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**Love's Forbearance**

by [Arianna](#)

**Summary**

This sequel was written in response to a 2009 Moonridge Claim challenge to follow Polly B’s heartbreaking story of partner betrayal on Sentinel Thursday with a story that would lead to a happy ending. This is a story of reconciliation, but it takes a while. Both Jim and Blair have to work hard to address the problems between them and to get to the truth of the underlying issues that caused the schism. 'There is no limit to love’s forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure.'

**Notes**

I want to thank Janet for posing the claim challenge, and Polly B for giving me permission to post her story as a lead-in to my sequel. I also want to thank the three people who donated to receive this story, Bee, Dorothy, and Gerri, and for their gracious permission to post it early. And, as always, thank you to StarWatcher for her impeccable beta, and to Rhianne, for hosting my stories.

**MOONRIDGE 2009 CLAIM CHALLENGE**

*Write a sequel to Polly B’s story (below)*

but have a happy ending!

Arianna’s challenge response,
Love’s Forbearance,

follows Polly’s initial story

Polly B’s Real Men

Challenge #277: Real Men  
Title: Five in the Stink  
Author: Polly Bywater  
Categories & Pairings: Slash, established relationship J/B, het J/ofc  
Rating: R for language  
Word Count: 1450ish + or – a few  
Warnings: Unhappy breakup fic just because this is what I felt like writing when I thought about Jim and the prompt, sorry to be late. The title comes from The Urban Dictionary’s definition of ‘deal breaker’. No happy-ever-after for J/B in the works, read at your own risk.

**

When Blair had thought about it – and he’d thought about it, of course he’d thought about it; everybody played the ‘what would you do if you came home unexpectedly and caught your significant other cheating on you?’ game. Depending on Blair’s mood at the time, it had either been a joking “shoot ‘em both!” a shrugged off “turn around and walk away,” or occasionally a surprised “hey, open relationship, cool!” But those phases never lasted because Blair didn’t like sharing; he attributed it to an only child thing. As Naomi had basically taught him option two from birth, Blair generally believed that was the preferable way to behave, avoiding prison time or self-directed moral outrage later, and minimizing the collateral damage.

What he hadn’t anticipated was how he would feel when it actually happened.

He spotted Jim by accident, watching through a bus window as Jim walked out of a restaurant, hand in hand with a blonde woman Blair recognized as a new tech from the crime lab. He didn’t know her name. Fate or chance kept the bus at a red light long enough for Blair to witness Jim and his date getting into a cab ... long enough for Blair to see Jim kiss her, holding her head the way he held Blair’s, devouring her mouth in an public display the likes of which Jim never indulged in with Blair, even though they’d been lovers for over a year.

Expecting hurt or anger, Blair sat there on his hard bus seat and literally felt himself ice over, mind shielding itself, frozen, impenetrable, and numb. Emotions safely cocooned in what seemed to be the mental equivalent of carbonite, he found himself thinking “maybe it wasn’t what it looked like” and asked himself if he shouldn’t get proof before assuming the worst.

Denial. He was already staging his grief, Blair acknowledged cynically, wondering how much this was going to hurt when the numbness wore off.

He left the bus at the next stop, grabbed a cab of his own and, thanks to the vagaries of Cascade traffic, managed to beat Jim home so he could plant himself on the fire escape with a white noise generator that didn’t muffle anything for Blair later when Jim fucked his date in their bed. Jim made the same “I’m coming” groan with her that he did with Blair; it was an observation Blair layered onto
his glacial calm as he waited long enough for Jim to fall asleep, if Jim kept to his usual pattern, before climbing inside his old room to start packing.

None too quiet about it – convenient, wasn’t it, that he kept almost all his belongings in his old room, for appearances’ sake – it didn’t take him long to gather only those things he couldn’t bear to leave. ‘The Sentinels of Paraguay’ wasn’t included. When he walked into the living room, Jim was escorting his date down the stairs saying something Blair couldn’t make out in an apologetic tone that managed to chip away at Blair’s frozen veneer.

“Don’t let me interrupt. I was just leaving,” he said without stopping, heading for the door.

“Blair, no. Wait. I need –”

“Oh, and it’s all about what you need, apparently,” Blair concluded, not sure how the words sounded outside his mouth because he couldn’t hear them. His ears were filled with roaring. Jim had somehow gotten between him and the door and he couldn’t stand the look on Jim’s face. Panicked. Guilty. Desperate. “Are you sure you want to have this conversation in front of your current fling, here? What was it this time, pheromones again?”

Whoa, that couldn’t be his voice, so tense and distraught. Blair sounded to himself like one of those stereotypical TV fags, flaming and wailing. He refused to go there or be like that. He took a deep breath and looked at Jim directly.

“Get out of my way,” he almost growled.

“Don’t leave. Don’t leave me,” Jim begged in a harsh whisper, his expression anguished.

“What do you expect to happen here?” Truly mystified, Blair shook his head and shouldered his duffel. “Where else do you think this can go?”

“It didn’t mean – it didn’t mean anything, Blair, please.”

“That really doesn’t help, Jim.”

The blonde, pale and rumpled and pretty, had one hand to her mouth and shocked brown eyes. To her credit, though, she was attempting to stay out of the fray and sidle around to the door, herself.

“So, you get it out of your system? Prove to yourself you’re still a real man? Was it worth it?” Blair asked evenly, guessing what likely motivated Jim’s infidelity. Blair moderated his tone by sheer force of will. What he wanted to do was scream. “Hope so for your sake, man. Hope you can live with the price of your self knowledge.”

“Blair, you can’t leave me. You said you’d never leave me,” Jim was in his face now, his face white and his words strained. “It was a mistake, okay? I know that.”

“Nah, it was a mistake getting caught,” Blair corrected, backing away before Jim’s hands could close on his shoulders. “Don’t touch me, Jim. I don’t want your hands on me. Just. Just, tell me something. Tell me the truth. This isn’t the first time, is it.” He was suddenly sure.

“Not even the first time with me,” the blonde muttered when Jim said absolutely nothing. She was wiping her nose with her hand and impatiently blinking back tears. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know. He said –”

“Let me guess. He said we were just friends. Well. We used to be.”
Jim flinched like Blair had struck him and Blair supposed he had. He couldn’t even feel bad about it.

When he started to walk past Jim, Jim grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him around. Blair refused to look him in the eye, unwilling to give Jim the encouragement Blair’s baring his throat would imply.

Those days were over.

“Chief, you can’t just walk out on me. Please.”

“Hey, pretty blonde homewrecker, you got a cell phone?” Blair called out as she finally made it to the door, still looking overwrought and upset.


“Call the police, report a domestic disturbance if Jim doesn’t let me leave with you.”

“Dammit, Blair! At least tell me where you’re going.” Jim’s hand fell away from Blair’s arm.

“You don’t get to know that any more,” Blair informed him as he passed. “You’re a free agent, Jim. You can fuck women from now on, go back to pretending you’re one-hundred percent straight. It’s your life and I’m no longer part of it.”

“Blair, you’re the most important part,” Jim said, reaching out to catch him by the hair, pulling him into a kiss Blair had no time to resist until he remembered watching Jim kiss her. Then he found the strength to shove against Jim’s chest and tear their mouths apart.

Jim smelled like sex and woman.

“Get off me, or I’ll report you for assault.”

“You wouldn’t do that. We’d beouted.”

“I’m leaving Cascade. Do you think I care?” Blair stepped back and this time Jim let him. “The closet was always your gig, Jim. Not mine.”


“Turn ‘em off. It’s what you do, remember?” Blair moved to the door. Jim’s blonde had left it open. She was standing out in the hall with her phone in her hand. Blair went over and pressed the button for the elevator, aware Jim was standing in the open door, one hand rubbing the back of his neck and looking all vulnerable.

“Please, Blair, can’t we talk?”

“Oh, I don’t think we have anything left to say, Jim.”

“I love you,” Jim whispered so faintly Blair barely heard him.

“I loved you, too. I think you finally killed it, though.”

The elevator car arrived and the door clanked open. Blair got on with the pretty blonde and tried to ignore her sad, sympathetic sideways glances.

“Ah, my name’s Abby. I really am sorry, Blair,” she said, pushing her hair off her unhappy face. “I’m not a homewrecker, usually. I swear. Except, this time I kinda am, I get that and I’m just ... so
“It wasn’t your fault. Thanks for ... helping me get out without a fight.”

“Oh my god, please don’t thank me. I’m going to be on the phone with my therapist all weekend. I really – I really liked Jim. He seemed like – such a perfect guy.”

“Yeah, he’s good at giving that impression.”

Blair would never fall for it again.

End

19 Feb 09

LOVE’S FORBEARANCE

by Arianna

Oddly enough, while I was writing this story,

I was given a fortune cookie that read:

There is no limit to love’s forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure.

It seemed particularly apt for this story.

Tight-lipped, seething with anger, Blair ushered Abby out of the building, and jogged through the cold rain to his car. After tossing his bags into the back seat, he slid in behind the wheel and cranked on the engine. Knowing he had to calm down before he started driving, he took a deep breath, and then another, letting it out slowly. He was just pulling out into traffic when he spotted Abby huddled into herself at the bus stop, her hair already streaming with rain.

“Ah, geez,” he sighed, remembering Jim had brought her to the loft in a cab. Pulling up in front of her, he leaned over to pop open the passenger-side door. “Get in,” he offered. “I’ll take you home.”

“Oh, no, no, you don’t have to do that,” she insisted, tears mingling with the rain and smearing her mascara onto her cheeks.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, and even managed to conjure a weary smile. “None of this is your fault. You’re drowning out there. C’mon. Get in. I promise I’m not dangerous.”

She huffed a startled laugh at that, and the tension in her body eased a little. “Thanks,” she said, as she climbed into the car. “I really appreciate this. It’s going above and beyond....”

Blair grimaced and nodded. When she gave him the address, he checked the traffic and pulled away from the curb. In the rearview mirror, he saw Jim standing in the entryway, looking dumbfounded. His throat tight, Blair jerked his gaze away from his erstwhile lover and concentrated on his driving.

Beside him, Abby pawed through her purse until she found some tissues. Sniffing, she wiped at her
eyes and face. Sniffing again, she cleared her throat and shifted in her seat to look at him. “Can I ask how long you and Jim ... er...”

Blair shook his head.

“I guess that’s none of my business,” she murmured, barely audible over the swish of the windshield wipers and the splash of wet under the tires. “It’s just that ... I believed him. I mean, downtown, half the staff think you guys have been together for, like, ever, and the other half say you’re just good friends and partners. So, I believed him.”

“It’s okay,” Blair said quietly, offering her absolution, even if he’d never be able to grant it to Jim.

Frowning, she studied him. “You told him you’d be leaving Cascade. Why? Why should you leave town when he’s the cheating jerk?”

Shrugging, Blair cut her a quick glance, surprised even someone pretty new had to ask. “I’m ... my job is Jim’s partner. I can’t keep working with him.”

“Well, sure, I get that,” she replied in a ‘duh’ tone. “But you’ve got a great rep – everyone, and I mean everyone, thinks you’re the cat’s ass for what you did to protect him. With that press conference last year? Giving up your degree like you did? That took real courage and loyalty. A lot of people think he’s a schmuck for letting you do it, and others think there’s probably a good reason. And everyone says you’re, like, brilliant. You don’t have to give up your job for him. Not after this. You’ve given up way too much for him already. Why shouldn’t he transfer? All this is his fault.”

Blair opened his mouth but wasn’t at all sure how to respond. Everyone thought the press conference was a sham? Thinking about it, he supposed he shouldn’t be so surprised. Jim had never been particularly discreet at crime scenes or with either the Forensics staff or Dan Wolf. They were surrounded by law enforcement people, highly skilled staff who were paid to notice details and pick up on anomalies. If he and Jim hadn’t been so absorbed in their own little world of denial, so caught up in one another and the secrets they shared, they would have probably both realized a long time ago that their colleagues all knew something was going on with Jim – and the media reports over his dissertation must have pretty much answered any questions they might have had. Shit. So much effort, so much pain and loss, for nothing.

Or, maybe not for nothing. Not if Abby was telling him the truth and his grand gesture had garnered him considerable respect in a community that practically sanctified partnerships. He understood she was trying to be supportive, which was nice of her given that the whole scene had to be pretty uncomfortable and embarrassing for her, too. Nevertheless, her words gave him pause.

His inclination was to run, start over, just be somewhere else where he’d never have to see Jim again. Detach, period. But ... was that what he really wanted to do? He was thirty-one years old. How many times did he want to start completely over? What would he really like to do, now that he didn’t have to worry about Jim? Go back to school, finish his degree? Stay with Major Crime, maybe work toward becoming a negotiator or profiler? Or maybe transfer to Community Policing? Move to the southern California desert, where it never rained and the sky was blue all the time?

He had no clue. Not a fucking clue. He was too damned mad to think, too ... too hurt by the betrayal. Making a decision right now, any decision, would be a mistake. “Thanks,” he said, soft and truly grateful. “That’s good advice and I’ll think about it. I ... I just don’t know what I want to do right now.”

“I can imagine,” she returned, and patted his arm sympathetically. “Everybody says you’re a good guy, Blair. You deserve better than ... well, you know.”
His throat thickened, and he thought about how weird it all was, being comforted by the woman Jim had just .... But his mind flinched away, not wanting to go there, never wanting to replay those moments up in the loft. Slowing, he drew up in front of her apartment building on the waterfront, one of several highrise condos in a renovated and newly upscale neighborhood for yuppies. “Here you go,” he said as he slowed to a stop.

She reached for the door handle and then hesitated, biting her lip. “This’ll probably sound dumb,” she said, sounding almost sheepish. “But, well, I’ve got a guest bedroom with its own bath and you’d be welcome to use it, at least until you’ve figured out what you want to do next. I mean, it seems like the least I can do.”

“You’re kidding, right?” he exclaimed, blinking at the bizarre suggestion. “You don’t owe me anything, and certainly not a roof over my head.”

“No, I mean it,” she replied, painfully earnest, and he thought she really was awfully sweet. Anger flared again, burning hot, this time on her behalf, that Jim would use her the way he had. She deserved better than that, too. “I’m thinking I’d like to open a bottle or two of really good red wine, and I hate to drink alone, you know?” she continued, with a slight smile of encouragement, unconsciously charming with the makeup smeared under her reddened eyes and wet hair plastered to her scalp. “Seriously, you’re welcome to stay.” When he didn’t answer, just turned away to stare out at the rain coursing down the windshield while he tried to order his thoughts, she sighed. “I guess not, huh. You must really hate me.”

“No, I don’t hate you,” he insisted quietly, the hurt resonating in her voice distracting him from his own pain. “Him, maybe, but you didn’t know.” A good red sounded appealing, as did a little company. If he went off alone, he knew he’d wallow in the awfulness of it all, rage and probably weep, and Jim didn’t deserve it. He really didn’t. “You sure about this?” he asked, turning to face her.

“I’m sure,” she avowed. “He’s never been to the apartment, so there’s nothing of him there. Maybe later, we could order a pizza? I’m not much of a cook.”

Unable to help himself, Blair laughed. “Pizza sounds good; my treat,” he insisted as he turned off the engine and popped open the car door, and then thought to ask, “Can I park here or is there a garage somewhere?”

“Oh, overnight parking is fine here,” she assured him and slid out onto the sidewalk.

Blair grabbed his duffel and backpack, and locked up the car. Hurrying in her wake along the wide walk toward the glass and marble entry, shaking his head at the vagaries of life and how generally outrageous and ridiculous the whole situation was, he told himself, One night, maybe two. just until I figure out what I want to do.

As they dashed into the lobby, out of the rain, Blair’s cell phone rang. He pulled it from his jacket pocket, but shoved it back out of sight when he saw that the caller was Jim. Abby looked at him, understanding in her eyes. Without saying anything, she led the way into the elevator, and then down the tenth floor hallway to her apartment. She took his wet jacket and put it in the hall closet before hanging up her own sopping coat.

“Your room is right here, and the guest bath is the next door on the right,” she said, gesturing toward the open doorway behind him. “I’m just going to wash my face and open the wine. I’ll meet you in the living room in a few minutes.”
He nodded and turned away. The room was larger than the one he’d used for years in the loft, with a queen-size bed, triple dresser, highboy and empty closet. There was a bedside table with a lamp that would make reading in bed easy and comfortable, and a clock radio. Wide, deep windows wrapped along one wall and around the corner, giving a view of downtown Cascade and the harbor. The colors she’d chosen were warm and bright, and there was a tapestry over the bed of a shaded bench in a garden and scrolled script that read, ‘Come with me to a quiet place, and rest.’ He remembered his years in the stark little room under the stairs, the bleak walls and narrow, uncomfortable bed, and thought how much more comfortable a room like this would have been. How much more welcoming.

Setting his bag and pack on the floor by the closet, he thought about the differences, and how it had all been there for him to see, if his eyes had been open, if he’d been really looking, instead of having been starry-eyed over having found his sentinel, and so incredibly grateful just to have a safe, clean place to sleep. But the bleakness, the stark emptiness, the lack of color and comforts, and the fact that Jim had added nothing except doors in the whole time he’d been in that room – the same lack of color in the main rooms of the loft, the same bleakness until he’d brought in plants and the colorful afghan, and hung stuff on the walls – all said something about Jim, about how he revealed nothing, not even in his own safe place. Like the house rules said something about him, about his need for control, his requirement for structure that was defined by him and him alone. The signs were all there for Blair to see, the signs of a soul that virtually shouted, ‘No Trespassing’.

Sinking down to perch on the end of the bed, Blair scraped his palms over his face, and dragged his fingers through his hair, pushing the unruly curls behind his ears. “I was so blind,” he rasped in weary sorrow. “I can blame Jim for a lot of things, but I can’t blame him for refusing to see what was right in front of my face – for years.”

He heard sounds from further inside the apartment, the muted rush of a shower, and he realized Abby was washing Jim off her body. Taking a shaky breath, he wished it would be so easy for him to wash the man out of his mind and heart, out of his soul. Dammit, he’d loved Jim with everything that he was, and he’d given the man everything ... everything. How could Jim have taken it all, become his lover, and then done this? And how could he have been so wrong about the kind of man Jim was?

When he heard cupboard doors opening and closing, the clink of glasses, Blair pushed himself to his feet. He didn’t want to get drunk; that would be a mistake, a big one. But a glass or two of wine, some conversation that had nothing to do with Jim or the disaster of his life, some food later, heavy on the carbs that would help him sleep – yeah, all that he needed, and needed badly.

By the time he’d ambled down the hall, pausing to admire the paintings of the Washington coast and mountains that adorned the walls, Abby had turned on some background music; nothing intimate, just peaceful, new age instrumentals, and had poured the wine. A gas fireplace burned in the corner, warming the chill from the room. He took the glass she offered to him and clinked hers. “To a new future,” he toasted.

“‘A happy one,’” she added, and he nodded, hoping the day would come when he’d feel happiness again and not this pervasive, deadening rage overlaying a bottomless chasm of loss.

Abby waved him to an armchair that had a matching ottoman, and she settled at the far end of the sofa. Like the guest bedroom, the room was alive with color and the wealth of windows would let in all the light the Cascade skies would offer during the day. A bookcase entertainment center filled one interior wall and through an archway, he could see the dining room and, beyond it, the kitchen. “You’ve got a really nice place,” he said, meaning it. “I like your taste in art and furnishings.” He hesitated and then added, “It’s a comfortable place, welcoming ... does that sound weird?”
“No, it’s what I try to achieve,” she replied with a smile, looking younger without the makeup and her blond hair still damp from the shower. She gazed into her wineglass and asked, “What shall we talk about?”

“Anything that has nothing to do with Jim,” he said, drawing the boundary very clearly. She nodded, and seemed to relax. “You’re in Forensics, right?” he went on, determined to focus the conversation on her so that he wouldn’t have to think about himself and his own life. “What’s your specialty?”

