."

Jim fingered the strand of hair he was still holding as he said, "Not much to tell, really. I love you - couldn't tell you before but swore that if - no, when - you came back, I'd tell you how I felt. So I did. Obviously I'd hoped you'd--"

"Feel the same?"

"Mmm, yeah, that about covers it."

"Well, isn't this your lucky day - because I do." With that, Blair glanced around his room again before adding in a voice touched with awe, "You kept me."

Jim nodded again. "Yeah, yeah, I did."

"And mom let you? Or is she here too?"

Jim's expression changed, took on a harder edge. "We haven't heard from her, Chief."

"Ah. Of course. She wasn't really happy about the whole badge thing, not that she didn't try, but… well, I suspect she's off on some sort of retreat where she can meditate and come to terms with the fact that her son is now a pig. I'm betting she hasn't even checked in with her friends."

"Yeah, that's kind of what we figured. But…you need to know that I wouldn't have given you to her even if she had shown up. Wouldn't have let her take you. You need to know that."

With Jim's admission, the most gentle, loving smile crossed Blair's face. "Oddly enough, even before the kiss - I knew that."

"I mean she's your mother, but--"

"Jim, did you hear me? I know. And it would be the same for me if things had been reversed. We're for…always."

Wonderfully relieved, Jim smiled. "Yeah, yeah, we are." Then he closed the remaining distance between them and, once again, touched his lips to Blair's - but this time, they both allowed their lips to part….

Only to be interrupted by loud pounding on the front door.

Jim reluctantly broke the kiss which caused a rather dazed Blair to fall forward even as Jim said, "It's Simon."

"Well, won't he be surprised," Blair said as he touched his lips.

Jim laughed then, a booming, totally uncharacteristic laugh, one full of joy, relief, and excitement. Getting to his feet, eager to witness Simon's shocked face when confronted with this Blair, he held out a hand and, when Blair took it, he pulled him up.

"Come on, let's go surprise the man."

***

The shock wasn't immediately noticeable for the simple reason that when Jim opened the door to admit Simon, Blair, hair still tousled and still carrying Deva, was right behind him.
"Morning, Simon," Jim said with a huge grin.

"Good morning," Simon answered, his eyes moving toward Blair. "Uhm, how's...you know...everything...today?"

Jim, doing a great job of hiding his total happiness, not to mention the laughter that threatened to explode, he followed Simon's gaze to Blair, saw him as Simon must: Deva under his arm, hair in total disarray, looking both flushed and a bit nervous. Biting back a chuckle, he said simply, "See for yourself."

Blair stepped forward, smiled, and said easily, "Morning Simon."

Simon started removing his coat and answered without thought, "How's Blair, Sandburg?"

Blair and Jim exchanged delighted grins before Blair answered, "I'm fine. We're both fine. And you?"

Simon paused, coat hanging by his fingers. As he turned around, it slipped to the floor. Head cocked to the right, he said in disbelief, "Sandburg?"

"Yeah?"

Simon took two steps forward and said again, "Sandburg?"

"Yeah?" Blair repeated, grinning widely now.

"Sandburg!" Simon yelled.

"Simon!" Blair yelled right back - just before being engulfed in two strong arms and crushed into Simon's very broad chest.

Now Jim let his laughter and joy out.

***

"Mmmsimnph?"

"Simon, I don't think Blair can breathe," Jim said several minutes later.

"Oh, God," Simon said, horrified. He quickly loosened his hold - but didn't completely release Blair. Instead, he studied him carefully before asking, "You really okay, Sandburg?"

Blair nodded. "Yep."

Looking over the top of Blair's head, Simon asked Jim, "How? When?"

Jim could only shrug. "How, don't have a clue. When - he woke up this way. One minute I was chastising Blair for using the coffeemaker without me and the next thing I know, Sandburg is cracking some joke about carrying togetherness too far." He gazed fondly down at Blair. "Guess we'll just call it a miracle."