“Blood spatter patterning, with a minor in weaponry and ballistics,” Abby told him, and he laughed despite himself.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “It’s just that you look like the girl next door. What made you decide to get into something so gruesome?”

Grinning, she riposted, “Gruesome? Fine thing for a detective to say.” Before he could respond, she was talking about her fascination with science in general and about her father, who was a forensics scientist in Seattle, and he’d encouraged her interest in the profession. Proudly, she told him that her father had been instrumental in helping solve a number of savage murders, and she wanted to do the same, wanted her life to matter by bringing monsters to justice. “I’m not brave enough to hunt them down, like you do,” she said, diffidently, disconcerting him, because he’d never thought of himself as particularly brave. “But I want to do my part.”

Time slipped past unnoticed, one hour and then another. They laughed about experiences in college, and shared memories of places around the world they’d both visited. He told her about some of the people she hadn’t yet met at the PD, like Simon Banks, and she recounted how great it was to work with Serena. At one point, Blair realized, to his surprise, that he was hungry, and they decided on what pizza to order. By the time they’d finished it, they’d also emptied two bottles of a very good red wine, and a pot of perfectly steeped Earl Gray tea.

When he yawned, Abby said she thought it was time they called it a night. She told him that she got up at seven AM, to get to work at eight, and he said that would work for him, and that he’d drive her to the office.

In his room, as he stripped for bed, Blair was afraid he might lie awake for hours but his head had barely hit the pillow when sleep claimed him.

The next morning over coffee and toasted bagels, she told him he was welcome to stay in the guest room for as long as he needed a place to be.

“Thanks, Abby,” he replied, liking her a lot. He could understand the attraction she’d had for Jim. “I just need a few days to figure out my next move.”

“Take as long as you need,” she repeated, moving to the sink to rinse out her mug and the empty carafe. Glancing back at him over her shoulder, she grinned as she added, “But, fair warning, after the first week, I’ll start to charge you rent.”

He laughed and nodded. “That’s more than fair,” he agreed, sure that he’d be gone before the week was up. Minutes later, they were on their way to work.

**

When he pulled into his spot in the underground garage, Blair was pleased to see that he’d beaten Jim to work. On the way up the elevator, he told Abby he’d call her later, about whether he’d be working late or if he could give her a ride home. Once he arrived on the sixth floor, he strode through the bullpen and straight into Simon’s office. Closing the door, he turned to face his boss and said, “Simon, I’m sorry to lay this on you, I really am, but I need an immediate reassignment to work
with someone else in Major Crime, or even in another division, maybe Community Policing. I can’t – won’t – work with Jim anymore. If that’s not possible, I ... I’ll resign right now.”

“Whoa,” Banks protested, holding up his hands and leaning back in his chair. “What the hell –”

“It’s personal,” Blair interjected. “And I really don’t think you want to know the details. Hell, I don’t want to know them.” Sighing, he sank into one of the chairs at the end of the conference table. “I really can’t work with him, and I don’t think he’ll want to work with me.”

Frowning, Simon studied him for a long moment, searching his eyes, and then asked, “What about his senses?”

Blair looked away and swallowed hard. “I don’t know,” he rasped huskily. “It depends on whether he decides to turn them off or not. If he keeps them, I’ll work with whomever his new partner is to brief them thoroughly.”

“Blair, what happened? After all you guys have been through...?”

Blair took a deep breath and blew it out slowly before he met Simon’s concerned gaze, and he found himself feeling grateful that the man wasn’t bellowing at him, but seemed honestly bewildered and genuinely worried about him – about both of them. “Like I said, it’s personal, but I ... I can’t trust Jim any longer. And I really don’t think I can work with him. I wish I never had to see him again, but I know that’s not possible unless I quit and move out of Cascade. I might have to do that, but first, I’d like to try to make it work here. Unless ... unless you don’t want me on your team unless I’m working with Jim or ... or you don’t think any other division would have me.”

“Sandburg, I won’t pretend to understand this – and I sincerely hope that whatever is wrong is fixable, because the two of you make a hell of a team. But you have a career here whether you’re Jim’s partner or not, and I can assure you that a number of my colleagues would be only too glad to hear you might accept a transfer.”

Blair felt some of the tightness in his gut ease; at least he had a job for as long as he wanted it. That meant he could take his time figuring out what he really wanted to do with his life, and whether that life would be lived in Cascade. “Thanks, Simon,” he gusted. “I’d like to try to stay here in Major Crime. I guess we’ll have to see what Jim thinks about that, though ... he may find it too hard to have me around.”

“Megan’s the only one who knows for sure about his senses, so she’ll be working with him and you and Joel can be teamed for now. We’ll see how that works.”

Wincing a little, Blair offered, “Jim and Megan don’t mesh very well.”

“I know,” Simon agreed, sounding as if he was already tired though the day had scarcely begun. Once again, Simon searched his face. “It would really help if I knew what was wrong. Maybe I could help.”

Blair looked away. He’d meant it the afternoon before; being in the closet had always been Jim’s thing, not his. But this was Jim’s job, his boss and friend, and it had to be Jim’s decision about how much he wanted anyone in the PD, including Simon, to know. “Tell you what,” he offered, “if Jim wants to explain, then I have no objections. But this is really his story to tell, not mine.”

“Okay, that’s fair, at least for now,” Simon allowed. Waving to the door, he directed, “Ask Connor to come in, and I’ll give her the good news.”
Blair snorted softly, but nodded. “Thanks, Simon. I really appreciate this.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, or why you’ve made this request,” Simon replied solemnly. “But with all you’ve done over the years, all you’ve contributed – and given up – you’re entitled to ask a favor or two.”

Blair felt the burn at the back of his eyes, and he ducked his head to hide how much Simon’s words affected him. Until that moment, he hadn’t known if he’d be welcome or not as anything but Jim’s partner; hadn’t expected that his wants and needs would count with his boss as much as Jim’s did. Hadn’t been sure, when push came to shove, that Simon was as much his friend as Jim’s. Simon’s willingness to immediately accommodate his request, without any explanation, meant more than he had the words to express.

Megan didn’t look like a happy camper when she came out of Simon’s office a few minutes later but, tight-lipped, all she said was, “I can probably guess, so if you ever want to talk about it ...?”

Blair stiffened and gave her a tight shake of the head. They all had to work together; the last thing any of them needed was one bad-mouthing the other and creating rifts in the team. Besides which, Megan was Jim’s partner now, for better or worse. “Let’s just swap desks, okay?” he suggested. “I’d like to get everything sorted out and settled by the time Jim and Joel come in.”

She gave him a sympathetic look that made him uncomfortable – pity wasn’t at all helpful – and a quick, supportive pat on the back. “Not much to move, since the case files stay with the desks,” she observed, and she was right. In less than fifteen minutes, they’d transferred their personal effects. “This is the file for the case Joel and I were working on,” she told him, with a gesture at the thick manila folder on her old desk.

“Thanks,” Blair murmured, and handed her his file of notes on the case he and Jim had been working. For a moment, his mind slipped back to the morning before, when Jim had claimed to be going to lunch with his father and brother. Blair had taken the opportunity of having some time on his own to run a few personal errands, which was why he’d been on the bus rather than in the office, and why he’d caught Jim with Abby.

“You okay, mate?” Megan asked into the silence that had fallen between them.

Meeting her gaze, he shrugged. “I will be,” he replied, though he wasn’t sure how long it would take. Turning away, he sat down at his new desk and powered up the computer. Before he opened the case file, he glanced out the window beside him, and took a moment to appreciate having a desk where he could see outside. Shifting his chair and the computer monitor slightly, he positioned himself so that he was facing the wall and window more than the bullpen. Perfect. He wouldn’t constantly be seeing Jim out of the corner of his eye.

He was deep in the file of the truck hijacking case Joel and Megan had been working on when, “What are you doing sitting here?”

Blair stiffened and took a second to compose himself before looking up at Jim. “I’ve been reassigned. I’m working with Joel now, and Megan is your new partner,” he explained, his tone flat and hard.

“You told Simon ...!”

“I told him nothing,” Blair snapped, low and furious. “Nothing except that I didn’t trust you any more and couldn’t keep working with you. I told him I’d resign if he didn’t reassign me.”
Looking haggard, as if he hadn’t slept, Jim stared at him. “Chief –”

“Don’t call me that,” Blair growled.

Jim winced and his gaze dropped. “We need to talk,” he insisted. “We can get past this.”

Huffing a humorless laugh, Blair shook his head. “I don’t think so, man.” Deliberately turning his back, he resumed reading the file, or at least pretended to read.

“Dammit, Sandburg,” Jim snarled and Blair felt his chair being swiveled around.

“Stop it, Jim,” he grated. “Unless you want me to air all of the dirty laundry right here, right now.”

Jim abruptly lifted his hands and stepped back. “What the hell is the matter with you?” Jim demanded, though he kept his voice low, very nearly a hiss. “Christ, it’s not like we’re married –”

“No, no, it’s not,” Blair rasped, pain filling his chest but he struggled to keep his expression flat and his voice level. “Or ever will be. But I thought ... nevermind, doesn’t matter what I thought. It’s done. We’re done.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Sandburg, don’t be such a drama queen,” Jim retorted angrily, planting a hand on the desk and leaning down over him. But, despite the inherent intimidation in Jim’s manner and posture, Blair saw the fear in his eyes. “We’re not done. We’ll never be done.”

“It’s over, Jim, all of it. I can’t ... I don’t have anything left to give you,” Blair replied doggedly, feeling hollow and sick, hating Jim for what he’d done, for what he expected. “I’m not your ‘partner’, not anymore.”

Before Jim could reply, Simon bellowed, “Ellison! My office, now.”

“This conversation isn’t finished,” Jim promised, tough and belligerent as he stepped away.

“Oh, yes it is,” Blair murmured hoarsely, knowing Jim could hear him perfectly well. “Leave me alone, Jim. Just leave me the hell alone.”

He flinched at the loud slam of the door to Simon’s office, and the sound of voices raised in anger, and wished that the heated words were muffled and indistinct; but they weren’t. He and Megan, fortunately the only two people in the bullpen, could see them through the glass wall and hear every word.

“Dammit, Captain, he’s my partner! The whole reason you offered him the badge was to back me up, to make sure I didn’t run into problems with my ... well, you know,” Jim stormed. “How could you just up and assign him to someone else without discussing it with me and getting my input to the decision?”

Simon eyed him, his expression far from conciliatory. “He was prepared to resign if I didn’t reassign him,” he replied, his tone cold.

Jim snorted and rolled his eyes. Tossing up his hands, he muttered, “Histrionics.”

Blair stiffened at that, his anger flaring anew, and he could see Megan watching him, her own expression stormy. Maybe this had been a bad idea. Maybe he should have just quit and moved on.

“I don’t think so,” Simon growled, leaning forward, his elbows on the desk. “He was very straightforward. Said it was personal but he couldn’t trust you anymore, and couldn’t work with you.
Said if I wanted to know more, it was up to you to tell me. Now, I maybe have some idea but I shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions, so you tell me, Jim. What the hell did you do to drive Sandburg to this? Huh?”

“What did I do?” Jim exclaimed. “How does this end up being my fault?”

Blair snorted and shook his head.

Simon leaned back in his chair. “I’ve seen that man stand by you regardless of the threat or danger to himself. Hell, I’ve seen him trash his whole life for you. So if he’s decided he’s had enough, then I have to wonder why. And I have to wonder if it’s going to affect your ability to do your job.”

“I can do my job,” Jim growled, his expression hardening. “I don’t need Sandburg or anyone else to be a good cop.”

His throat tight, his eyes burning at Simon’s summation of what he’d given over the years, Blair took a shaky breath at Jim’s assertion. Was that true? Had he been hanging on out of a delusion of being useful? God, he hoped it was true because he truly did not want to think about what abandoning Jim might cost.

“Fine, then it shouldn’t matter that you’re now partnered with Connor. I expect you to cooperate with her and not make her life a living hell just because you’re pissed off with me and Sandburg. Am I clear, Detective?”

“Very clear, sir.” Jim turned to stomp out of the office;

“Oh, and Jim? Leave Sandburg alone.”

Jim was just about to storm out of the office and Blair thought he should bury himself back in the file when he spotted Joel standing in the entryway, his troubled gaze shifting from him to Simon’s office and to Megan, at her new desk. Standing, Blair hastily grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and hurried toward Taggart. “Can I buy you a coffee?” he offered.

“Looks like that would be a good idea,” Joel replied, his tone sardonic. “Looks like a lot’s changed overnight.”

“Yeah,” Blair agreed, steering his new senior partner back toward the elevators. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m your new partner and Megan’s been assigned to Jim. Simon’s, uh, just finished explaining that to Jim.”

“I see. Care to tell me why?” Joel asked, but the elevator doors opened and there were others inside.

“When we get to the coffee shop,” Blair told him. Joel gave him a sharp, speculative look but then nodded in patient resignation.

**

In the elevator, and then as they left the building and loped across the street, dodging traffic, Blair thought about what Jim had said, about his rationalization that they weren’t married so infidelity was okay. The attitude wasn’t uncommon amongst the gay and bi populations; for many of them, relationships were open by definition, the fun in the variety and, often, in multiple partners of different genders. Some of them viewed committed gay couples as middle-class hetero-wannabes, dreaming of the house in the ‘burbs and even the requisite two point five kids.
He and Jim had never discussed it, never voiced any exclusive commitment, but Blair hadn’t been interested in anyone else. Hadn’t wanted anyone but Jim. He’d just assumed not only that Jim felt the same but that Jim would expect absolute loyalty. However, given Jim’s insistence upon keeping their relationship in the closet, maybe he should have seen this coming. Jim was the epitome of the alpha male; maybe the unconscious drive to procreate was stronger in him than it was in Blair. Plus there was the fact that Jim was divorced. Blair hadn’t thought about it, had just figured Jim and Carolyn hadn’t been compatible, or that Jim’s almost pathological inability to trust had doomed that relationship from the start. But maybe Jim was simply unable to commit to anyone. Ruefully, Blair recalled his own assessment that Jim had problems with intimacy and, for a split second, his innate curiosity flared, and he wondered if the trust issues, the commitment issues, were grounded in the man, in Jim’s history and experience, or the sentinel, and a need to always be wary, on watch – but then he ruthlessly, viciously, shut down that line of thought.

Whatever. Man or sentinel, Jim’s orientation, his expectations or lack thereof no longer mattered. Blair had grown up in the world of flexible relationships, and he was as open as the next guy about casual sex between friends and strangers. But, for him, love, real love, meant something different. Deep down, giving himself to someone for a lifetime meant commitment; he needed to know he came first with someone, that he wasn’t disposable, or a convenience, or a passing amusement. Bottom line, Jim had lied to him about having lunch with his father, had been sneaking around, and evidently this wasn’t even the first time. If Jim had thought their relationship was so all-fired open, then he wouldn’t’ve felt the need to lie. Jim’s behavior was a betrayal of their partnership at the most basic level. His attempt to rationalize it now only made it worse, more sleazy, a complete abrogation of personal responsibility and integrity. The whole thing left Blair feeling sick. And stupid. For having trusted Jim so completely. For having believed in him without question.

Inside the coffee shop, he insisted upon buying Joel’s coffee and muffin. Joel led the way to a table by the window and took a moment to get settled, adding cream and a sugar substitute to his coffee and breaking apart the still-warm muffin. Without looking up, he asked, “So, what’s going on between you and Jim?”

“Nothing,” Blair replied, and blew across the top of his mug to cool the hot beverage before taking a small sip. “Absolutely nothing,” he went on, his tone flat. But when he looked up and met Joel’s gaze, he knew he’d have to do better than that, and that his bitter anger had no place in a conversation with a colleague, no matter how much he trusted Joel. He couldn’t be party to turning anyone against Jim. They all had to work together, had to count on one another’s unquestioned backup in the field. Sighing, he set the mug down. “It’s personal, Joel, nothing to do with work. But... I can’t work so closely with him anymore. I was prepared to resign if Simon hadn’t reassigned me. I’m sorry, I know you and Megan were working really well together –”

Joel waved a hand, cutting him off. “And you and I will work just as well together,” he said, his expression and tone concerned. “That’s not what I’m worried about. Are you alright? Has Jim kicked you out of the loft again? Is there another sentinel in town?”

Blair gaped at him and then rolled his eyes, realizing after what Abby had said the evening before that he shouldn’t be surprised. Joel, like all of their closest colleagues, had no doubt figured just about everything out long ago. Frowning, he wondered if they’d also figured out that he and Jim had gone past being platonic friends and that their partnership hadn’t only been at work. “No, he didn’t kick me out,” he replied, his gaze dropping to stare into his cup of coffee. “I left. It’s past time that I got my own place.” Flicking a look at his friend and new partner, he added, “Seriously, what went down had nothing to do with the job. I just... I just....”

Joel reached across the small table and lightly clasped his arm. “You caught him, didn’t you?”
Blair twitched in surprise and then froze. Was Joel fishing? He looked up into Joel’s eyes, and read concern but no judgment. “Like I said,” he reiterated, “it’s personal. I can’t say more than that. But, but I’m really glad to be assigned to work with you.”

Joel gave him a small, slow smile. “I’m glad to have the chance to work more closely with you,” he affirmed. And then he began to brief Blair on their current case.

Inhaling deeply, Blair felt some of the tension that gripped him ease, and was grateful that Joel was making it so easy. He really was very glad to be the older man’s new partner, and he’d do his best to never let Joel down.

**

Megan watched Jim stalk to his desk and rolled her eyes. “So, Jimbo, do I take it that you’re not all that thrilled to be working with me?” she asked, doing her best not to sound amused. But really, his behavior was so predictable ... and juvenile. It was long past time that Sandy called it a day.

“Don’t push it, Connor,” he snarled. “This wasn’t my idea.”

“Wasn’t mine, either,” she drawled. “Let’s just try to make the best of it.”

His jaw tightened, but he nodded, if grudgingly.

She picked up the file Blair had given her earlier and sauntered across the floor between their desks. Flipping it open, she perched on the edge of Jim’s desk. Leaning toward him, she lowered her voice, “I’ll do everything I can to help you with your ... well, you know.”

“Don’t do me any favors, Connor,” he snapped.

Feeling as if she’d been slapped, and not happy about it, she leaned in even closer, and her voice while still low was hard, “I expect professional courtesy, and I will not put up with the crap you gave to Sandy. Nor will I put up with your pissy attitude, especially since I suspect this team change is your own bloody fault.”

“Why is everyone so convinced I did something wrong?” Jim grated as he turned to level an ice-blue glare at her. “Sandburg gets bent out of shape, and it’s all of a sudden my fault? Last I heard, a man was innocent until proven guilty.”

Megan snorted, and then gave him a sweet smile. “Fine, mate,” she allowed. “You’re as innocent as the driven snow. You know what? I don’t care. I just want to get on with the job.”

**

The atmosphere in the Major Crime bullpen was frigid when Blair and Joel returned. Brown ostensibly stuck his tongue in his cheek and quirked a curious brow, but didn’t attempt to obtain any explanation as to what was going on. Rafe, who was on the phone, just looked from them to Jim and then back again; clear enough warning that volcano Ellison was steaming and might be on the verge of erupting. Blair grimaced but hurried to his new desk and, retrieving the file, moved to Joel’s desk and pulled up a chair to discuss the case notes. Across the bullpen, Megan appeared to be doing the same thing with Jim. An uneasy peace settled over the bullpen as the detectives all determinedly focused on their work.

An hour later, the venti mocha supreme was banging at Blair’s bladder. Excusing himself, he offered to get Joel a coffee from the breakroom, and headed to the bathroom down the hall. He was just finishing when Jim walked in and stood with his arms crossed, staring at him. Blair did his best to
ignore him and went to the sink to wash his hands.

“What is wrong with you?” Jim demanded.

“With me?” Blair challenged, though he tried to keep his tone even. “I catch you cheating on me, and it’s my fault?”

“Cheating?” Jim hissed, with a paranoid glance at the stalls, though it was clear they were alone. “Since when did you decide we were exclusive?”

Blair gaped at him. “That’s so bizarre that I have no idea what to say,” he retorted. “You ... I ... you know what? It doesn’t matter. The fact is, I thought it was exclusive because we’ve been sleeping in the same bed every night for over a year, and you’ve got such a thing about trust and loyalty, I figured you’d go ballistic if I even looked at someone else. And if you thought our relationship was so all fired open, why didn’t you ever mention any of these women you’ve been seeing? Huh?”

“Maybe because I figured who I spent time with is my business,” Jim slammed back.

Blair stiffened in angry resentment, but then he waved his hands between them. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter. We obviously had different expectations but the end result is I feel betrayed. I don’t think you ever wanted to be with me, so I have no idea why ....” Looking away, he shook his head. “You don’t respect me. In fact, you seem to have contempt for me. And I can’t do this anymore. I can’t pretend that everything is fine, because it isn’t.”

“You said you’d never leave me. I guess your word doesn’t mean much,” Jim sniped. “What am I supposed to do now, huh? You know as well as I do that Connor can’t do what you do.”

“No, I don’t know that,” Blair argued, “and neither do you. Besides, like I said last night, if you’re worried about your senses, turn them off. You did it when you were a kid and you did it when you got back from Peru. And you did it when you shot that security guard by accident a couple years ago. I’m sure you can do it again now.” He stopped, panting for breath, struggling for control. “And I said I’d never leave you in the context of what I thought was a life commitment. Clearly, I was wrong. You left me before I ever thought of leaving you, and you damned well know it.”

“Jesus, Sandburg, you trying to tell me you haven’t messed around in the past year?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you – and you know it’s true, because you’d’ve smelled it if I ever cheated on you.”

Jim looked away, not having a ready answer to that. “I don’t want you to move out,” he growled. “And I don’t want to work with another partner.”

“Yeah, well, sorry to break it to ya, tough guy, but sometimes it isn’t all about you,” Blair grated. “I’ve given you ... everything. And it wasn’t enough for you. So, fine. I just can’t do it anymore. I can’t always be less than you want or need. I can’t always be the one who you can’t or won’t trust. I can’t keep loving someone who seems incapable of loving me back. It’s not healthy, not for either of us. It’s time I moved on, Jim. But I can’t keep starting over. So I’m going to do my best to make this job a success. I hope you won’t screw it up for me.”

“The only one who’s getting screwed here is me,” Jim complained.

Blair gave him a bitter half smile. “Well, you said it, man, not me.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. You’ve set things up so that everyone thinks this is my fault.”
Blair looked him up and down and pressed his lips together. Then, pushing past Jim, he rasped, low and fierce, as he reached the door, “It’s not about fault, Jim; it’s about consequences. You made this bed, buddy, so you can damn well lie in it.”

Jim stared at the door as it slapped closed behind Sandburg. His jaw flexed and he swallowed hard; shoulders slumping, he scrubbed his face with his palms, sighed, and shook his head. “Now what?” he muttered, and then left to go back to work. He and his new ‘partner’ needed to hit the streets and dig up some leads in the major drug trafficking case they’d inherited up from Narcotics.

**

Blair stormed into the hall – and found Joel leaning against the wall, a studied expression of innocence on his face. Tossing up his hands, wondering why they ever thought they could be discreet or keep anything from any of their colleagues, he asked, “You heard?”

Joel shrugged and fell in beside him as they made their way to the breakroom. “Don’t worry about it,” he rumbled. “Point is, nobody else heard.”

Blair barked a reluctant laugh. “What? Covering my back already?” he half teased, half taunted, but immediately regretted his biting tone. “I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“Hard when things go south,” Joel interjected, with a solemn nod as he poured two mugs of coffee. “Serena and I, well ... let’s just say she mentioned that Jim took Abby to lunch yesterday, and when none of you made it back to work ...” He shrugged. “Didn’t take a genius to put the pieces together.” Leaning against the counter, he blew on the steaming beverage. “You gonna find a new place to live?”

“Yeah, soon as I get some time to look around at what’s available,” Blair replied, and raked back his hair. “That’s if I stay in Cascade.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘if’?” Joel challenged, a dark scowl clouding his face. “Why wouldn’t you stay? Or, don’t you want to be a detective?”

“I like the work,” Blair sighed, meeting his friend’s gaze. “I’m just not sure how well I fit here. I was hired to back up Jim, right?”

“Son, you fit just fine,” Joel assured him. “You aren’t just Jim’s shadow; you never have been. You’ve always made your own contributions. Important ones.” Joel grimaced and his gaze dropped to the coffee in his mug. “I could understand it if you decided you wanted to go back to the university world. But I, for one, hope you’ll stay. And I’m not the only one.”

“Thanks, man,” Blair murmured. “I ... I’d like to stay. Hey, a guy can only start over so many times, right?”

“You’re good at the work, Blair. You can make a difference here.”

Nodding, Blair squeezed Joel’s shoulder. “I want to,” he said quietly. “I want my life to count for something.”

Joel’s face lit with a wide grin. “Well, then, we best get you settled as soon as we can. Listen, I’ve got a bunch of calls I can make this afternoon to see if I can break something loose on this case. If not, it’s going into the cold case file because there just aren’t any leads. So why don’t you get a paper and find yourself a place to live, huh?”

“You sure? I could help with the calls.”
“Nah, you’ll be able to focus better once you get yourself settled. Go on, go see what you can find.”

“Okay, okay, thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Uh, just one thing, Blair,” Joel said, his expression and tone hesitant. “I know it’s none of my business and I really don’t want or need to know the details but, well, you and Jim have been partners and good friends for a lot of years. Men ... we all make mistakes, you know? Some worse’n others.” When Blair didn’t respond, just turned his face away, Joel added, “Like I say, it’s none of my business. But I hope you’ll think about it, think about everything that was good and not just ... it’s a shame to lose a really good friend.”

Blair’s throat tightened, and he wondered how much people thought he should give Jim, how much and how often he should forgive, but his conscience piped up and reminded him that he’d made his fair share of huge mistakes over the years. Sighing, he nodded. “You’re right,” he allowed, with a quick, guarded glance at Joel. “But he doesn’t think he made any mistake, and he’s not sorry about anything. So I guess it’s me that’s wrong, here, but I don’t know how to ... I can’t ... right now, I don’t see a way around the problem.”

“I think he might be sorrier than you know,” Joel replied. “And I know you don’t bear grudges. So I’m hoping things will eventually work out.”

Feeling miserable, Blair just gave a small shrug. “Maybe,” he allowed, but he didn’t really believe it. Moving toward the door, he said, “Well, I guess I’ll see if I can find an apartment. Thanks for giving me the time. If something comes up, though, just call me on my cell, okay?”

“I will,” Joel assured him with a warm smile. “Good luck, son. I hope you’ll find something you like.”

On his way out of the building, Blair called Abby to tell her that he wouldn’t be able to drive her home, but would see her later at the apartment.

**

Looking up at the lofty, beamed ceilings, and then at the view over the bay from the wide floor-to-ceiling windows and balcony off the master bedroom, Blair couldn’t believe his luck in finding such a perfect place so quickly. In many ways, it wasn’t unlike Abby’s place: it was a newly renovated warehouse with brand new fixtures and appliances, two bedrooms and two baths. But it was more masculine, with brickwork, stone, wood and tile that conveyed both warmth and strength. The six-month sublease would give him time to find out if staying in Cascade was going to work, and the rent was well within his ability to pay. God, it was great to have a good salary, and all the overtime didn’t hurt, either. “I’ll take it,” he said. “When can I move in?”

“Immediately,” the rental agent replied.

Blair signed the requisite documents, and gave her a check for first and last month’s rent. Two hours later, he’d arranged for rental furnishings to be delivered the next day. In some ways, the temporary nature of his new living arrangements left him feeling vulnerable, as if his life was ephemeral, so uncertain as to be nothing to depend upon. But the flexibility also gave him the confidence of knowing he really could take the time to decide what was right for him, once he’d figured out what kind of future he wanted to build for himself. If he decided to leave Cascade in six months, it would be easy to pack up and go; but if he wanted to stay, he could just renew the lease. Either way, he was no longer homeless.

His next stop was a self-move agency, where he bought flattened cardboard boxes and masking tape,
and then he headed back across town to the loft, to pack up what was his. Though the day was
fading by the time he parked on Prospect, he was relieved to see that Jim hadn’t returned home yet.
Upstairs, he quickly assembled boxes as he needed them, filling them with books and CDs, a few
artifacts and photos, his stock of teas and herbs, his quilt and the afghan from the sofa, the lamp from
his bedroom, and his extra clothing, shoes and jackets. Every book, every garment, everything he
lifted and put in a box reminded him of the pain, the grief of losing what they’d had, and his fury
with Jim, for treating their relationship with such cavalier disregard, was rekindled. He’d deserved
better than that from Jim. As a minimum, he deserved honesty, and he sure didn’t deserve to be a
lover hidden in the closet, to be used as a handy body in the dead of night. Pausing, he told himself
that he had to have meant more than that to Jim. What they’d had was so good ... even great. But not
good enough, he sighed. Not good enough to be all that Jim either wanted or needed.

Unable to quell the bitterness he felt, Blair left everything that had anything to do with sentinels,
whether it be the Sentinels of Paraguay text that he’d so prized, his journals documenting the
research or the CD that held his dissertation. Wasn’t easy to leave it all, though. Wasn’t easy to close
the door – slam it, really – on the dreams, on the life he’d led, and the love he still felt though he
wished to hell he didn’t. God, why couldn’t he care as little as Ellison evidently did for what they’d
had, what they’d shared?

Moving quickly, he was just loading the last box into his car when the blue and white pickup pulled
into the next slot.

Jim jumped out of the truck and hurried around the back as Blair closed the trunk. Not much
interested in what passed for conversation with Jim, Blair ignored him and moved toward the
driver’s-side door.

“Not so fast, Chief,” Jim called and grabbed his arm.

The fury he’d been holding at bay erupted; barely able to restrain his impulse to slug the man, Blair
whirled around and shoved Jim away, shouting, “Back off, man! Don’t touch me! And don’t call me
that. Don’t ever call me that!”

“Whoa, easy, Sandburg,” Jim exclaimed, holding his hands up for peace. “I just want to talk to you.”

Blair gulped air and forced himself to lower his voice, to slow down. “We don’t have anything to
talk about, unless it’s about a case at work.”

“Ch – Blair, come on. We’re friends, remember? We can work this out.”

“No, no – just no,” Blair insisted, waving his hands between them and shaking his head
emphatically. “We’re colleagues, Jim, just like H and Rafe and Megan and Joel, no more, no less.
The friend you used to have?” Blair raked his hair back and, breathing hard, grated, “I think he
drowned a year or so ago.”

“Don’t ... don’t say that,” Jim choked, suddenly so pale he looked like he might pass out. “I know
you’re mad, but don’t ever say that.”

“Why not? I might as well have – you’ve treated me like shit pretty much constantly ever since.
Yeah, sure, for a while there, after I trashed my life to keep your secret, things were good again, but
it didn’t last. I trashed my life so people wouldn’t know you see and hear better than everyone else.
Wow, that’s some secret, Jim.” Blair laughed harshly. “You know what I hear? I hear that at least
half the department knows you’re a sentinel just from watching you do your thing. Sorry, big guy,
but I guess the secret got out anyway.”
Jim reached out to grip his arm, but Blair blocked him and stepped back. “Don’t touch me,” he growled. “It took me a long time, Jim, but I’ve finally figured it out. I’m a convenience and when I make your life easier, you like having me around. But I’m not a real person to you, am I? Not someone you truly value. Certainly not anyone you love. Sorry, but that’s not enough for me anymore.”

“If you’d let me explain –”

“What’s to explain? You lied to me, Jim,” Blair hissed, conscious that they were outside and anyone could be listening. “You said you were having lunch with your father. Yeah, right. I can understand the attraction to Abby; she’s an intelligent and beautiful woman – and she’s fun to be with. But you lied and you took her in our bed. Sorry, your bed, the one I used to also sleep in. Well, you can have whomever you want in that bed from now on. Everyone but me.”

“So if I’d just said that I wanted to sleep with her, you’d’ve been okay with that?” Jim challenged.

“No, I wouldn’t’ve been, but I wouldn’t’ve felt so betrayed, you know? At least you could have had the decency to be honest with me.” Blair shrugged, suddenly too overwhelmed with it all to keep fighting, wanting only to get away.

“I told you, I don’t want a new partner,” Jim protested. “There must be some way of fixing this.”

Blair shook his head. “You can’t always get what you want. God knows, I didn’t,” he said, the sadness welling up in his chest drowning his anger and nearly choking him. “Jim, you can stop pretending that you want to talk or that you care that I’m moving out. You think I haven’t figured it out? You wanted me to catch you. Why else bring them home? Which means you ... you...” His voice caught and he fought for control.

Jim didn’t say anything, just looked stricken, so Blair knew he was right. Jim wanted him gone, but didn’t want to kick him out. So Jim had set it up, created a situation in which he would want to leave – in fact, couldn’t get out fast enough. “I gotta go,” he rasped, turning away. “See you at work,” he called over his shoulder, trying for off-hand, trying for ‘normal’ and failing badly, as he opened the car door and slid inside. He didn’t look at Jim as he drove past him and pulled onto the street.

Once he’d left the loft – and Jim – far behind, he pulled over and pounded the steering wheel with his fist. Panting hard, he fought the urge to scream in helpless fury or cry in desolate despair. Why the hell had Jim done it like that? Why couldn’t the man have respected him enough to just say it was over, and tell him why? Maybe there could have been a way of salvaging something. But this way, God, it was so humiliating and public and...

Closing his eyes, Blair swallowed hard and then took a deep breath, trying to cleanse the emotion from his mind. Feeling broken inside, he slumped in his seat and, propping his elbow on the windowsill, covered his eyes with a trembling hand. He could get past this. Wasn’t the first time a relationship had gone bad. He wasn’t a kid, not some teenager who couldn’t face up to the facts and get past them, to focus on more important things, like the job.

But, hell, he’d loved the man, loved with everything he had. Everything that he was, heart and soul.

Fuck. He still loved him, and how pathetic was that?

Man, seeing him everyday ... Blair shook his head in dismay. He wasn’t sure he could do it; he only knew he had to try, if only to salvage his own self-respect. And to prove to everyone, if not himself,
that he didn’t need Jim in his life, and that he had worth on his own and not just as Jim’s shadow. Blair wasn’t sure why that mattered so much, just that it did; it was all that was holding him together.

An hour later, he let himself into Abby’s apartment with the key she’d given him. He was relieved to find the place dark. Quickly, he packed up his gear, and left her a note, thanking her for her hospitality and telling her he’d found a place of his own only a block or so away.

When he got to his renovated warehouse, he unloaded the boxes, one of which contained his sleeping bag and pillows. He called Joel and asked if it would be okay if he arrived a little late the next morning.

“Sure, that’s fine,” Joel replied. “How did the hunt go for a new place?”

“Great,” Blair replied, forcing enthusiasm into his voice. “I lucked in to a fantastic apartment in the renovated HarborFront project, and my furniture is being delivered in the morning.”

“Ah, that’s good news, Blair,” Joel said with hearty cheeriness. “See you tomorrow, and you can tell me all about it.”

“Yeah, I’ll be in by noon, no later,” Blair murmured, feeling exhaustion swamp him. God, it was so hard to pretend everything was fine, that he was fine. “Night, Joel.”

He hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and there was no food in the place, but it didn’t matter; he wasn’t hungry. For a long time, he stood leaning against one of the window frames, staring out at the lights on the water. Pain, ever-present since he’d seen Jim kiss Abby in the cab and heard them in Jim’s bed, twisted in his gut and made it hard to breathe. Crossing his arms, he sank down onto his haunches and then shifted to sit and lean a shoulder against the brick wall. His eyes burned and the moon, rising in the black velvet sky, seemed all blurry, but it didn’t matter, either.

Nothing much mattered anymore.

**

“Hey, Blair, your furniture arrive, no problems?” Joel called with a broad smile when Blair entered the bullpen just before eleven.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Blair replied as he took off his jacket and draped it over the back of his chair.

“So, tell me all about it,” his new partner encouraged.

“Uh, sure,” Blair replied, raking back his hair as he gathered his thoughts. Conscious of Jim’s presence across the floor, knowing he was probably listening, Blair invested as much enthusiasm as he could muster into his voice as he explained, “Well, you’ve seen the reclamation of those old buildings down on the waterfront, what they’re calling the HarborFront? Several warehouses renovated into apartment buildings, stores and shops and restaurants? Well, I got a sublease on a fifth-floor, two-bedroom penthouse that’s, like, humongous, with high wood beamed ceilings, brick walls, a fieldstone fireplace, polished dark wood plank floors, granite counters, all new kitchen and bathroom fixtures – even has a washer and dryer. The windows are floor to ceiling, most of them overlooking the water, and there’re two balconies, one off the living room and the other off the master bedroom, which has its own bath, by the way. One balcony looks out over the bay, and the other one shows the downtown skyline across the harbor.”

“Sounds fantastic,” Brown observed enthusiastically as he rose from behind his own desk and ambled over to lean on the divider between his desk and Joel’s. “When’s the housewarming?”
Blair forced a laugh and hoped to hell it sounded genuine. “Well, I just got some furniture, you know, the usual leather couch and chairs, wrought iron and glass dining room table and chairs, a bed and dresser, but I’ve still got to get a lot of stuff, like dishes and glasses and cutlery and towels. It’ll be a while before I’ll be ready for company. Sorry.”

“Oh, my man, you miss the whole point of a housewarming – the single person’s answer to the married folk’s wedding showers and gifts. You invite everyone you know and they bring gifts, and the next thing you know, your cupboards are full, you’ve got all the glasses and towels you’ll ever need, and all the sheets and blankets, too. Not to mention all sorts of gadgets for the kitchen. So, what do you think? Next Saturday night?”

The last thing Blair wanted to do was celebrate being alone in his own place, but Henri looked so eager, and Joel was smiling and nodding encouragingly, and then Megan called, “What time should we be there, Sandy?” and he knew there was no avoiding the inevitable.

“Saturday night sounds good, providing we don’t need to work; say seven? I’ll send you all emails with the address. But, uh, don’t go overboard on the gifts, okay? It’s just, uh, nice that you all want to see the place.”

“We’ll spread the word,” Brown assured him, and clapped him on the shoulder before returning to his desk.

Blair thought all the warm enthusiasm felt staged, the jovial banter forced, as it no doubt was; everyone had to be wondering why he’d split with Jim after so many years together, but nobody was asking. In their own way, they were trying to tell him that he was a part of the group whether he was with Jim or not, and he appreciated it ... but he wished they’d just let him be.

Careful not to look at Jim, he settled in at his new desk and angled his chair so that he couldn’t see Jim, not even out of the corner of his eye. It worked fine until Joel perched on the end of his desk to go over the progress he’d made on their case the afternoon before. Doing his best to listen, Blair could see Jim staring at him, pale and strained, like he hadn’t slept in days, just staring ... until, with a sinking feeling, Blair realized Jim had zoned on him.

“Ah, Joel, sorry, just ... Megan?” he called as softly as he could to get her attention, and then canted his head at Jim.

She gave him a puzzled look, then realization dawned and she jumped to her feet to hurry to Jim’s side. Joel turned to see what was going on, and Blair found it utterly hideous to watch Megan try to get Jim out of his zone, calling him, her voice getting louder and louder as she pinched his arm and then his earlobe, while everyone in the bullpen watched in appalled fascination.