At that point, Simon realized he was still holding Blair - so he abruptly let go, which sent Blair and Jim off into new gales of laughter even as Simon said, "We've got to let everyone know. Call them - they'll want to see for themselves."

"So call them. As for me and Sandburg, we're going to have breakfast." He rubbed his hands
together in anticipation. "I'm thinking...pancakes."

***

Pancakes had been made, cooked, and eaten by all three men, and then Simon had made all the necessary calls. By noon, the loft was full of detectives, including Luis.

For Jim, it was almost a repeat of the poker game. He found himself standing against the pillar, arms crossed, as he enjoyed watching everyone fuss over his partner. They all seemed to have a need to touch Blair as they moved about the loft, laughing, crying and touching. They touched his arms in passing, tweaked or ruffled his hair, patted his back - anything they could do that reassured them, they did. Proof that he was not only real, but himself. They wanted to hear him talk, asked to hear some of his old anthropology stories as if they'd never heard his exploits before. They even wanted to hear his laugh, which confused Jim - left him conflicted again. Watching everyone, watching Blair, he had a moment of feeling as though he were now betraying the young Blair - because he'd come to love the beautiful, freeing, exhilarating laugh of the five-year old Blair.

Frowning at the thought, he realized that the loft had grown somewhat quiet, that the questions had all been answered - well, as much as either Jim or Blair could answer them. Since neither of them knew why Blair was back, Jim had every intention of taking Blair in to see Doctor Nichols as soon as possible - but for now, the mood in the loft was mellow and content. No one seemed willing to leave, though, so with Simon's help, Jim had passed out sodas, popcorn and other munchies.

Eventually, Blair stood up to get everyone's attention. "Uhm, everyone?"

The chatter stopped as all eyes turned toward him. To Jim's astute eyes, he looked nervous as he'd said, "I...well, I mean...Jim kind of told me everything that's happened. I obviously don't remember the last few weeks, but I do know how all of you helped. How you helped to care for me, watch me while Jim worked...and I just want to say...well--"

Several kernels of popcorn flew through the air, many hitting their mark, namely Blair's hair as Henri got to his feet. "Come on, Hairboy, we've been babysitting you from day one!"

"Brown's right," Joel added with a grin. "Every time Jim said, 'Sandburg, stay in the truck', we knew there was a fifty-fifty chance that you wouldn't. So we kept our eyes on you, and when you did leave--"

"Hell," Luis interrupted. "I'm surprised one of us wasn't permanently assigned to the truck. Can't you all hear the radio transmission?" Then, in a perfect imitation of Megan's Australian accent, he said, "Uh-oh, mates. Jim's left Sandburg in the truck, who's got the duty?"

The loft exploded in laughter, including Blair, but when it calmed down, he got their attention again. He looked around the room, at the men and women he'd come to know, trust, respect - and love. He could even see the ones who were missing. Like Beth, who'd have been with Luis, poking him in the ribs - or Peter, a hand resting possessively on Martin's thigh - and of course - Rafe, who'd have been seated as close as humanly possible to Megan and stealing glances when he thought no one was looking.

Blair paused a moment, their memories soft on his mind. Somehow he knew that any flowery speech now would be wrong, so instead, with eyes a bit misty, he said simply, "Thank you, guys. Thank you."

There was a moment of silence until Stevens said thoughtfully, "You know, I can't speak for the others...but if you really want to show your gratitude...well, there is something you could do."
Suspicious now, Blair nevertheless asked, "What?"

"I'd really like that white Power Ranger. For my kids, of course."

"That would be your future kids, right?" Blair asked teasingly.

"Oh, yeah, definitely. Future kids."

"Hey, as long as you're giving stuff away, I wouldn't mind the Ramhorn Warrior transformer," Martin added with a wink.

Suddenly everyone was talking at once, all demanding their toy. "No, I want the red Hot Wheel," or "But I played with the blue Power Ranger, it's mine," seemed the gist of the demands.