Blair couldn’t stand it and lurched to his feet to rush to the bathroom, where he lost the bagel and coffee he’d just eaten. God, Jim’s greatest fear was being seen as some kind of freak and that’s exactly what was now happening out there. If she had this hard a time pulling him back in the office, how the hell was she going to be able to help Jim in the field?

Leaning against the wall of the stall, struggling to control the dry heaves, gasping for breath, he blinked away tears of helpless grief. Dammit, he wanted so badly to be indifferent, to not care, to believe that Jim’s problems weren’t his business anymore, but he couldn’t, just couldn’t stand it. He couldn’t stand back and watch Jim be humiliated like that, when he had no control over what was happening. And he couldn’t bear to think about what might happen on the street, in an alley, in the dark and rain, with guns going off all around him.

“Blair, you okay?” Joel asked, cutting into his thoughts.
Still panting for breath, Blair pressed the flush handle, and left the stall to go to a sink and splash water over his face and rinse out his mouth. Joel handed him paper towels, to dry himself, and then he straightened, his hands braced on the rim of the sink. “I don’t think I can do this, Joel,” he rasped, his voice close to breaking. “I can’t just stand back and watch –”

“He’s still not responding,” Joel told him, sounding awkward and almost reluctant but having to share the information.

“Ah, God,” Blair sighed. Standing straight, he led the way back into the hall and then into the bullpen. As he crossed the floor toward Jim, he said in a conversational tone to no one in particular, “Let’s not stare, okay? It’s not a big deal. He’ll be fine in a second.”

Embarrassed, the others quickly turned their attention to their files or phone calls. Megan looked at him, distraught. “I’m sorry, Sandy. I just can’t get through to him. I ... I thought it would be easy.”

“It’s okay, he’s just not used to responding to you,” Blair murmured as he took her place beside Jim. He pressed his palm flat against Jim’s back and leaned in close, to whisper, “C’mon, Jim. You can hear me. Come on back now. Just follow my voice and come back.”

Jim blinked; his whole body shuddered, and then he sniffed and grimaced. Blair backed away, conscious that his breath was probably very bad. Turning to Megan, he said softly, “It’s okay, he’s back now.”

Jim’s head snapped around to look at him in confusion, and then Jim’s gaze took in Megan and the rest of the guys. Understanding darkened his eyes, and a slow flush reddened his neck and face. His jaw tightened and he swallowed convulsively; his shoulders hunched defensively and he bowed his head, reached out with shaking hands to fiddle with papers on his desk in a pathetic pretense of being busy.

Simon’s voice, though far from a bellow, nevertheless shattered the brittle silence in the bullpen. “Ellison, Sandburg, Connor, my office.”

Blair looked at Megan, and he knew his anxious resistance had to be plain in his eyes because hers softened in compassion. Jim muttered as he stood, “Don’t strain yourself, Ch – Sandburg. You don’t want to work with me, fine.” But Jim’s body belied his brave, stubborn words: he seemed diminished, his pallor stark, his posture defeated, and there was a fine tremor in his hands, which he curled into fists when he caught Blair looking at them. Simon called, “Today, people.”

“Coming!” Megan replied brightly, as if everything was just fine, and led the way with Jim behind her and Blair trailing along in his wake.

Simon studied them as they entered and chose seats around the end of the conference table, facing him. “Anyone care to tell me what just happened out there?” he asked, his tone mild, his expression concerned.

Megan glanced at them and offered, “Captain, Jim, uh, zoned on ... something in the office. I didn’t notice at first but Sandy clued me in. I tried to wake Jim up but nothing I tried worked. I don’t understand. I did what Sandy does. You know, call Jim’s name, touch him. I even, well, I even pinched him ... more than once,” she added, her voice falling as she gave Jim a sideways look and mouthed, ‘sorry’.

“I see,” Simon murmured. “What did you zone on?”

Jim grimaced and shrugged and looked away, and Blair knew he wasn’t going to answer – but he
didn’t feel comfortable telling Simon, either. When Simon’s gaze tracked to him, and one brow
raised, he knew he had to come up with something. “Uh, it could have been anything, Simon.
Someone wearing a new perfume or cologne, different shaving cream or shampoo, maybe the
cleaning staff used something different last night, on the desks or floors. I’ll, er, uh, Megan’ll have to
check with them to see.” He heard Jim’s soft snort but doubted anyone else had, and he realized he
was falling head first into his old role, picking up where he’d left off, covering for Jim, just like he
had for years.

“Why couldn’t Megan bring him out of it?”

“He’s right here,” Jim interjected snidely.

“Well, if you have the answer, by all means share it with us,” Simon offered, his patience obviously
waning.

But Jim again just shook his head.

“Sandburg?”

Blair blew a long breath. “Well, I guess it’s because Jim probably unconsciously listens for my voice
or waits for my touch when he’s zoned. We’ve been working together for a long time, so it wouldn’t
be surprising. It’s just learned behavior, but ... but I don’t know how long it will take for him to begin
to respond to Megan.”

Beside him, Jim ground his teeth and his posture stiffened.

“You had something to add, Detective?” Simon asked.

Jim’s expression had flattened and his eyes were empty of emotion when he lifted them to meet
Simon’s worried gaze. “I don’t know if it’s just a matter of familiarity, sir. Right from the beginning,
Sandburg has ... has cut through the haze, like a hot knife through butter. I can’t explain it; it’s just
the way it is. But I know he’s not comfortable working with me, so Connor and I will just have to
make the best of it.”

Simon sighed heavily. “I’m not sure that’s good enough,” he rumbled. “I think you’d better ride your
desk until we can be sure Megan’s got a lock on this stuff.”

Jim surged to his feet. “No,” he snapped, then flexed his hands, clearly trying to calm down.
“There’s no telling how long it could take, Simon. I can do my job. Don’t ... don’t condemn me to
desk duty for what might be forever. I ... I couldn’t stand that. I’d rather quit.”

“You can’t,” Blair blurted, miserable with the realization that they were boxed in without a whole lot
of options. “Being a detective, it’s what you are.”

“So what do you suggest, Sandburg?” Simon asked, but he sounded as if he was sorry to be putting
the responsibility for a solution on his shoulders.

Blair bit his lip for moment, wishing there was another option, but there really wasn’t, not if Jim was
going to be able to do his job safely. “I’ll work with Jim until Megan tests out okay with him.” He
looked at Megan and then at Jim, “It’ll mean doing extra work after hours and on weekends, drills
and stuff, so Jim can learn to respond to Megan’s voice.”

Jim shook his head.

“What? You don’t agree?” Blair challenged, thinking the man was god-damned lucky he was
prepared to concede so much.

“That’s not it,” Jim said, sounding trapped and discouraged. “Is it going to be like this, this hard, every time I change partners?”

“I don’t know,” Blair answered. “It may not take all that long.”

“And it might not work at all,” Jim countered. “Ch-Sandburg, I know you don’t want –”

“This isn’t up for debate,” Blair replied, careful to keep his tone even. “This is about your safety, and Megan’s. The job comes first. I’ll just have to deal with it.”

Blair looked at Simon and wondered, given the way the man was watching him with such a thoughtful expression, if he’d realized that as much as Blair said it was the job that came first, it was really Jim’s wellbeing that Blair was ensuring. Feeling torn and twisted inside, he hated himself for still caring so damned much.

Then, in an effort to distract himself from his battered feelings, Blair looked at Megan and wondered why Jim hadn’t come back when she’d called him. Was it because Jim didn’t work well with her? Maybe her voice was pitched too high, or maybe it was the accent? Shit, what were they going to do if Jim never learned to respond to her? Blair hadn’t really meant it when he’d caustically told Jim he could turn off his senses, but he was beginning to think that might have to be an option they seriously considered. He was prepared to help Jim in the interim, but he’d be damned if he’d tie himself forever to a man who seemed to have little more than contempt for him. Oh, the man said he cared, but his actions sure indicated otherwise; Jim only cared when it was convenient, or when he needed help with his senses.

“Oh, Sandburg, good,” Simon intoned, sounding torn between being genuinely grateful and relieved, and being sarcastic about the assignment of staff being taken out of his hands. Sighing heavily, he went on, “The three of you will need to work this out with Joel, so that he’s got the help he needs on his caseload. If you agree, Blair, maybe Megan should go back to working with Joel until you’ve cleared her for sentinel duty.”

Jim visibly tensed and flushed, obviously hating it, hating the special needs and his unique dependency.

“Yes, sure, of course,” Blair agreed wearily, wishing there was another alternative, but there really wasn’t. Ah, well, he supposed separated couples who worked in the same business inevitably had to work together, like Jim and Carolyn had had to keep up a working relationship after their divorce, and they’d even managed to stay friends. And, as Jim had so helpfully pointed out the day before, they hadn’t even been married. Yeah, right, like that had ever even been an option. He’d just have to suck it up and be a grownup. “It’ll be fine, Simon; it’s not like there’s any other choice. Don’t worry about it.”

Banks gave him a hard look, as if wondering if it was ‘fine’, then why had he been so all-fired ready to resign the day before if he’d had to keep working with Jim. Looking away, Blair wished he didn’t feel like such a fool. But he supposed he should get used to it because it didn’t look like he was going to be feeling any different any time soon. His life was a mess, pure and simple. With a wry smile as he followed the other two out of the office, he figured Jim’s life wasn’t a whole lot better right then and, oddly, that was some small comfort.

In the bullpen, they gathered up Joel and went to the breakroom to bring him up to speed. His expression was guarded when he looked at Blair and asked, “You sure you’re okay with this?”
Jim grunted something inarticulate and turned away to fill his mug with coffee. “I told him he didn’t have to do this,” he said to the mug, as if he couldn’t bear to face any of them.

“And I said the job comes first,” Blair interjected. “Thanks, Joel, but it’s okay. Sorry for playing musical partners....”

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” Joel replied and waved off the concern. Smiling at Megan, he jerked his thumb back toward the office. “I dug up some possible leads for us yesterday afternoon. C’mon, I’ll brief you and then we can hit the streets.”

After they’d left, badly needing the comfort of a soothing cup of tea, Blair plugged in the kettle and leaned against the counter where it met the wall. His arms crossed, he studied Jim’s stiff back. “You okay with this?” he asked.

Jim shrugged. “I told you I never wanted to change partners,” he said, low and strained. “I guess I should be grateful you don’t think I staged this whole thing to get you back.”

Blair rolled his eyes, then shifted to pull the tea canister out of the cupboard. “Oh, I could believe you’re manipulative enough to stage something, but I don’t believe you’d ever ‘out’ yourself like that in front of everyone. You’d never allow yourself to be seen as so vulnerable by the others, and you hate your senses too much to share them so openly.”

“I don’t hate them,” Jim said, sounding awkward and uncertain, and he glanced back over his shoulder at Blair.

“No? Could’ve fooled me,” Blair retorted as he unplugged the steaming kettle and poured the boiling water into his mug to warm it, emptied it into the sink, and then poured the hot water over the teabag. Dunking the bag, he added, “Maybe it’s time we figured out how to turn them off.”

“What if I don’t want to do that?” Jim countered, turning to face Blair.

Satisfied his tea had steeped enough, Blair threw the bag into the trash. “I’m not going to trail around behind you forever, Jim,” he said, low and even. “I won’t be held hostage to your senses, not with what’s happened between us. We are not partners anymore, not permanently anyway.”

Jim eyes searched his and then his gaze dropped. Looking vulnerable and sad, he nodded before turning away to lead the way back to the bullpen.

Blair felt a suffocating mixture of irritation and ... guilt. Damn, where does he get off acting like he’s the wounded party, huh? Fuck! he thought in frustration. And why the hell am I feeling sorry for him, and guilty for giving him a hard time? Snorting at the unintended and certainly inappropriate pun, he followed Jim into the hall and back to the office.

An hour later, an excruciatingly uncomfortable hour of heavy silence between the two of them, they got the warrant Jim had requested to put a major importer/exporter under surveillance for suspicion of trafficking in illicit drugs, to the tune of millions a year.

Just what I need, Blair thought as he followed Jim into the elevator, on the way to the parking garage and Jim’s truck. An all night stakeout with the one person in this world I so do not want to be alone with.

**

Jim stopped at a deli on the way to the surveillance site and left the truck without saying a word. Blair, in no mood to humor him, also got out of the truck to head into the shop. Several steps ahead
of him, Jim already had a basket started with the usual munchies and bottles of water. Blair went to the deli counter to order sandwiches. They’d been together so long, there was no need to ask what the other would like, a fact that Blair found bittersweet at best. When he got to the cashier, Jim was already there and he signaled to the woman to add the sandwiches to his bill.

“I can pay my own way,” Blair protested.

“I know you can,” Jim replied, dry and remote, “but you’re doing this under duress, so the least I can do is feed you.”

Blair narrowed his eyes. “Nice sentiment, but we both know the department will reimburse the cost of the food.”

Jim had the audacity to give him a crooked, knowing smile, as if they were sharing a joke, but his only reply was to hand two twenties to the cashier. Blair snorted disparagingly and grabbed one of the bags to carry out to the truck.

Fifteen minutes later, Jim found a parking spot in an alley close enough to the import/export offices and warehouse to hear conversations inside, while also being able to see the parking spots filled with vehicles driven by employees or customers. Blair noted the time of their arrival in his notebook and, with Jim’s help, recorded the license numbers of all the vehicles in the small company lot. Jim closed his eyes and concentrated on sorting out the voices in the building, finally locking in on the man he was looking for, Robert Chu. They’d interviewed Chu the week before about illicit drugs that had been found by the sniffer dogs in a shipment of goods from Asia. Chu predictably denied any knowledge of how the drugs could have possibly gotten into his crate of laughing Buddhas purchased for the tourist trade, but Jim had sensed the lie in his heartbeat, faster respirations and sudden perspiration. The law enforcement agencies, local, state and federal, had known for some time that there was a significant pipeline from Asia and now they were trying to find out if Chu was the ringleader.

Blair did what he had to do, grounding Jim with a grip on his arm, murmuring occasionally to engage Jim’s attention, to keep him from zoning, and recording anything pertinent that Jim heard and deigned to share with him. From the dearth of forthcoming information, Blair assumed that Jim wasn’t hearing anything of particular interest.

Two hours later, the business shut down for the night. Maintaining a healthy distance between them and Chu’s Mercedes, Jim followed the suspect home to an affluent if not ostentatious house in the suburbs. He parked under a tree in the service lane behind the houses where he could easily hear anything said in a normal tone of voice in the tree-shrouded mini-mansion. They settled in for a long evening.

Daylight faded and night enveloped the truck. Blair sipped at a bottle of water, but had no desire to eat one of the sandwiches or open any of the other bags of snacks. Jim didn’t seem to have much of an appetite, either. Finally, after nearly another hour of silence, Jim said, “Sounds like you found a great apartment.”

“Uh huh,” Blair grunted again, and then he muttered, “If this is how you treat someone you respect and value, I have to tell you you’ve got serious problems with your interpersonal skills and
behaviors.” Turning to face Jim, he slammed, “You are so full of shit. If you valued me, or our relationship, you wouldn’t’ve been with her and God only knows how many other women. Admit it, Jim. For God’s sake, be honest about this. You’re not comfortable being bi. You don’t want anyone to know you find guys attractive. You don’t just want to keep it in the closet, you want to nail the damn door shut.”

“That’s not true,” Jim protested.

Blair snorted and shook his head. “Okay, then explain it to me,” he taunted. “Why were you with Abby?”

Jim took a long drink of water, as if his mouth and throat were very dry. He cocked his head and listened for a minute, ensuring that nothing of interest was going down in the house. “I’m not sure I can explain it,” he finally rasped, staring straight ahead, his fingers twisting the cap on and off the bottle. “You asked the other night if it was pheromones. Sort of, but not really. I mean, I was conscious of that chemical attraction but ... that wouldn’t’ve done it. It was ... it was like Mexico. When I couldn’t help myself, stop myself....”

Despite himself, Blair tried to understand. “You’re not saying Abby is another sentinel?”

“No, no, nothing like that. And ... well, you’re right, it’s not just been Abby. There was one other woman, Jocelyn, from Robbery.”

Frowning, Blair recalled the case about six months before that involved major works of art being stolen from the university and from the museum downtown. Jocelyn had been one of the officers assigned to work with them. She was a gorgeous redhead and he recalled thinking at the time that she was just the kind of woman who Jim usually found irresistible. Bitterly, he reflected he’d apparently been only too right about that. Too angry to speak, he turned his head to look out the window toward the house they were watching.

“They didn’t mean anything, I swear,” Jim insisted.

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” Blair grated. “Would be easier if you’d fallen helplessly in love with someone else, but to not even care about them and still sleep with them ...” Again, he shook his head. “You cheated on me for simple recreational sex. That’s ... completely unacceptable. The whole thing is so wrong that I don’t even know where to begin.”

“It wasn’t recreational, it was ...” Jim’s voice caught, and he coughed to clear his throat. “God, this is so weird,” he muttered. “It was about ... I feel this need, this urge that I should ... it’s about having kids.”

Blair blinked in startled surprise. “What? Kids? You did this in order to get those women pregnant? Did they know that?”

Jim just shook his head.

“Oh, man, you can’t be serious. If you wanted kids, we could have talked about that, tried to adopt. You’re a little old, but maybe we could’ve –”

“Kids with sentinel genes,” Jim cut in, blushing furiously.

Blair stared at him as he processed that tidbit. “You’re talking about some primitive genetic imperative to pass along your sentinel genes to the next generation?”

His shoulders hunched, Jim nodded stiffly. But he didn’t make eye contact.
“That’s actually incredibly creepy, Jim,” Blair charged. “Beyond creepy. If you want to share your genes, you make a donation to a sperm bank, not foist them off on some woman who has no idea that you’re using her as what? A human incubator of sorts?” He shuddered with aversion at the dishonesty of the whole thing. “Jesus, Jim –”

“But with a sperm bank, we wouldn’t know if a kid ended up with the senses, and you wouldn’t be there, to help them.”

Blair gaped at him, at his outrageous presumption and yet, in Jim-speak, it made a weird kind of sense. “And you didn’t discuss any of this with me because...?”

Jim fidgeted, blew a long breath. “I was embarrassed. Ashamed.”

Sitting back, Blair gulped some water, wishing it was either high octane coffee or a peppermint tea to calm the queasiness inspired by Jim’s bizarre confession. He thought about it, thought about the possibility of a primal urge – not so hard to imagine, given that in the generic human hierarchy of needs, sex was right up there with air and food. The sex drive wasn’t for fun, though it could be some of the best fun any human could experience; it was for procreation, to ensure the continuation of the species. Made sense that a sentinel, with such rare genes, would have a hardwired drive to make little sentinels. Jim was over forty, which might exacerbate his need to reproduce before it was too late.

But ... was there any indication that Jim had felt this need for little Ellisons before now? Like when he was in the sexual prime of his life? Blair didn’t kid himself that Jim had told him everything, but as well as Carolyn, he knew about Lila, and he knew about Veronica. Jim had fallen hard for them; he hadn’t sounded like a guy who had slept with the women just to sleep with them. Nor was there any indication that Jim had ever slept with women indiscriminately before now, other than when he’d been overwhelmed by pheromones. Blair suspected he’d had a lot more action than Jim had ever had. And there didn’t seem to have been any discussion about him and Carolyn having kids – or at least no regret to have not had any before the marriage broke up.

Blair bit his lower lip. Something cramped in his gut. He didn’t want to call it contempt ... didn’t want to think that maybe he was beginning to despise this man he’d loved beyond reason. But he didn’t trust Jim, not anymore, and he didn’t think he was getting the truth or, at least, not anywhere near all of the truth. For whatever reason, Jim was trying to snow him, maybe just to make what he’d done seem less like the cheating crap that it had been. Whatever. Over the past several months, he’d seen no evidence of anything that had suggested Jim had been acting under some primitive or primal urge. “I don’t buy it,” Blair snapped.

“You calling me a liar?” Jim exploded and hammered the steering wheel with his fist. “Why the hell would I make something like that up?”

Not in the least intimidated by the raw emotion, Blair shrugged. “You may have convinced yourself that this was why you were sleeping around,” he said, feeling sick and fed up. “And you may even feel some serious angst about not passing along your genes, but I don’t think this is about some genetic imperative.”

He sighed deeply and flicked a glance at Jim, but found he couldn’t maintain eye contact, couldn’t bear to look at the man who could use women like that – let alone treat him as inconsequential – if anything Jim had said was anywhere even close to being the truth. But he was sure it wasn’t. “If it was such a strong imperative, you would have had kids by now. And ... and if it was some kind of sentinel thing, I ... you would have told me. After all we’ve been through, after Alex and ... and Mexico, you wouldn’t have hidden something like this from me. And if you did, well, it doesn’t say anything good about the level of trust – or lack thereof – between us. But I still want to believe that
you’d tell me, that we’ve learned not to hide stuff like this. Learned the hard way.” He paused, then asked for his own satisfaction, “Tell me, did you use any protection? If not, weren’t the women concerned?”

Jim’s grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles were white, and he turned his face away. But the flush crawling up his neck spoke volumes. He’d lied, Blair was sure of it, probably to try to make what he’d done seem somehow more acceptable. When Jim didn’t speak, Blair wasn’t sure what more there was to say, if anything. Maybe it had all been said, and there really was nothing left. Despite the anger and aversion he felt, despite the hurt of the betrayal, and the despair of knowing Jim was never going to love him, there was something about it all that just didn’t make any sense.

Jim wasn’t the kind of guy to coldly use people the way he’d claimed he was using those women, which was the main reason Blair was sure it was lie. But why the hell would he bother lying about it? Why was he trying so hard to explain away what happened?

The Jim he loved had integrity; he wouldn’t play the cheating game, wouldn’t ... wouldn’t lie about it if he’d just stopped caring or wanted what they’d had to end. And if he had, he wouldn’t pretend to be as upset as he genuinely seemed to be: sorry and regretful and ... scared; so out there on the emotional edge that he was nearly out of control.

But maybe he was just scared about losing the help Blair gave him. Maybe he’d just never thought that there’d be a limit, a line beyond which Blair couldn’t forgive, couldn’t understand – couldn’t deal.

Something nagged at Blair, picked at the unraveled edges of his thoughts, something that didn’t feel right; there was something ... something Jim had said, more than once. His brow furrowed with his effort to remember, Blair rubbed his temples, the headache that had plagued him for the past three days was thundering in his skull, making it so damned hard to think.

Wouldn’t Jim have trusted him if he’d felt such a driving need to mate to procreate? Wouldn’t ... trust. Blair shivered as cold realization stole over him. Something about trust, about – Jim had accused him of cheating, had been sure he must’ve cheated during the past year. Twice, Jim had insisted that he must have done the same thing, even though Jim had to know on a sensory level that Blair had never –

“Oh my God,” he gasped, fingers closing around great clumps of his hair. His stomach rolled, and he gritted his teeth, swallowing hard, to keep from retching.

“What? What is it?” Jim demanded, sounding alarmed, and gripped his shoulder. “Chief, what’s wrong?”

Shaking his head, Blair fumbled with the door handle, and shouldered his way out of the truck, nearly falling onto the sidewalk. He stumbled to the curb and dropped to one knee, still afraid he might vomit. And all the while, bits and pieces of things that had been said and done flashed in his mind. “Ah, God,” he mumbled, blinking against the burn in his eyes, refusing to cry, refusing to let his sudden certainty tear him apart. He was aware of Jim beside him, and the strength of Jim’s arm around him, supporting him. “Don’t touch me,” he rasped, flinching away, fed up and yet sick to his soul with pity and such profound regret that it had come to this. Despite everything, it had come to this.

Gradually, his breathing evened out, and he fought back the surge of nausea. Sweat had broken out on his brow, as if he’d suffered a mortal shock, and in a way, he supposed he had. Arms still crossed around his body, bracing himself, he lurched to his feet and leaned against the hood of the truck.
“Chief, tell me what’s wrong. What do you need? What can I do?” Jim demanded, obviously frightened for him and feeling helpless.

“I’m okay,” Blair gasped, and rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. “Or ... I will be.” Slowly, he straightened and stared at Jim, wondering if he could possibly be right, and certain that he was. It was such a Jim thing to do.

“I’ve called in for the night shift to come now. I’m taking you back to your place – unless you need to go to the hospital,” Jim was saying, hands reaching toward him but hesitating, afraid to touch, afraid of being rejected.

Blair was barely hearing him as thoughts tumbled over one another in his mind in a kind of checklist of symptomatology, or perhaps just of causality: Afraid. Fear-based responses. Fear of intimacy. Inability to trust. Anticipation of betrayal. Pre-emptive strike. Setting it up to get caught. A test. Another god-damned test.

“Damn you,” Blair whispered, harsh with frustration, wishing with all his heart that he could hate the man.


The pathos of it all was so overwhelming that Blair felt as if he was breaking into little pieces inside. Swallowing against the bile that burned in the back of his throat, he said with sudden, rock-solid conviction, “You love me, don’t you? You really do love me.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jim agreed, his voice cracking and moisture glazing his eyes. “So much it scares me; so much that ... that it hurts, you know? Makes it hard to breathe. I wish to God I hadn’t hurt you like that. Jesus, Chief, I don’t know how to fix this.”

“You really thought I’d probably cheated on you, didn’t you? And if I hadn’t, then it was just a matter of time,” Blair went on, knowing he sounded detached, even distant, but he had to separate this, everything that had happened, from himself. Because it really had absolutely nothing to do with him. It had everything to do with how Jim saw the world. Jim’s gaze faltered, but he nodded, as if grudgingly. “I didn’t want to believe it, tried not to think it but ... yeah, I know – I know it’s just a matter of time.”

“You know that, despite everything that’s happened, you know that,” Blair echoed, feeling so hollow, so empty, so afraid that there was no way to fix this, that it would never be any better than it was right now. “You really don’t believe that I – that anyone – will ever love you completely, unconditionally.”

Jim shrugged and looked off down the dark street. “And I was right, wasn’t I?” he husked, raw with pain. “After what I did, you ... you left me. You ... I know you hate me.”

“I wish that were true. I wish I could hate you,” Blair grated. “But I think you hate yourself enough for both of us.”

Jim turned to look at him, his expression puzzled.

“You don’t even realize what you did, do you?” Blair asked, struggling to control his anger because it really didn’t have anything to do with him. “Man, you really have to work on getting some insight, you know? You were so sure I’d hurt you, leave you, betray you, that you figured you’d strike first. You pushed the limits to see if what I said about loving you was true – set it up so that it was only a
matter of time before I’d catch you at it. And now you figure you were right, because I left, just like you were sure I would. And to hide it all from yourself, you concocted that bullshit about not being able to withstand the drive to procreate.”

Jim just gaped at him, his brow furrowed, his eyes dark with his struggle to understand – and maybe with the effort it took to listen and not deny it all defensively.

“You were testing me, you bastard,” Blair charged, shaking with the horror of it, and the pity he felt but couldn’t afford to feel because it wouldn’t help either of them. “Testing my love and commitment to you. Giving up my life at Rainier, denying myself in front of the world, wasn’t enough for you. God help me, coming back from the dead when you called me wasn’t enough for you. Jim, man, you’ve got some serious problems about this whole trust thing, and I don’t think I can help you. I’ve given you all that I am, everything that I have, and it’s not been enough. Nothing’s ever going to be enough for you.”

“No,” Jim gusted. “No, that can’t be right – I ... no.”

He looked so broken, so lost and confused, Blair couldn’t help himself. He stepped into Jim’s space and took the man into his arms, and he felt Jim trembling like a leaf, so Blair hugged him harder. “If I could make you feel safe, I would,” he whispered. “If there was something I could do to convince you that I will always love you, I’d do it. But this isn’t about me, is it, Jim? This is all about you. And if it’s ever going to be any better, you’re the one who has to fix it. You need professional help. But, if you’re ever going to get past this, you need to want to fix it enough to get that help despite your aversion to talking about emotions and your innate need for privacy.”

“Chief, please,” Jim moaned, the chimera of lonely strength stripped away. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m sorry, I should have realized long ago. Instead, I’ve ... I’ve been an enabler, haven’t I? I’ve allowed you to ... to get away with these games for too long. I’m sorry, Jim. I can’t keep playing that game. It’s not good for you and it’s killing me.”

Blair stepped back and looked up at the man who’d been his best friend, the man who he’d hoped would be his last and lifelong lover, and it was all he could do not to weep. He took a deep breath to steady himself. “I’ve already left you,” he said, as steadily as he could manage. “I don’t know if I can change.”

Jim held out his arms, and he was as pale as death. “I don’t know if I can change,” he stammered. “Well, I guess that’s something you’re gonna have to find out.”

“If I do ... you’ll come back to me, right? You’ll come back?”

Blair studied the man he loved with all that he was, and he summoned his strength to do the hardest thing he’d ever done. “I won’t make that promise,” he said, his voice shaking. “You have to do this for yourself, Jim. You have to do this because you want to be able to trust and love without fear.”

Jim stiffened and his face took on that blank look that Blair recognized as his shield when he was hurting the most; after a moment, Jim shook his head and turned away. Blair didn’t know if that meant that he wouldn’t try or if he just wasn’t sure he could ever change.

“If it helps,” Blair said softly, “I do love you, Jim, and I’m afraid some part of me always will. Just so you know, I would have never, not ever, cheated on you. But I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep trying to prove myself when it isn’t ever enough for you.”

Jim’s jaw tightened, and in the dim light from the overhead standard down the street, Blair could see
him swallow convulsively. Finally, he nodded to himself. He looked up along the street at the house they’d been watching, and he rubbed the back of his neck. A moment later, an unmarked car pulled up behind the truck, and Blair recognized Brad Lewis and Amy Yu, from Narcotics.

Jim went to the driver’s side window and hunkered down. “We need you to pick up the surveillance this evening, see if he goes anywhere. Sandburg and I will be back for the day shift. Sorry, something’s come up and I have to take care of it tonight.”

“No sweat,” Lewis told him with a resigned half smile. “This is our case, too, or it was. If anything goes down, we’ll give you a call.”

Jim stood and came back to the truck. “Get in, Chief,” he said wearily. “I’ll take you home.”

Neither of them spoke as Jim drove back into the city. But when he stopped in front of Blair’s building he said, “I’ll pick you up at seven AM.” He paused and then added, “I need to think about what you said but ... I’m sorry, Blair. I’m sorry I put you through so much crap. You deserve better. A helluva lot better.”

Blair held his gaze for a long moment, and wished he could say that it would all work out fine, but he wasn’t sure it would. He hoped, but he was far from sure. Bereft of words, he reached out to grip Jim’s arm, and then he got out of the truck. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he said before he closed the door. And then, conscious that Jim was watching him, wondering if he should have invited Jim up to see the place but instinctively knowing that would probably be a bad idea, he turned away and walked into the building.

When he got to his apartment, he peeled off his jacket and walked over to the window, to stare up at the sky. Part of him felt as if the earth had fallen out from beneath his feet, as if he’d never get his balance again. He ached with sorrow for himself and for Jim and for what they might never have.

But part of him felt better than he had in days, more settled in himself. Jim hadn’t cheated on him out of a lack of love, but because he loved too much and feared being hurt too much. Jim was screwed up, no doubt about it, but there was some hope for them if Jim would get help, if he could confront and overcome his emotional demons. But Jim had been battling those demons for a long time; he’d been driven by them for most of his life. So, even though he was a betting man, and the romantic in him wanted to wager on the strength of Jim’s love for him, wanted to believe their love for one another would be enough, Blair wasn’t at all sure that this was a battle Jim would win.

Still, he supposed he could hope, at least for a while.

Wasn’t like he had anything better to do ... wasn’t as if his whole life depended on how it all worked out.

**

Blair wanted to stay hopeful but Jim wasn’t giving him much reason. When he asked the next day during their stakeout if Jim was going to see a therapist, Jim leveled a flat glare at him and turned away with a cold, “What do you care? Not like you’d come back if I were.”

Lips compressed, Blair bit back a less than helpful retort and swallowed the surge of anger that washed over him. “Well, I sure as hell won’t be back if you don’t,” he said, figuring a little motivation couldn’t hurt. Jim flicked him a look, but his stiff expression softened and he nodded before relaying what he was hearing about a new shipment coming in the next night.

“Am I welcome at your housewarming Saturday night?” Jim asked an hour later, his tone thin, as if
he was expecting a rejection.

“Sure, why not?” Blair replied, going for off-hand. “Everyone from Major Crime is going to be there.”

Wading through molasses would be easier and far less sticky than conversation between the two of them was these days. But Blair knew he couldn’t push it. Jim had to do this on his own. The man was a hero, the bravest human being Blair had ever known, but he didn’t know if Jim had the courage to take on the emotional morass that he worked so hard to repress.

“What do you need?”

“Just about everything,” Blair drawled as he took a photo of the heavy-set black leather-garbed man coming out of the warehouse, and another as he climbed onto his Harley. “He’s one of the Choice boys, isn’t he?”

“Yep, looks like Satan’s Choice has the distribution rights to the drugs this scumbag is bringing in from Burma,” Jim replied, sounding bored. Drawing out his cellphone, he called Simon and reported that it looked like they could wrap up the case the following night, when the shipment came in and was handed over to the gangbangers.

As it turned out, Jim was right, and the bust went down like clockwork just after eleven PM Friday night. It took most of the night to finish the bookings, interrogations and reports. When Blair headed home a good hour after the sun had come up, he was glad he’d have time to get some much needed sleep before he had to pick up supplies for the housewarming party that he really didn’t want to have.

**

“Wow, man, this place is unbelievable,” Rafe enthused as he wandered around the apartment, taking in the fireplace and the views. Blair smiled and handed him a beer. The intercom buzzed and he went to let whomever it was in. Within fifteen minutes, his spacious place was packed, and he was amazed that his guests included not only his colleagues from Major Crime, but also people from Records and Forensics – Abby looked like she wasn’t sure she was welcome but he gave her a hug before waving her inside – and the ME’s office, including Dan Wolf himself. There was a smattering of officers from Narcotics, Homicide, Vice and Robbery – notably not Jim’s redhead – and even a few of the uniformed branch. And everyone brought a gift. As he made the rounds filling wine glasses that he’d bought that afternoon, Blair noticed that Abby was on one side of the room, and Jim was on the other, and they were doing a fairly good impression of being total strangers to one another.

And this was supposed to be fun?

But, he was blown away by everyone’s generosity. Brown had been right. He wouldn’t have to buy another towel or bed sheet for the rest of his life. He had every small appliance and kitchen gadget he could imagine and some he had no idea how to work or why anyone would need them. There were salad bowls and mixing bowls and measuring cups and cutlery and pots and pans. Major Crime had gone together to get him a truly amazing entertainment system that included a flat screen television, DVD player, multi-CD player and speakers. Abby, along with the rest of Forensics, had brought what amounted to a small forest of plants. Astonished by all the gifts, Blair reflected that he now had more possessions that he’d ever had, even if he added everything he’d ever had together, in his whole life. Moving in six months wouldn’t be as easy as he’d imagined it would be – if he decided that was what he wanted to do.

Looking around at the faces of his friends, he thought that leaving really didn’t feel like the solution he’d once thought it would be. He had a place here, whether he was with Jim or not, partnered with
Jim or not. Warmth welled in his chest and he couldn’t help smiling with more happiness than he’d thought he’d be able to feel for a good a long time. “I’m overwhelmed,” he stammered, meaning it. “I can’t believe how generous you’ve all been – and what great gifts ... You guys, you’re all something else, you know? Something really special, and I’m lucky to know you and work with you. All of you. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Jim, standing across the room, gave him a crooked grin and lifted the beer in his hand as a kind of salute, as if he knew what Blair was thinking, that Blair had needed this affirmation, needed it more than either of them had understood.

**

For two weeks, Megan tried, she really did, but she couldn’t seem to get the knack of unobtrusively guiding Jim. Inevitably, she grabbed or slapped him rather than offering a light, steady touch, mostly because he didn’t seem to notice a light touch from her. Blair coached her on the uses of voice tones and pitch, but Jim never came back to her call, not even when she resorted to shouting. “Errrgeghhh!” she mocked screamed in frustration after the second week of getting nowhere. Jim frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose before breaking down to rub at his temples, his brow furrowed against the headache that seemed to have gotten worse as the week progressed.

“This isn’t working,” Blair said, discouraged to be stating the obvious. “I don’t know why. You’re doing it right.”

Jim cocked a brow at him and gave a slight shake of his head, but he didn’t comment. “I’m sorry,” Megan sighed. “I guess I can’t be your partner, Jimbo.”

“I guess not,” Jim agreed. After a beat, he added, “But, uh, thanks for trying.”

She gave him a quizzical look and picked up her coat from the back of the sofa, where she’d dropped it earlier. “Well, I’m out of here. Got to be in court first thing in the morning.”

Blair walked her to the door; they’d been meeting at his place because he refused to set foot back in the loft. After he closed the door behind her, he wondered why Jim was still there. Usually, the two of them left together.

Passing through the kitchen, he called, “You want a beer – or some Tylenol?”

“Tylenol would be good,” Jim replied, sounding tired and strained. When Blair came into the living room and handed him the bottle of medication, he tapped out three caplets before returning it to Blair and taking the glass of water Blair held out to him. After he’d swallowed the pills, he murmured, “Thanks,” and turned back to look out the window at the bay.

“So, who do you think you’d like to work with?” Blair asked. “Sooner we start working with someone else, the sooner –”

“Give it up,” Jim cut in. “I don’t want to work with anyone but you, and you don’t want to work with me, so I guess I’ll be resigning.”

“Oh, come on,” Blair protested. “It’s a little soon to give up. We’ll find –”

“I don’t think so,” Jim interrupted. He sighed heavily as he turned back from the window. Holding out his hand, he said, “I know you don’t want to hear this, but I don’t think just anyone can do what you do. Who taught you, huh? You just ... know what to do. I guess it’s because you’ve studied
people with heightened senses for years, and maybe it’s also that you’re trained to be observant and you’re very intuitive and ... ah, hell, you’re brilliant, all right? You make connections, come up with ideas that nobody else would get.” Jim grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “Right from the beginning, it’s your voice that cuts through the haze; your touch that ... that brings me back. If Simon bellows loud enough, he can bring me back, but nobody else can do it with a whisper.”

“Jim, there’s nothing to suggest that guides are anything special,” Blair replied doggedly. “It’s just a matter of training and of you getting used to someone else’s voice and touch.”

Jim’s lips thinned and he looked away; shoving his hands into his jean pockets he slowly shook his head. “I don’t think so, Chief. I really don’t think so. I didn’t have to ‘get used to’ your voice or touch; it just worked with you, right from the get-go.”

Torn, Blair closed his eyes and turned away. Working with Jim for the past two weeks hadn’t been that bad; hell, it had been fine. They’d broken another case in record time, just like they always did. But ... but it wasn’t healthy to work so closely with someone he loved, even craved, not when it was hopeless.

Was it really hopeless? Maybe ... he shivered, and was appalled at how quickly he seemed to be able to sweep aside the fact that Jim had cheated on him, more than once; and somehow, it was worse knowing that Jim hadn’t even cared all that much for those women. They’d just been handy and attractive and willing.