Finally, Blair held up his hands. "Okay, guys, I get it and I agree with you. But I need to do this fairly - so hang on a minute." He hurried into his room and returned a few minutes later, arms full of his 'toys'. He sat on the floor, crossed his legs, spread the goodies out around him and then, with a truly wicked grin, said, "You want 'em, guys - you've got win 'em. And gentlemen, it won't be easy because this is war!"

Mouth agape, Jim watched as, once again, a bunch of tough cops hunkered down on the floor to play - no, not play - battle - for their favorite toys. With shock, he watched as Luis was helped down and propped up by pillows so he could join the 'war of the toys'. Jim wasn't in the least bit surprised though, to see the very thirty-year old Blair Sandburg - love Jim's life - once again setting up the rules...rules that very definitely favored him.

Cackling in devilish delight, he blasted Simon's Power Ranger to smithereens. At Simon's stunned look, Blair laughed - a rich, deep, all-Blair laugh. It wove its way through the loft, touching everyone, but finally coming to rest in Jim's heart. And when it did, just as he had last night, Jim let go. Not because he had to accept a truth, as he had last night, but because now he knew that he didn't have to miss the five-year old Blair - that child was right here - with the mature Blair. And he always would be.

Jim decided he'd had enough observing for one day - it was time to join the fray. After all, there was no way Simon was going to take possession of the 'Alpha-mate' Transformer. Just now way.

That was his.

***

Epilogue:

The loft was finally back to its pristine self, the gang long gone now. Oddly enough, most of the toys remained. Between them, Jim and Blair had battled bravely - and won. In fact, only Martin and Megan had gone home with any spoils.

Now they sat on the couch, in the darkness, the lights of their city providing the only illumination.

With Jim's hand in his, Blair gave it a squeeze and asked, "You okay?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You don't handle change all that well, in case it's skipped your notice. And this was really - different."
Jim chuckled and squeezed back. "Different describes it, all right. But hey, you're back and I know it - so everything's good. Does that make sense?"

"Sure." Blair cocked his head, "Come on though, you can be honest. Was I too awful? Too much?"

Jim pulled Blair to him, tucking him into the space under his arm, where not surprisingly, he fit perfectly. "Actually, you were a blessing. Now, I don't want you to get a swelled head - or anything. Not just yet, but no, you weren't too awful at all. In fact, I know neither Simon nor I will ever be able see a zoo the same way again, and I know Connor has a whole new appreciation of the aquarium."

"Aquarium?" Blair sat up. "We went to the Aquarium and I don't remember? Damn. I've wanted to go since it re-opened."

"Yeah, well, you did. You even have the stuffed whale to prove it."

"Gee, thanks Jim," Blair snarked.

They went back to sitting quietly, but it didn't last.

"Jim, I don't suppose we could…you know…go again?"

"What, to the Aquarium?" At Blair's nod, he said, "Sure, why not?" He chuckled then and received a poke in the ribs.

Blair looked over at the stairs and said thoughtfully, "We seem to be…putting something off here, man. Like…maybe…going upstairs?" He looked back at Jim. "Maybe you're not as comfortable with the sudden switch from a five-year old me to the thirty-year old as you thought?"

"Actually…it's getting more and more difficult to believe the last weeks even happened. But there might be some…stress involved in going up to bed. We've been moving in this direction a long time - expectations might be a bit high. Not to mention, you had surgery two days ago."

Blair unwound himself from Jim and got to his feet. He held out a hand. "Recent surgery simply means I get to top tonight."

Startled, Jim stared up at his partner, who simply pulled him up.

"We're big boys, Jim. We can do this."

With that, Jim found himself being tugged toward the stairs - and then up them. At the top, Blair paused and they stood awkwardly for a moment as they looked at each other - and then the bed - and Blair smiled.

He could admit that he'd been feeling a bit insecure - afraid he might disappoint. He was one of the few people in the world who knew that Jim had been with men before. He also knew they'd been very similar to Jim - big, military/cop types - and nothing like Blair. And yes, he'd been worried that the last weeks of caring for a younger version of himself might definitely interfere. But then he'd looked at the bed - and what was sitting in the middle of it.