“I’ve been seeing a therapist,” Jim said softly, and Blair was both astonished and deeply moved by the admission – more, by the fact that Jim was seeking help – because he knew what it cost his stubbornly private and independent partner to admit he couldn’t do it all alone. “I’m trying, Blair. I want it to work. I want us to work.” When Blair didn’t immediately reply, Jim demanded, “Don’t ... don’t you want...?”

“Yes, yes, I ...” Blair began, but hesitated, not trusting himself, knowing he was too impressed that Jim was getting help, too hopeful that things would eventually be fine. He had to establish his own terms of reference, his own requirements, and not only and always simply accede to Jim’s needs. “I love you, Jim. But love isn’t enough anymore. I need to know there won’t be any more games. That ... that I can trust you, that you’re as committed as I am. Right now, I just don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” Jim asked, turning to face him, crossing the space between them with quick, long steps. “What do you need me to do? Say? What?”

Blair felt shaky inside, breathless. Looking up at Jim, he spelled it out. “I ... I need you to not be ashamed of us. I can’t live in a closet, Jim. I’m tired of all the secrets.”

“I thought you understood,” Jim replied, surprised. “Don’t ask, don’t tell – it’s like the military. We wouldn’t be able to stay partners.”

Moving away, Blair scraped his hands over his face and raked back his hair. “I guess I don’t buy that anymore,” he said, low and weary. “Half the PD thinks we’ve been lovers for years, and everyone in Major Crime, and I suspect quite a few others in Forensics know you’re a sentinel. They know you need someone backing you up who knows what to do, how to help you. It hasn’t mattered for years that we might be together, so why the hell should it matter now? Because I’m official now? Nah, that’s just a little too convenient.” Turning away from the window to face Jim, he charged, “You’re not comfortable with people knowing. Being my lover and being loved by me doesn’t fit your image of yourself. You found it way too easy to cheat on me, on what we had. You said ... you said that it wasn’t like we were married. Well, for me it was. Until that’s the way it is for you, too, then, well, then I’m not interested.”
Jim’s gaze fell away, and he stood arms akimbo, as if he didn’t know what to say or do. After a moment, he gave himself a little shake and inhaled deeply. “Can you work with me without feeling like you’re being held hostage? Without resenting me or ... hating me? Because, if you can’t, then I need to tell Simon to put me on leave, and I need to start thinking about what to do with the rest of my life.”

Blair stiffened, resenting being put against the wall, especially since Jim didn’t seem at all willing to even try to work with anyone else. Dammit, it was Jim’s fault that they were at this impasse.

But that wasn’t fair. Jim had tried with Megan, and gotten nowhere. And Blair had seen for himself that Simon had to bellow to bring Jim out of a zone, which wasn’t particularly helpful in most situations they got themselves into. Yes, it might have been Jim’s fault but ... the eternal ‘but’: Jim’s fears and his trouble with trust and intimacy were all very real, and Blair hadn’t ever made the man face up to them. No, instead, he’d always accommodated, always enabled Jim to go on without confronting his dysfunctional behaviors. So he had to accept some of the responsibility for where that path had taken them.

“You were the one who looked for me,” Jim reminded him. “You told me what I am, taught me how to use my abilities. I ... I’m sorry, Chief, but I can’t do this without you.”

“I’ll try, okay?” Blair returned, however uneasily. “I ... it'll be hard, Jim, with so much unresolved between us. But I’ll do my best to not let it all get in the way.” He paused, then added, “But if it’s too much, you have to respect that. If I say I’m done, I don’t want you fighting me on it or making me feel guilty.”

“Oh, Jim agreed, sounding and looking immensely relieved. “Okay.” He lifted his jacket from the back of the chair by the fireplace. Putting it on, he said, “I need time to think about everything you said, time to...”

“I know,” Blair said into the silence, and then realized he was doing it again. Filling in the blanks, saying what Jim couldn’t say. “I’ll tell Simon in the morning to stop worrying about reassigning me. I’ll explain that it didn’t work with Megan and that we’ll give it a shot being partners again.”

Laughing hollowly, he reflected, “He’ll probably think I’m nuts, to have made such an issue and now ... he doesn’t know, does he? Why, I mean? You never told him?”

Not meeting Blair’s eyes, Jim shook his head.

“Dammit, Jim, I get tired of being the one who creates problems,” he complained. “Maybe you should tell him that it didn’t work with Megan, and that you’ve talked me into working with you again, at least for the foreseeable future.”


Without another word, he walked out of the room and out of the apartment. Blair heard the door close, and Jim’s receding footsteps in the hall. He felt angry and sad and, crazily, guilty. Why should he feel guilty? He was backing Jim up, still working with him. God, he was not the sort to put up with an abusive relationship, or with a partner who didn’t care enough to acknowledge him, though he’d tried. For Jim, he’d tried. And what had it gotten him? A partner who hadn’t been faithful. Was he making too much of that? Infidelity wasn’t all that uncommon, after all. He’d played his own games in the past.

Until he’d met Jim, he hadn’t thought much about making a permanent commitment to anyone or anything. Hadn’t thought he had what it took to pledge his life to something or someone beyond himself. Selfish? Oh, yeah, for sure, but it was the way he’d been brought up, and he’d chosen a
field that would allow him to continue to travel, to spend time with one group of people and then another, always moving on. From the beginning, though, knowing Jim, working with him, had been different from anything he’d ever known, and since he’d met Jim, he had changed. Deep inside, he wasn’t the same man. Maybe he’d grown up. Or maybe he’d finally found something, someone, more important than he was, that made his life matter, have meaning. Maybe he’d finally figured out that love wasn’t about being loved but loving, and that truly loving someone meant accepting them, warts and all, loving unconditionally, forever. In those dark moments when he doubted that they’d ever make it work after the dissertation had blown their world apart, he’d felt panic well in his chest. All he knew for sure was that he wanted Jim so bad that being apart tore him up inside; he needed the man the way he needed air.

Blair kept telling Jim that he wouldn’t make any promises or commitments, but the truth was that Jim would be a part of him, a part of his life, until he drew his last breath. And that scared him. Scared the hell out of him because it meant that Jim had all the power. He should despise Jim for having cheated on him but he was already more than halfway to forgetting, let alone forgiving. That realization really scared him, because he knew he couldn’t trust Jim to not hurt him again.

He looked out the window, down onto the street, and watched Jim leave the building and jog to his truck. Just before Jim opened the door, he looked up and Blair knew Jim was seeing him as clearly as if they were standing only inches apart. He lifted a hand and pressed it against the glass and, below, Jim saluted him. And then Jim turned away, climbed into the truck and drove off into the darkness.

“I love you, you schmuck,” Blair whispered, nearly choking on the words. “God help me, I’m afraid I always will.”

**

A month went by with no more comments by Jim about seeing a therapist, and with no observable change in their relationship. Blair found it all surreal, working with Jim everyday, touching him, grounding him, just like always, hell, still doing most of their paperwork – and then going home to his own huge and lonely apartment. The only real difference was that Jim never touched him, never, and only called him ‘Chief’ when he forgot that they weren’t really friends anymore, let alone lovers. For Blair, it was a constant battle to keep it casual, keep it focused on the job, to pretend that’s all there was between them.

God, it was exhausting.

A dozen times, Blair found himself on the verge of saying he couldn’t do it anymore, that it was just too damned hard to work so closely together. But then he’d watch Jim doing his thing, reaching out with his amazing senses, and he’d feel awe all over again. His chest would fill with the familiar astonished gratitude that he’d found his sentinel and that he’d personally become a part of the process, helping the sentinel of Cascade as no one else ever could.

Tears would burn, and then anger would flare again, that Jim had wrecked it, destroyed what they’d had because the man couldn’t believe in love, couldn’t believe in anyone, couldn’t trust, no matter the proof in front of him. The pain of it twisted in Blair’s gut, a wound that was as raw as that day weeks before when he’d caught Jim, just as Jim had to have known he’d eventually be caught. What a warped pair they made, held together by Jim’s senses, lacerated by memories of what was no longer possible. Blair knew he should tell Jim to just turn them off, abandon the dream, be the normal cop he’d always said he most wanted to be. Maybe then they could both get on with their lives.

But he couldn’t do it. Couldn’t deny those incredible senses; couldn’t mute them. Even if Jim had been willing, Blair knew insisting Jim turn them off would kill something inside of both of them. So,
time after time, he’d damp down the anger, and take a deep, cleansing breath as he blinked away the burn in his eyes. The day might come when it hurt too much to go on, but that day hadn’t yet arrived.

Though his inclination was to hide out in his apartment, Blair knew that wouldn’t be healthy. So he participated in the weekly poker game, even hosted it once. And he’d gone out with Abby, the first time to repay her for her hospitality and after that just because he enjoyed her company. They’d been to a couple movies and dinner at Lacey’s, a neighborhood eatery halfway between each of their buildings. But much as he liked her, he couldn’t get past that afternoon in the loft; couldn’t imagine ever being intimate with her. He went out once with a new clerk in Records but couldn’t seem to get his head back into the dating game. Once or twice, he cruised through Dorothy’s, a bar a block from his apartment, but the idea of some quick, semi-frenzied encounter for release left him feeling cold and empty. Having had so much more, it was damned hard to go back to shallow connections and superficial liaisons. He just didn’t have the energy to bother.

He tried not to think about or imagine what Jim was doing on those same lonely nights.

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“What do you think?” Blair asked as Jim scoured the crime scene with his senses. “We got a pattern here, or what?”

Jim gazed dispassionately at the prostitute sprawled in a pool of blood on the rumpled bed. The woman had been pretty once, until time, booze, and drugs had worn her down. Blair could see the needle tracks on her arm and on her thigh, and he shook his head at the pathos of it all.

“Yeah, I think we’ve got a pattern,” Jim muttered, gesturing to the way she was positioned, and the deep slash across her throat. “I smell the same aftershave as at the last two similar scenes, and it’s nobody here now. It’s unusual.”

“So we need to make the rounds, find out what it is,” Blair murmured and Jim grimaced at the idea of having to sniff countless bottles of men’s cologne in store after store. He rubbed his temple as if anticipating the headache he was going to have, but he nodded in agreement.

“The crime scene techs have arrived, Detective Sandburg,” the uniform said from the door.

Blair looked up in surprise. Usually the uniforms deferred to Jim as the senior detective on the scene. This guy must be new. “You can let them in,” he replied, meeting the cop’s warm and steady gaze, and he saw admiration in the deep sea-green eyes. “Officer...?”

“Mickelson, Detective. Steve Mickelson,” the young man answered with a slow smile.

“Officer Steve Mickelson,” the young man answered with a slow smile.

“Officer Steve Mickelson,” Blair repeated, and found himself smiling in return. It had been a very long time since he’d allowed himself to notice anyone else, let alone respond to the silent but clear invitation in the eyes and the posture, even in the voice of the attractive man who nodded and waved in the technicians. But he was noticing now.

Jim’s shoulder jostled his and drew back his attention. “We need to start that research, Chief,” Jim said, even as he flicked a glance between Blair and the uniformed cop, his nostrils flaring. Then, for the first time in what felt like forever, he planted a hand on Blair’s shoulder to steer him through the crowded room and past the cop standing sentry in the doorway.

Irritated, and well aware of what was going on, Blair shrugged off his hand in the hallway. “Feeling possessive?” he growled, with a cold glance back over his shoulder at Jim. “Get over it.”

Jim held his gaze for a heartbeat before looking away. His expression was rigid, his jaw tight, but he
didn’t say anything, just pushed past to lead the way out of the seedy hotel and back to the truck at the curb. Blair paused to glance back at Officer Mickelson, who was watching him. “I should have your number,” Blair said, flipping open his notebook, “in case I have questions about, uh ... whatever.”

Officer Steve Mickelson smiled again, slow and sensuous, as he drawled out his work cell number, his radio call sign, and his home number, just in case the detective needed to reach him when he wasn’t on duty.

Blair noted down the numbers. “You know, that just might be necessary,” he agreed, his gaze flicking over Mickelson’s body. “We could review what transpired when you arrived here over a beer later, say at Dorothy’s around seven-thirty this evening?”

“I’ll be there,” the cop promised.

When Blair climbed into the truck, he couldn’t help but notice that Jim looked furious. “Do not say anything,” Blair warned as he clipped his seatbelt. “You lost that right weeks ago.”

Jim cranked on the ignition, but didn’t put the truck into gear. “I thought ... I thought if I got the counseling, if I ... I thought you’d....”

Surprised by the hurt and vulnerability in Jim’s voice, having been more prepared for anger, Blair blew a long, slow breath. “I didn’t promise anything, Jim. And seeing a therapist is a long way from having ready or willing to bring a relationship out of the closet. Officer Mickelson doesn’t seem to have the same reservations about being obvious about whom he admires.”

Jim turned his face away, as if he was checking the side mirror, and his hands gripped the steering wheel, but still he didn’t pull into traffic. “You’re saying you’d be alright with it if I ... if I showed affection or interest at work?” he asked, low and husky, nearly stuttering.

“Don’t put yourself out unless you really mean it, Jim,” Blair cautioned. “I’m not a prize to be won, here. It’s not a competition with another guy, not an alpha male territorial pissing contest. Don’t start something you’re not prepared to finish.” When Jim turned to face him, his expression unreadable, Blair reminded him, “I’m talking married, Jim, or as good as; nothing less. If you can’t handle that, don’t even start.”

Jim frowned slightly, looking thoughtful. He nodded slowly, then pulled into traffic. But he didn’t say anything. Blair shook his head at the all-too-characteristic silence, certain he’d die of old age before Jim was ready to meet him at least halfway. His hopes fast sinking, he told himself that he had to let it go, had to face the fact that what he wanted from Jim – what he needed – was more than Jim would ever be able to give him, for all kinds of reasons.

Maybe it was time he got serious about looking for what he needed elsewhere.

Maybe it was past time.

And that blond Steve Michelson with the stormy sea-green eyes was damned cute.

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Dorothy’s, the first upscale bar and restaurant catering to the overtly rainbow crowd in Cascade, was conveniently located in the new HarborFront collection of avant-garde cafes, clubs, and shops only a block from Blair’s warehouse. Steve was already there when he arrived, leaning casually on the bar and looking like a million bucks. He was nursing a beer while he watched the door, and he smiled with evident delight when Blair walked in.
“Hey,” Blair greeted him, warmed by Steve’s admiration, and signaled the bartender. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

Once he had his own tall glass of golden lager, they adjourned to a table and were just getting settled when Jim came through the door and angled straight for them. Though casually dressed, he still managed to turn most heads, and Blair’s mouth dropped open when he spotted the filigreed gold earring he’d given Jim the previous Christmas in his partner’s ear.

“Mickelson, Sandburg,” Jim greeted them with a tentative smile that didn’t hide the nervous uncertainty in his eyes. “Mind if I join you for a few minutes? There’s, uh, something I’d like to discuss.”

Well, what could they say? “Sure, no problem,” Blair agreed, though he knew his tone was cool, at best. He had no idea what Jim was doing there, but he doubted he’d like it. “You want something to drink?”

“I’ll get a jug of what you’re having – you guys’ll be ready for another in a few minutes, right – and be right back,” Jim replied, already moving toward the bar.

Steve looked at Blair and cocked a brow.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head and not at all sure what to feel. Stunned? Angry? “I didn’t expect to see him here.”

“Old news, man,” Blair returned and took a sip. “That rumor’s been goin’ around since I started as a civilian observer in Major Crime nearly five years ago.”

“But we were an item, at least for the last year,” Jim confirmed as he set the brimming jug of beer in the center of the table and slid into a chair. Pouring himself a glass, he went on with a candor that left Blair speechless, “Only I blew it big time a couple months ago.” Leaning back, his attention focused on Steve, he explained, “Before joining the Force, I was an Army Ranger. You know, ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’, so I’ve never been very comfortable wearing my bisexuality on my sleeve. And those rumors Blair mentioned? Well, he hasn’t heard half of what’s being said, and none of it’s pretty. So, Steve, tell me, what’s changed? You obviously aren’t concerned if people know you like to date guys. But why doesn’t that worry you? Especially the impact it might have on the job?”

Completely disconcerted by Jim’s demeanor and candor, Blair wasn’t sure he appreciated the fact that Steve looked amused by the whole thing, and maybe even a bit flattered to be asked for his opinion by a senior detective. Leaning forward, his elbows on the table, the younger man replied, “I’ll bet the guys mouthing off were mostly older – a whole other generation where they wouldn’t admit they were gay or bi for anything in the world. Too dangerous. Might not get backup. Hell, might get beat up by their brothers in blue in some dark alley. “

Jim nodded soberly, and took another sip of his beer. “Exactly.”

“All those guys could ever admit to was ‘loving their partner like a brother’, or being ‘closer to their partners than their wives’, or the partnership being ‘more intense or longer lasting than a marriage’ – some of it is true, sure, because we need to rely completely, without question, on the partners who back us up. But a whole lot of it was euphemisms for seriously preferring their buddy’s company to that of someone of the opposite gender, especially the wives they were obliged to have to convince the world they were straight,” Steve elaborated, obviously warming to his theme. “Those guys are trapped in the values of their generation and, frankly, I feel sorry for them – but I also recognize that
they could cause a whole lot of nasty trouble, so I’m careful around them and don’t push my sexuality at work. But those men are retiring. Sure, there’re some in my generation who have a problem – and I’m not sure I’d be at all as open in the deep south or midwest,” Steve went on. “But younger people in general are more comfortable with the fact that some of us lean different ways. Not so far north of where we’re sitting right now, it’s legal to get married. Maybe it’ll be legal here someday, too. Hopefully, in our lifetime.”

Jim nodded thoughtfully, then tossed back the rest of his beer. Standing, he held out his hand to Steve, who took it for a quick, firm clasp. “I appreciate your candor, Mickelson. You’ve given me a lot to think about.” Briefly, he rested a hand on Blair’s shoulder. “I won’t deny that I’m damned sorry I screwed up so bad with Sandburg, here, or that I hope we’ll find a way to work it out. But mostly, I just want him to be happy. So, uh, I won’t intrude any longer. Have a good evening, guys. See you tomorrow, Chief.”

Blair watched him walk out and then turned back to Steve. What kind of game was Jim playing? What did he expect Blair to think about his unexpected appearance? Dammit, what the hell was going on with him? “I ... I really didn’t expect that,” he said, more or less flabbergasted and seriously annoyed that Jim seemed impressed by what he’d heard from Steve, a perfect stranger, but hadn’t ever been able to accept the same arguments from him. Still, it was a big step for Jim to come to the bar and be open about his orientation with another cop, one he didn’t know at all, and Jim was pretty straightforward; being manipulative wasn’t really his style.

Chuckling, Steve replied, “I could tell by the way your jaw hit the table. It’s okay. I kinda appreciate the fact that he’s so upfront.”

“Upfront?” Blair echoed and huffed a laugh. “He’s never admitted to anyone ... never been ... I still can’t believe....”

Steve’s eyes narrowed as he studied Blair. “He really shook you, didn’t he?”

Blair nodded and took a long drink. “Oh, yeah,” he breathed as he set his glass on the table. “Big time.”

“You still love him as much as he seems to love you?” Steve asked and, when Blair didn’t answer immediately, he sighed. “You do, don’t you?”

Raking his hair back off his face, Blair wasn’t sure what to say, but he figured honesty was probably his best bet. “I’ve loved that man for a very long time, and to be honest? I don’t know if I’ll ever get over him, not completely. But I also don’t know if we have any kind of future. He’s, uh, he’s got some serious issues and being in the closet is only one of many.” He hesitated, and then added, “I’m sorry, man. This is not what I had in mind for a friendly evening and a few drinks. If you want to bail, I more than understand.”

Steve shrugged, then grinned. Gesturing at the jug, he said, “Well, we still have a whole lot of beer courtesy of the fellow who just wants you to be happy. And I’d still like to get to know you better. Let’s say we just see where things go? There’s nothing that says we can’t be friends, right?” He winked and leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a seductive level as he added, “Even, maybe, friends with privileges?”