Deva. Looking very smug. If a stuffed animal could be said to look anything but…well, stuffed. That was all it took for Blair to toss his fears aside - just as he'd done so many years ago.

Jim had spotted Deva too and now gave a startled gasp. "How the hell--"

"Who cares how he got here, Jim. He's here." Blair walked over and picked him up. "I can't believe I
ever forgot him." He glanced up at Jim. "Don't you think it's odd that I chose a black jaguar to protect me when I was five?"

"I did - until I let myself really think about it. But I was a bit hurt that you didn't name it…Jim."

Blair snorted. "Very funny." He sat down. "So you really don't think it's…weird?"

"Weird is our watchword, Chief. And I think I'm starting to like that about us." He sat down next to his partner. "I think, in a way, you were my…what…my guide? Even back then."

Okay, this was not the Jim Blair knew. Not the Jim who could never accept who he was, let alone all the spiritual mumbo-jumbo that seemed to go hand-in-hand with being a sentinel. Only one response to Jim's word came to mind.

"Shit."

"Give me a break, Chief. I've had a lot of time to think about all this and the truth is, even when you were a wonderful child living here with me, you…well, you guided me. Without the grown-up you with me on the job, I felt it was safer to turn down my senses, but as soon as I came home, heard your voice, as soon as you touched me, I was grounded and they opened up on their own." He paused for a moment, trying to choose his words carefully. "I think I know why Deva came to you, why your mother bought him. You needed the protection and reassurance." He stopped, took a deep breath, and added, "I know about Mickey."

"Well, fuck." Clearly upset now, Blair got to his feet. "How? What did I say?"

Jim reached out for him. "Hey, calm down. It's okay. It doesn't matter how it came out. Hell, with the number of men in and out of Naomi's life, it only makes sense that some would be less than sterling characters and that sometimes, you'd be the one to pay the price." He picked Deva up. "That's why you got Deva - I think."

Blair sat down again and took Deva from Jim. "He did protect me. He really did." He picked at a piece of lint on the shiny black coat. "I've never told anyone this, not even Naomi, but I'm going to tell you because…maybe…you'll believe me now and I never thought anyone would."

Jim held his breath, unsure if he really wanted to hear what might be coming. Not that he had a choice.

"See, Mickey came back while Mom was at work. I shouldn't even remember this, but I do. Anyway, we'd moved, to get away from him. I had some lady with me, a babysitter, but I don't remember her name," he smiled, "she wasn't very nice. Anyway, the door bell rang and it was Mickey. He probably gave her some song and dance, along with money and she left. I was alone with him and he was mad. Said if it hadn't been for me, he and mom would have been happy. That they could still be happy - if I were gone. He said I was useless, an albatross, that they could travel all over the place if I weren't around. He said that she'd never wanted me in the first place."

Blair stopped then, his body rigid with the memory. Jim felt a rush of sympathy - followed by a flush of red hot anger directed at Naomi - and the man who'd said such terrible things to a child.

"That's when he started towards me - and I knew he was going to kill me. I kept backing up until I hit the wall. There was no where else to go, no bed to hide under this time. I had Deva in my hand - but suddenly - he wasn't. Instead, there was this large black cat crouching in front of me, growling at Mickey, hissing and spitting, fur standing straight up. Then it rose up and began to stalk him. This time…Mickey was the one backing up - and he was shaking his head and saying, "No" over and
over again until he finally reached the front door. That's when he ran. When the door slammed shut behind him, when I heard the car drive off - I looked down - and there sat Deva - just a small, stuffed cat again."

"Well, fuck."

"Yeah, Jim. Fuck."

They looked at each other, then down at the cat…and they laughed. Sure, it was more of an hysterical kind of laughter, but Jim figured it they'd both earned it. But finally the laughter died as they moved into each other's arms. They held each other, soothing one another with soft caresses.

Eventually, the soft caresses became more passionate as they began to explore each other in their need to reconnect, to express their emotions. To complete something, to mate and lay claim to one another.