Smiling, feeling some of his tension ease even as butterflies erupted in his gut at the idea of what ‘privileges’ could mean later than evening, Blair nodded agreeably. God, it had been way too long since he’d been on any kind of date that might lead to more. Hoping he looked and sounded both casual and cool, he reached for the jug and filled his glass and Steve’s as he replied, “Sounds good to me. So, you from Cascade?”
When Blair woke alone the next morning, and thought about the evening before, he hated himself. Not because he’d brought Steve home and they’d done some heavy necking, but because he hadn’t been able to let it go any further. Plodding to the shower, going through the regular motions, he called himself every kind of fool. Why the hell couldn’t he let his feelings for Jim go? Why did he feel like he was cheating on the man with someone else? They hadn’t been together for months because Jim had cheated on him, goddammit!

“This is insane,” he breathed to his reflection in the mirror as he smeared on his shaving cream. Working with Jim, spending every day with him, was no way to get the man out of his system. No way to move on. He began shaving but had to stop because his hands were shaking too hard.

“Dammit,” he snarled. “Why the fuck do I feel like I’m betraying him? Why can’t I accept that it’s over? That I can’t ever trust that he’ll never ... never .... Shit!”

He grabbed a towel and wiped off the foam. Leaving the bathroom, he stomped into the kitchen, where he made himself a cup of very strong coffee and toasted a bagel, even though he wasn’t at all hungry. He had to eat, had to go through the motions of normal living; he needed the structure of the little routines to stay focused on the ‘now’ and hold his frustrations and all the uncertainty and resentment and frustration at bay. Leaning back on the counter, he wrestled his emotions back into submission but he wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep them chained beneath a veneer of calm. How the hell did couples that broke up but still worked together do it? Mystified, he wondered if he should call Carolyn and ask her how she’d done it. But he laughed at the outrageousness of the idea. For one thing, from what he gathered, Jim hadn’t been unfaithful in that relationship. And for another, he really didn’t think Carolyn would give him the time of day, let alone share such intimate information – even if he could come clean and tell her that he’d spent the last year in Jim’s bed. Which he couldn’t. Because Jim didn’t want anyone to know.

Or he hadn’t, until last night, when Jim had come out to Steve. What the hell was that about? Could he, dare he, hope that Jim really was grappling with his most fundamental fears and needs for privacy?

“God, what next?” Blair asked himself, feeling as if everything was out of control and that there wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it. It couldn’t go on like this. Something had to give. Muttering to himself, telling himself he needed to stop reacting and get a handle on his life, he returned to the bathroom to finish shaving before dressing and heading to work.

When Blair entered the bullpen, he saw that Jim was already there. Fed up with what he increasingly felt was bullshit and being jerked around by a guy who couldn’t make up his mind about love or commitment or his own sexuality, he felt anger simmer under his frustration with the whole situation. Hands shoved in his pockets, he stopped in front of Jim’s desk and leaned forward to demand in a hoarse whisper, “What the hell was that about last night, huh?”

Jim looked up at him with guileless eyes. “You said you wanted me out of the closet. You said you were sick of hiding and that I had to deal with that or there was no hope for us,” he replied, his voice low but by no means a guarded whisper. “It goes against everything I’ve ever believed, Chief, about surviving ... about fitting in. But I’m trying here. I’m really trying to ... to get out of my own way. To be honest.”

“So you had to show up on my date to discuss homophobia or increasing tolerance in the Force?” Blair snorted and shook his head. “You sure you weren’t just trying to torpedo my chance with
“Mickelson didn’t look like someone who would be scared off that easily,” Jim retorted, his gaze dropping away. “Why won’t you believe I’m trying?”

“I know you’re trying,” Blair sighed, turning away. “Very trying.”

Jim shot to his feet. “That’s not fair, Sandburg. I’m doing everything you’ve said I had to do to have any credibility with you. I’ve been in therapy for weeks, and last night I –”

“Okay, fine, you’re right,” Blair retorted, anger sparking. “But to what end, Jim? Huh? How does any of this prove that anything will really change? That you won’t pull the same damned thing again when you get bored?”

“Bored? You think it was about being bored?” Jim challenged, his voice rising.

Blair abruptly realized that everyone was listening, though their colleagues were doing a good job of trying to pretend they were oblivious. His gaze returning to Jim’s, he snapped, “I don’t think you really want to do this here.”

“No? Wanna bet?” Jim growled and, coming around his desk, he gripped Blair’s arm and drew him along to Simon’s office, where he rapped sharply on the open door and then hauled Blair inside. After closing the door, Jim turned to Simon and said, “Sir, I’m sorry to bust in like this, but I need to clarify something that’s important to my future, both personally and professionally. There’s well-defined regulation that couples can’t be partnered; it’s just too risky, right? Both of them could be killed, which would devastate their families. Or under stress, they could lose their grip and break ranks to protect their significant other rather than the public.”

“Uh huh,” Simon drawled, watching them both warily. “That’s pretty much what the regs say and why.”

“Okay,” Jim allowed. He rubbed a palm over his head and kneaded the back of his neck. “Okay, well, you probably need to know that Sandburg and I were engaged in a ... a sexual relationship for the past year, and that things fell apart when he caught me with a woman.”

Simon winced and grimaced. “Is there a reason you feel obliged to tell me this now?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim replied. “My hope is that we’ll be able to reconcile, but I felt we needed to keep the relationship under wraps so we wouldn’t compromise our partnership here at work. But Sandburg thinks that because of the sentinel thing, and my need for his specialized support, that the regs wouldn’t apply. So, well, I need a ruling here. He’s not happy being in the closet and I can understand that. And he doesn’t trust that I care enough about him – about us – to challenge the situation here at work. Well, I do. Care enough. Enough that if we can’t remain partners if we reconcile that I’m prepared to resign.”

“Ah, hell,” Simon groaned. “Just how out of the closet do you want this to be?” he asked Blair, who was gaping at Jim and wondering if he’d fallen into some alternate or parallel reality where James Joseph Ellison was comfortable with his sexuality and didn’t feel that everything in his life had to be classified information.

“Huh, what?” Blair stammered, blinking as he turned to Simon.

“I asked you how far out of the closet do you want to be?” Simon reiterated, impatiently. “Do I have to take on the union who will protest special treatment, or is it enough that your immediate colleagues understand you’re a, uh, couple?”
“We’re not,” Blair said, frowning. “Not anymore.”

“But we could be again, right?” Jim insisted. “I made some monumentally stupid mistakes but surely to God we can work it out.”

Simon held up his hands. “I don’t want to be in the middle of this conversation. You two need to take this to a marriage counselor or – at least – somewhere private. Once you’ve figured out whether or not you are or aren’t a couple, let me know, and we can take it from there. Okay?”

“Seems reasonable, so long as you think there’s a way we can work it out,” Jim agreed. “Our relationship didn’t get in the way of doing our job for the whole of the past year and I think we can argue that I need his backup.”

“Jim, that would mean coming out about being a sentinel,” Blair exclaimed, tossing up his hands.

Jim sighed. “I think that horse is pretty much already out of the barn, Sandburg. There aren’t many in the PD who honestly believe you’re any kind of fraud.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my partner?” Blair demanded.

Jim met his gaze unflinchingly. “I want this to work, Chief. But we don’t have a chance if you’re never gonna trust me again, or you can’t believe that I can change.”

“This is all very interesting, and don’t get me wrong, I care about how it all works out,” Simon interjected. “You’re both my friends as well as my valued team members. But please, get the hell out of my office and deal with all this on your own time.”

Badly needing to wrap his head around the massive curves Jim was throwing at him, Blair was all too happy to agree. “Right,” he said, heading toward the door.

“We’ll keep you posted, Simon,” Jim assured, moving to follow him out.

“Riiight,” Simon drawled, and rolled his eyes. “You do that.”

Blair couldn’t stand it. Stopping dead in his tracks, he turned to Simon and demanded, “You’re seriously saying that Jim and I, that we ...” he gestured between the two of them, “and we might –”

Scowling heavily, Simon rumbled, “You’re not suggesting that I might harbor narrow-minded, discriminatory or prejudicial attitudes toward you because of your sexual orientation? Tell me you’re not suggesting that, Sandburg.”

Brought up short, Blair floundered and decided he was really losing it. “No, no, I wasn’t suggesting that,” he stammered. “I really wasn’t. I do know better, Simon. It’s just – we’ve buried it for so long – and now I don’t know –”

“I understand, Blair,” Simon cut in, his tone softer, even gentle, but there was a trace of sarcasm resonating on the edges. “It all sounds very confusing. I think we’ve all been confused enough for this morning and now I really want the two of you to get back to work.”

Deciding he should quit while he was behind, Blair just nodded and got the hell out of the office. When he heard Jim start to say something behind him, he raised his hands and shook his head. “Not now, man. Simon’s right. We have to get back to work. There are a bunch more shops we need to check out to see if we can get a lead on that cologne you smelled at the crime scenes.”
“Fine, then let’s go,” Jim agreed, lightly tugging his arm to turn him back toward the exit.

Tense, feeling the burn of acid in his belly, staggered by Jim’s recent behaviors, Blair felt as if the walls were closing in on him, trapping him. *I want this to work, Chief. But we don’t have a chance if you’re never gonna trust me again, or you can’t believe that I can change.* Jim’s words played over and over in his head, a seemingly endless loop, as they pounded down the stairs to the garage in the basement. His anxiety spiked, leaving him feeling more than a little nauseated. Jim was doing everything he’d said was necessary, so why did that only leave him feeling trapped? And why did he feel ready to lash out in furious anger? Didn’t he want to reconcile? Wasn’t that what he’d been hoping for?

Panting for breath, Blair climbed into the truck and clicked on the seatbelt. He shouldn’t feel this breathless after dashing down only seven flights of stairs. Forcing himself to slow and deepen his breathing, he also swallowed hard to dislodge the heaviness in the back of his throat.

Jim hadn’t cranked on the engine, and was half-turned in his seat, looking at him. “What’s wrong, Chief? Your heart is hammering like a freight train.”

Pressing his right hand against his chest, still fighting the urge to pant for air, Blair shook his head. “I don’t know. I feel like … like everything is closing in on me, pushing me, like I can’t breathe.”

“I thought you’d be glad that I’m being upfront about us, no more hiding …” Jim said, clearly at a loss.

Blair lifted his left hand, signaling Jim to wait, just wait, while he got his breathing under control. Jim left the truck and ran back inside the building, only to return less than a minute later with a bottle of water from the pop machine in the hall. Twisting off the cap, he handed it to Blair, who gratefully sipped at it, slowly, so as not to jar his twitchy stomach. “Okay,” he sighed after a minute. “Okay, I’m good now. God, I haven’t had one of those since I was a little kid.”

“Had what? What happened?”

“An anxiety attack,” Blair admitted, feeling sheepish. He took another long swallow of water, and then capped the bottle. Setting it aside, he scraped his face with his palms and shoved his hair back behind his ears. “You said something upstairs that hit me hard. About me not trusting you again, and not believing you can change. I see you, hear you, saying stuff that I never thought I’d ever hear you say, and it’s like I can’t believe it, can’t take it in.”

Flicking a look at Jim, lacerated by the vulnerability on Jim’s face and the confusion in his eyes, Blair felt the anxiety flare again as emotions warred within him. He wanted so badly to believe it all, to believe that everything was going to be fine and they’d have the textbook fairytale ending. But … but he couldn’t, couldn’t … couldn’t trust Jim not to hurt him again.

“I guess I don’t believe it,” he whispered hoarsely, feeling the burn of despair in the back of his eyes. “I know you’re trying,” he hastened to add, but he had to fight to keep the anger out of his voice. “It’s like you’ve got this checklist in your head of what you have to do, and if you do it then everything will be fine. Like ‘go to a gay bar and admit I’m bi’, and ‘tell Simon the truth and clear up this whole partners thing’, and ‘get therapy to deal with the trust stuff’. But, but Jim … it’s like you’re just going through the motions, you know? How do I know, really know, that you won’t dump more crap on me in the future, tell me that our partnership isn’t working, or give me another song and dance about having to perpetuate the species, or whatever the next time you cheat on me? How do I trust you not to … to treat me like shit the next time you’re feeling insecure or unworthy?”

“Chief, I can’t prove something won’t happen,” Jim replied helplessly. “I can only say I’ll do my
best and that I swear I won’t cheat on you again.” Blair saw his jaw tighten, and recognized the
characteristic sign of angry frustration ... and heard the barely tempered sarcasm in Jim’s voice when
he went on irritably, “What’s it gonna take, huh? To convince you? Do you want to go to Canada
and get married?”

“Dammit, Jim, I didn’t create this problem, okay? And you know, it might be nice if you actually
talked to me about what you’re thinking about or planning instead of just blindsiding me every time I
turn around lately!” Blair snapped, anger ripping loose in response to Jim’s impatient sarcasm. “If
you think that sauntering into a gay club with an earring in your ear or grandstanding for Simon is all
that it’s gonna take, you’re wrong. In the past nearly two months, you haven’t said one word to me
about what you’re learning or dealing with in therapy or whether any of it is making any difference
to you. Hell, I don’t even know if you’re keeping your appointments. So far as I can see, we aren’t
communicating any better than we ever did, and I haven’t seen or heard anything that suggests that
you won’t turn around and cheat on me again whenever you get the itch.”

Glaring at Jim, who wasn’t meeting his gaze, he slammed, “And you know what, it isn’t marriage
that I want, it’s the ‘until death do us part’ commitment that I want. I’m not at all sure you’re capable
of making that kind of commitment to anyone.”

Jim flinched but didn’t respond, just sat there, pale and tense, taking the abuse. Turning away from
him, knowing that accelerating anger wouldn’t do either of them any good, Blair closed his eyes and
forced himself to stop ranting. In fairness, he knew therapy, introspection, the exploration of emotion,
and not being in control were all extremely difficult for Jim; the wonder was that his frustration with
the process hadn’t boiled over more often in the past weeks. Blair was more concerned about the
virulence of his own anger. Jim was doing everything he’d asked, so why wasn’t it enough, and why
was he aching to punch something or someone? Someone? Hell, he wanted to slug Jim. So angry he
could scarcely think, Blair struggled to order his muddled thoughts. Taking a breath, doing his best to
sound calm and reasonable, he suggested, “Simon said we should get some joint counseling and I
think we need couples’ counseling.”

Jim rolled his eyes and sank back against his seat; shifting, he stared sightlessly out the window.
“Fine. Whatever it takes,” he agreed, but he sounded worn out, defeated, as if he’d lost hope.

Blair hated the surge of guilt he felt, and that resentment just added fuel to the fire of his unreasoning
anger. Dammit, this wasn’t his fault. Taking a breath, he shoved away his habitual inclination to
capitulate and straightened his shoulders. “Okay, well, maybe ask your therapist if he or she is
comfortable seeing both of us, or whether we need to make other arrangements.” He wondered what
it said that after two months he didn’t know if it was a ‘he’ or a ‘she’. Snorting softly, he told himself
it probably didn’t say anything good.

Jim nodded and twisted the ignition key, cranking the engine to life. “I’ll get us an appointment as
soon as it can be arranged,” he said as he steered out of the garage.

Blair looked out at the street and thought about getting his own therapist. But he discarded the idea.
Their issues were about communication and trust, and the essence, the very nature of love, and
whether Jim was capable of making a commitment to one person for the rest of his life. Whatever he
had to say to a counselor, he could say in front of Jim. Maybe, someday they wouldn’t need a third
party to help them say what needed to be said, and to hear what needed to be heard.

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Three days later, he was sitting with Jim in a remarkably sterile waiting room outside the therapist’s
office, nervously anticipating their first joint session with Dr. Meadows. When the door to the inner
sanctuary opened, Blair automatically stood to greet the counselor, and was staggered when a
gorgeous, long-legged redhead who must’ve stood six feet in her heels strode out to meet them. From her flaming mane to the flashing emerald eyes, she was the epitome of everything Jim had ever seemed to want in a woman. Jim regarded her with something akin to rapture on his face and, though he didn’t like to judge anyone on appearances, Blair had a very bad feeling about being there. But then he was immediately contrite; if this is what it took to get Jim to see a therapist willingly, then fine. Whatever.

“Jim,” she greeted him, with a wide, warm smile, but she turned to him with a cooler look of assessment. “Mr. Sandburg. Won’t you both come in?”

“Blair, please,” he urged, holding out his hand.

“Blair,” she agreed, shaking his hand briefly before waving them into the office ahead of her.

The large rectangular room had the requisite couch, and Blair tried very hard not to imagine how it might have been used, and two well-stuffed armchairs in front of a massive desk of burnished mahogany. The walls were lined with bookshelves, and decorated with diplomas and modern artwork of bright colors splashed haphazardly on the canvases. A door in the corner looked like it led to a private washroom, and another door in the same wall as the wide windows led out to the back parking lot and green space. Like the waiting room, the place felt expensive but cold, and he wondered what kind of therapist she was. The couch suggested a Freudian analyst, but he didn’t think Jim would have the patience for that, even with a stunning redhead.

They took the chairs in front of the desk and she settled behind it. “Mr. Sand – Blair,” she began, “Jim has told me that you suggested joint counseling sessions, I presume with the hope of reconciliation. So what is it that you feel needs to happen before you and Jim can get back together?”

A little taken aback by her directness, and feeling distinctly on the spot, Blair unconsciously held up his hands to buy time. “Uh, yes, in the long run, maybe reconciliation is possible. But I think it’s a bit early to talk about specific terms. There’s a lot we have to work through, particularly around issues of trust and commitment, and our respective understanding of what those terms mean.”

“Really?” she returned, sitting back in her leather executive chair. “I was under the impression that you love Jim.”

“I do,” Blair replied. “But love isn’t necessarily enough to make a relationship work. It hasn’t been enough so far.”

She nodded and, picking up a pen, scribbled something on the pad of paper in front of her. Then, laying it down, she leaned forward, her elbows on the desk, her eyes drilling into his. “I’m pleased that you seem to understand that there is a lot of ground to cover here and that reconciliation may not be in either of your best interest.” Blair blinked at her tone and darted a quick glance at Jim, who was staring at her with surprise on his face. His gaze was drawn back to hers when she continued, “You seem to be presenting yourself as the wounded party here.”

Blair felt his mouth go dry with the realization that this was not going to go the way he’d imagined, not at all. “That’s right,” he confirmed, proud that he was keeping his tone steady. “I caught Jim cheating on me in our bed.”

She tapped the pen on the paper. “When relationships fail, the responsibility rarely rests with only one partner.”

“That’s true,” he agreed, trying not to feel defensive because she was right. “I feel I’ve been an enabler for some time in a dysfunctional relationship.”
“An enabler? You? Really? Jim took responsibility for you for four years while you hung around studying the police department, gave you a place to live, and stood by you, didn’t he, after you’d used his name in a fraudulent document? And he has continued to work with you for the past year despite the difficulties I’m sure that must have presented. I’m not sure who has been enabling whom. It’s clear to me that Jim cares for you a great deal, but I suspect you either enticed or somehow coerced him into an intimate relationship, which he is having difficulty sustaining. In my view, his loyalty to you seems excessive and misplaced. It’s not entirely surprising that he sought solace in another person’s arms. A woman’s arms.”

Blair felt he’d been sucker-punched. Almost everything she said was true and was certainly what most of the world believed, so there was nothing he could say in his own defense. But he hadn’t thought this was going to be about defending himself. He’d hoped for better; had thought Jim would be more open and honest in therapy, more fair about the balance in their relationship and friendship.

Apparently, he’d been wrong.