For Blair, much like that morning, he understood the need to take the more passive role by allowing Jim to do whatever he needed, to use his senses in every way, to reassure himself one more time that Blair was really back.

Jim moved them backward on the bed even as he began to divest Blair of the material that kept Jim from skin. Blair wanted to help - but again, the need to take control was burning bright in Jim's eyes, so he let Jim do his thing while enjoying Jim's face, the concentration and love.

When he was finally naked, Jim straddled him and began to take his clothes off, fingers now oddly unsteady but eyes never leaving Blair's face.

Blair had seen Jim naked before - but there's always been showering involved - this was different. Jim was undressing - for him. When he too was bare, Jim lowered himself with his arms so that only their lips connected.

Blair sensed that Jim wanted slow and exploratory, but once they kissed, their lips parting, their passion rose quickly, full cocks bumping and rubbing as they explored each other's mouths. They couldn't last - not this time. Couldn't draw it out, indulge themselves. No, that would come later.

Blair came first, into Jim's hand, Jim's name on his lips. Jim followed seconds later, Blair's name whispered into thick, curly hair.

Chests heaving, sweat cooling, Jim lay half on and half off of Blair. Eventually, as one, they turned on their sides with Jim spooned up behind Blair. Eyes already closing, Jim had the presence of mind to pull the comforter up and over them. With contented sighs, they slept the sleep of lovers.

Sentinel and Guide. Jim and Blair.

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Epilogue -

Jim drove down the narrow, tree-trimmed road and, when he spotted what he was looking for, pulled the truck over and parked. He took the flowers Blair handed him and they both exited the truck and, together, each with bouquets in their hands, started across the expanse of freshly mowed lawn.

When they reached the small, peaceful, sun-dappled path, they followed it quietly until Jim stopped them and pointed to a marker.
Blair, dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans and a brown jacket, his Cascade P.D. badge hanging from his belt, bent down and lovingly set the first bouquet down in front of the gravestone. He touched the granite as he said softly, "Beth, don't worry about Sam and the kids. We'll take good care of them. They miss you terribly, but they know you're watching over them. And don't worry about Luis - we're taking good care of him too." He smoothed his hand over her engraved name - and whispered a quiet good-bye.

He stood up and Jim led him a few yards further away - to another gravestone. Again, Blair knelt down and placed the second bouquet on the mound of earth. "Peter, I can't lie. I really miss you. No one could make me laugh the way you did. Loved you, man." He traced a finger over Peter's name. "I'll take care of Martin, I swear it."

He remained there for a few minutes, head bowed, tears flowing freely. But eventually, after another choked-out farewell, he got to his feet and followed Jim to the final gravestone. Jim handed Blair the bouquet he'd been carrying and for the last time, Blair knelt and placed flowers on a grave.

"Rafe...you and your three piece suits." Blair smiled warmly. "Best dressed detective in Major Crime. Miss you, buddy, and Henri's a bear without you. But Susie's keeping him in line and...Megan is coping, okay? So don't worry about her. We'll keep her safe - but you have to know - she loved you, big time." He rubbed at his eyes, looked up at the sky, and said, "We're depending on you, Rafe. You, Peter and Beth, to watch over us, you hear? We'll hold all of you...right here," he tapped his heart, "forever. We'll never forget you and that's a promise."

Jim bent enough to reach Blair's hand. He helped him to his feet, slipped his arm around Blair's waist and, together, they whispered goodbye. Then, arm-in-arm, they walked back to the truck.

End - The Healer - Continued in The Boogeyman

End Notes

Warnings: These three stories have violence and both Original Character deaths as well as one secondary character's death from the show. There is also the death of an animal (which if I were doing these stories today, I'd have found a way to avoid - but I chose to keep it since my only intent is to correct grammar/punctuation, etc, not to significantly change the story). The primary subject matter is child abuse and can be stressful to read parts of them. The child abuse is in the form of physical and mental (not sexual). This trilogy is most definitely rated R.

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