Frozen, he stared past her at the diplomas on the wall, and wondered why Jim would do this, would set him up for this. He couldn’t seem to breathe and, humiliated, he felt his eyes burn. Under the lacerating hurt, fury was igniting. Struggling for control, he looked at Jim, who was gaping at her. “Is that what you told her? Huh? That I’m some kind of leech who is using you, sucking the life out of you, or a clinging vine who is strangling you?” he seethed. Shaking his head, turning away, he pushed himself up from the chair. “I think we’re done here.”

“No, Blair, wait!” Jim exclaimed, also coming to his feet and grabbing his arm, holding him in place. “Where do you get that crap?” he yelled at the therapist. “I told you he’s the best friend I ever had, that I love him and need him in my life. Why are you doing this? Trying to destroy us?”

“Jim,” she returned, her tone now warm and cajoling, “your loyalty does you credit. But of course I know what happened a year ago – who doesn’t?”

Blair was staring at Jim’s hand gripping his arm and, though he hated it, he knew Jim could feel him trembling. “Let me go,” he rasped.

“No,” Jim repeated. “I didn’t want it to go like this. I didn’t expect ... Blair, please. I want to work things out.”

Blair felt dead inside as he looked up into Jim’s eyes, cold and dead. He’d thought there was a chance that they might get back together; God, he’d hoped it would be possible. But they were still mired in the same old lies, still stuck in the same old closets. “Really?” he challenged. “Tell me you didn’t come on like the misunderstood, tragic hero who has only been doing his best. If you’re not the bad guy, then of course it must be me, right? Fuck this.” He yanked his arm but couldn’t free himself. “Let go of me!” he snarled.

“Dammit,” Jim cursed, retaining his grip. “Tell him! Tell him what I told you about why I was sleeping around. Tell him!”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You said he was too good for you. You said that you hoped he’d give it up and go after the life he deserved to have. But, of course, that’s nonsense. You’re simply assuming responsibility – which does you credit – but you clearly don’t owe him anything.”

Despite his icy fury, and the heated emotions raging inside, Blair heard her, as if from a distance. Blinking to bring himself back into the room, he asked, “What? What did you say?”
“Jim said you’ve always stuck by him, that you love him more than is good for you, that you didn’t have to hold that press conference and give up, what was it? Three million dollars? But it’s clear to me that you have some unhealthy hold over him. I’ve done the research and I know you were nothing more than a grad student tagging along behind him, riding on his glory. I believe you became an adrenaline junkie, and you wanted more of the same – and you wanted to own him. You appear to be a very manipulative individual, dangerously so, and it would be far better for Jim if you were to get out of his life completely.”

It was all so surreal. “You are so off-base. I did get out of his life completely. Twice,” Blair grated. “Nearly two years ago, when he threw me out and said we were done, I left him, I was gone. Hell, I was dead. But he called me back and I ... I came back because I thought he wanted me. And I was prepared to leave a year ago, after the press conference, but he wanted me to stay, to be his official partner. I’m not the one who has pushed to continue this relationship or whatever it is that we have. After I caught him cheating, I tried to work with another partner downtown, but Jim insisted that he wouldn’t or couldn’t work with anyone else. So don’t tell me that I’m the one clinging onto him.”

“But cutting him off, Blair twisted his arm abruptly, breaking Jim’s grip. “And you,” he growled, whirling to face Jim. “Now you’re claiming that you wanted me to catch you because you don’t deserve me? For God’s sake, Jim, what is wrong with you? Why can’t you accept love? Why can’t you believe you’re deserving of it? I thought that’s what you were working on, that and your ability to trust and your capacity to commit to a lifelong relationship – and to maybe even feel good enough about us to come out of the closet. What the hell have you been doing here for the past two months? Repressing everything again? Did you tell her about your childhood? Or about what happened to you in Peru or with that sleaze, Colonel Oliver? Huh? About losing your men? Have you talked about why it didn’t work with Carolyn?”

Panting, Blair broke off before he blurted out anything about Jim’s senses and, shaking his head, he turned away and closed his eyes to shut it all out. What a mess, what an unholy mess it had turned out to be. He didn’t know if Jim had slept with the good doctor yet, but it was pretty clear to him that she was hot to sleep with him. Where had he gotten the referral to this woman? Out of a crackerjack box?

“I came here because I need to know I can trust you if we’re ever going to have a future. I need to know you’re not going to willfully hurt me again,” he raged, but low and tight and cold. “And it’s all just the same old shit. Nothing’s changed.”

The brittle silence was broken when she began to clap. “Terrific performance; you’re quite the little drama queen, Blair,” she drawled. “I can see why you have Jim twisted around your little finger.”

“That’s enough!” Jim bellowed. “Detective Sandburg is the best man I’ve ever known, the best friend and partner and ... and lover I’ve ever had. I have no idea what’s wrong with you, lady, but you are way out of line here.”

Blair laughed hollowly. “Oh, come on,” he jeered, though Jim’s defense of him was cutting through his anger, creating a small patch of warmth in his chest. “You’d don’t know what’s wrong with her? She wants you for herself, that’s what’s wrong.” Aching with the hopeless love he felt, he added bitterly, “Can’t say I blame her.”

Meadows flushed. “Nonsense,” she protested. “I haven’t said anything that I suspect most of the people around you both are thinking. I’m simply addressing the situation in a rational manner, stripped of the emotions and the co-dependency that seems to exist between the two of you, to help Jim see reality for what it is.”
“Yeah, right,” Blair chuffed, but he looked away because, dammit, she wasn’t all that far off the mark about what people who didn’t know them well thought about him.

“Reality for what it is,” Jim echoed hoarsely. “Well, how’s this for a little reality? The only thing Blair lied about was that his thesis was a fraud, when it was nothing but the honest truth. I owe him everything. And I need him like I need air. But he owes me nothing, and if he’s smart, he’ll ditch me for good and get on with his life.”

Blair turned to look at Jim, surprised and, despite himself and the anger he tried to hold onto, deeply touched by the fierce passion in Jim’s voice. Jim again took his arm, this time more gently, and said, “Lady, we’re finished and if you send me a bill for this travesty, I’ll sue you. C’mon, Chief, let’s get out of here.”

Blair looked at Meadows and saw her astonishment as what Jim had just told her sank in. “And if you break the confidentiality of this session and tell anyone what Jim just told you, we’ll not only sue you, we’ll move heaven and earth to have you stripped of your license.” Nothing like having a common enemy to bring people together, he thought bemusedly, and that made him think he was missing something, as he let Jim usher him toward the door. “But this really hasn’t solved any of our problems.

The door was locked. Jim thumped it and whirled to face her. “Open the damned door or I’ll break it down.”

“In a moment,” she replied, her tone much gentler, without the caustic edge. “I’m sorry for attacking you, Mr. Sandburg, but I felt it was necessary for both of us to know very clearly where Jim stands, and for you to hear it from him rather than from me. And you’re right; he hasn’t been the most forthcoming client, particularly about the role you play in his life, at least until now, or about the depth of his feelings for you. But Jim wasn’t the only one playing the avoidance game. You were also dodging the bullet when I asked what you needed from him at the beginning of the session. It’s now very clear that you need to know you can trust him and that he’s capable of a lifelong commitment, which you currently seem to doubt – not without some cause. It’s also clear that you’re harboring a great deal of anger. You came in here angry with him, and now you’re also angry with me, but you try to hide that anger. That’s not healthy and we’ll need to deal with that. But at least we’ve got it out on the table.”

When she paused, they stared at her stonily.

“I assure you, I have no designs on Jim. But it was interesting to see you care enough and still feel affiliated enough with him to be jealous. And it was most illuminating to see how you, Jim, are not prepared to allow anyone to denigrate Mr. Sandburg – at least not in your hearing, though I suspect Mr. Sandburg has to live with a lot of people thinking and saying those things.”

She paused then, but Blair was not inclined to either debate the points she’d just made or remind her to call him by his first name, so she continued, “All in all, I think the two of you have a very sound basis of strong mutual regard and affiliation for being able to work out your differences. If you’re not willing to continue working with me, I’ll understand; my approach at the beginning of this session, to shake both of you out of your comfort zones, was somewhat unorthodox.”

She pushed a button under her desk and they heard a low buzz from the door. “It’s up to you whether you go or stay, or go to discuss whether to continue working with me, or simply go with a view toward working with another therapist, even if it means starting from square one.”

“And you said I was manipulative,” Blair said sardonically. “I need to think about this. And I think we need to discuss what just happened before we talk with anyone else.”
“Fair enough. Give me a call if you wish to schedule another appointment.”

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They were both silent on the way out of the building and back to Jim’s truck; given the stony look of fury on Jim’s face, Blair thought silence was probably a good thing. He wasn’t any too happy with the woman, either, not least of all because she’d effectively pulled the plug on any trust Jim might have had in her. Jim hadn’t been all that pleased about pursuing therapy in the first place and the likelihood of him starting over with anyone else was just about zilch.

On the other hand, while he might question her process, she’d sure succeeded in getting them to cut to the chase.

When they got in the truck, Jim just sat there, staring out through the windshield, apparently lost in thought. Needing the time to decompress and get all his own emotions back under control, Blair didn’t push.

*Best man I’ve ever known. Best friend, best partner, best lover. Need him like I need air. I owe him everything.* Pressing his lips together, Blair crossed his arms and bowed his head. Jim had told him some of that before, after the press conference. But he’d written it off to the stress and pressure of the moment and Jim’s desire to give him something in return for having trashed his own life. Jim’s words expressed need, maybe respect, and obligation. But Jim hadn’t said much about love. Maybe, though, his weird, mixed-up actions, like sleeping with others to get Blair to give up on him, were paradoxically driven by love, by the need to sacrifice all for what Jim believed was best for him.

Blair understood sacrifice, knew what it cost, what it meant. Chewing on his lip, he wondered if he was reading too much into it, or if he was being conned. Jim was so damned plausible; but he’d do something like this, something stubborn and risky and even distasteful if he thought it was ultimately the right thing to do.

Heaving a sigh, Blair gave his head a shake. Was it a test, like he’d thought weeks ago? A test to see if he’d keep loving Jim, no matter what? Was it some genetic drive to reproduce? Was Jim just tired of him, uncomfortable in a gay relationship, or intrinsically unable to commit to one person? Or was it really because, deep down, Jim didn’t believe he deserved to be loved, and he genuinely felt Blair needed to be driven away for his own good? Given what Blair had already sacrificed for him, Jim had to know that he’d have to do something so fundamentally offensive as to be utterly unacceptable to get Blair to give up on him. Partner betrayal was pretty damned offensive.

Staring into space, Blair decided it was either the test or the sacrifice – otherwise Jim would have been more careful not to get caught – and maybe, though Jim might not even be entirely aware of it, it was both, which could explain his evidently contradictory feelings and behaviors.

“Was she right?” Jim rasped. “Is that really what most people still think? Is that what you face every damned day, that contempt?”

Startled by the one question he had totally not expected, Blair didn’t have a ready answer. Shrugging, his gaze wandering everywhere but toward his partner, he replied, “People who know us don’t treat me that way. Who cares what strangers think?”

“I hate it,” Jim snapped and slammed the wheel with his hand. “All of it. I hate what knowing me has done to you.”

“Enough!” Blair exclaimed. “Damn it, Jim. You act like I can’t think for myself, make choices for
my own life. I’m not a child. I’ve been a full participant in everything that’s happened – up until you apparently decided you had to drive me away. If you can’t accept my right to choose, if you can’t respect the choices I make, then it really is hopeless.”

“If you weren’t a cop, what would you do?” Jim asked then.

Blair’s laugh was hollow. “I don’t know, man. I haven’t given it a lot of thought.” Finally twisting to face Jim, he challenged, “Maybe you should have asked me that, and if I wanted to be anything else, before you decided to destroy what we had.”

“I don’t understand how you can say you still love me,” Jim said softly, his gaze downcast, his tone confused. “If I caught you ... God, if I didn’t kill you, I’d sure in hell never trust you again and, and I don’t know if I could still love you.”

“I know,” Blair said and frowned in thought. There went the test idea. Jim hadn’t thought there’d be any hope of forgiveness but, afterward, he’d apparently not been able to live with what his actions had caused. Well, to err was definitely human and he’d known Jim had feet of clay for a very long time. How messed up was it that Jim had maybe done it all out of love, out of only really wanting the best for him ... the best being, in Jim’s definition, a life without Jim in it? Anger surged at the games Jim had been playing, at the stakes he’d risked and for what? To destroy what had been so hard won? But the pain of it overwhelmed Blair’s anger, leaving little but despair in its wake.

“So, you love me, but you don’t trust me anymore,” Jim said, sounding infinitely weary.

Blair knew how he felt. God, he wished he could curl up and just go to sleep for about ten years. “Yeah, that about sums it up,” Blair muttered. “And I’m angry with you. So angry that, half the time, I want to slug you for being so boneheaded.”

“Feel free if you think it’ll help,” Jim offered, sounding more than half serious. When Blair didn’t respond, he asked, “Am I ever going to be able to make it up to you?”

“I don’t know,” Blair told him.

“Well, that’s better than a ‘no’,” Jim returned, and cranked on the engine. “So, what do you think about seeing her again?”

“What do you think about it?”

“I don’t want to start over from square one.”

Not surprised, Blair nodded. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to trust her, but maybe that’s not necessary so long as she helps us deal with one another.”

“I’m sorry, Chief,” Jim sighed, and still didn’t ease into traffic.

“For what, specifically?”

“Everything. Before you met me, you used to trust just about everyone. Now, trust is as big an issue for you as it is for me.”

Blair snorted and couldn’t stop the grin that twisted at the corner of his mouth. “Guess after five years, you’re rubbing off on me.”

Jim choked, and then laughed wryly. “I wish,” he said with a wink at the unintended double entendre. But he sobered and met Blair’s gaze. “If you’ll give me another chance, I won’t cheat on
you again. I just don’t know how to prove that to you.”

Blair bowed his head, and turned his face away. That was now the crux of the problem, because he didn’t know how Jim could prove it, either. Didn’t know how he was ever going to learn to trust the man to not rip his heart out again. He knew Jim meant what he was saying; didn’t doubt that in the least. But Jim was driven by his emotions far more than he would ever admit, and when he was stressed or boxed in or angry, he did and said things without thinking. Blair had done his best to ignore the reactive behaviors, to not take them personally, but he was feeling raw and tired and didn’t think he wanted to keep playing that game. “I guess we take it a step at a time,” he finally sighed as he buckled his seatbelt. “Doesn’t look like there’s any rush. Neither of us is going anywhere in the meantime.”

Jim gave him a long, thoughtful look but didn’t say anything more, just checked the mirrors and eased into the late afternoon traffic.

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Too agitated to sleep, Blair spent most of the night pacing around his apartment, arguing with himself about what to do about his relationship with Jim. He told himself that everyone makes mistakes and that years of friendship shouldn’t be outweighed by a single – well, okay, repeated and monumental – mistake. Some mistakes were bigger than others, more hurtful, and Jim had done this deliberately, cheated on him, hurt him. Out of love? Out of fear? Did it matter?

Jim needed him, needed his specialized support, so he couldn’t just walk away, not without feeling guilty, not without dreading what it might mean for Jim’s safety and his life. Jim was trying to make up for what he did. He was easing himself out of the closet, and was undergoing therapy ... but whether that was doing any good, Blair wasn’t entirely sure.

Blair wanted to forgive him; it was in his nature to forgive and move on. But every time he thought about that afternoon in the loft, he felt sick. He couldn’t go back there, not ever. Could not sleep in that bed again. Funny, he’d grown up with a mother who had drifted from one man to the next, loving each one and then leaving him, without any evident regrets or sorrow, only anticipation for the next adventure. If Naomi had caught her lover in a similar situation, she would have shrugged and packed up, and they would have taken the next bus out of town. She’d talk about good intentions and the inherent weakness of men, and pat his head and hug him and say she was sorry he was doomed to be as weak as all the others. Naomi didn’t believe any man could ever make a life commitment to just one person; she felt it was biologically impossible. So she never tested it, never bucked nature, just went with the flow and enjoyed life as she found it. Blair rubbed his eyes. And now here he was, a man who’d grown up with no idea about how a committed relationship worked but who wanted that commitment desperately, only to learn that maybe his mother was right. Men weren’t designed for fidelity.

He frowned at that. Nature versus nurture was the perennial argument in his field. But men weren’t just their drives and needs. They thought, and felt love, they created art and rules for civilized life, and they could make choices, even dedicate and give their lives for an ideal, like freedom or love. Jim was the most disciplined man Blair had ever known. If anyone was capable of making and living up to a commitment it was him. And Jim said he was ready now, willing to make such a commitment. Said he wanted forever, too. But...

The eternal ‘but’.

“Can I trust him?” Blair sighed heavily and paused by the window to stare out at the night sky. “Is this about being able to trust him? Or is it about my fear? My unwillingness to be vulnerable to more hurt? I’ve trusted Jim for five years to protect my life ... it shouldn’t be so hard to trust him with my
He leaned his forehead against the glass and closed his eyes. Memories of good times, special moments, flashed in his mind, making him ache to be with Jim. But then the scenes shifted, and he remembered again what it felt like to hear Jim tell him it was over, and to be drowned. He flinched away from the window, stumbling back, reflexively panting for breath. But his mind took no pity, and he remembered Jim kissing Alex on the beach in Mexico, abandoning him and Megan to go after her, leaving them bound in the temple while he kissed her and held her while her mind went into meltdown. And he remembered Jim cutting him off, arguing with him over Veronica. And Jim again telling him they were done when the dissertation blew up in their faces.

Taking a shuddering breath, Blair slid down the wall and wrapped his arms around his knees. Bowing his head, he remembered what it felt like to know Jim was making love to someone else in their bed. Tears blurred his eyes and he ached with anger and pain.

How many more times would he let Jim rip out his heart?

How long before Jim decided once again that he wasn’t good enough, or that he’d screwed up one time too often or – whatever – and told him they were done?

Was he a fool to give up now, when Jim said he was ready to make a commitment? Or would he be a bigger fool to give Jim yet another chance to reject him?

Life was short; time that passed was time he could never get back. Detach with love and move on? Remain but as friends and partners downtown only? Give love another chance? His gut clenched and he could not, simply could not, imagine ever going back to the loft.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispered in anguish. He’d never felt so torn, so uncertain and indecisive. So vulnerable. “I can’t go on like this,” he muttered, pushing himself to his feet.

Moving through the apartment to his bedroom, he went on talking to himself. “I came back from the dead for him, and he treated me like shit. I gave up my doctorate for him, and my reputation, to keep him safe, and most of the world has treated me like shit ever since. I went to the Academy and accepted the badge and carry a weapon I’m trained to kill with, for him, to be his partner, and I finally seemed to have gotten it right, because he finally told me he loves me and took me into his bed. And that lasted for what? A little more than ten months? Before he took other lovers? Why? Because he loved me? Because he was afraid I might cheat on him? God, come on, that’s all just so much crap. No more. No fucking more. He wants me, he can work for it. I’m not going back to him.”

Frustrated, angry, emotionally exhausted, he threw himself onto his bed and thumped the pillow into shape. Determined to sleep, he closed his eyes, only to curse a few minutes later, and roll onto his back to stare at the ceiling. “You’re hopeless,” he grated, despising himself and his treacherous body for the love that burned in his heart, and the ache he felt, his deep need, to hold Jim in his arms.

I don’t know how you can still love me.

Jim’s poignant, heart-wrenching words echoed in his mind, taunting him, daring him to prove that he still loved the man. Did he love Jim unconditionally or not? Didn’t love put up with anything? Have infinite patience and acceptance? Forgive anything and everything?

Unable to stand the clamoring thoughts any longer, Blair lifted an arm to cover his eyes, and willed himself to go through the deep breathing and mental exercises to empty his mind that he’d learned about the same time as he learned how to walk and talk.
When sleep finally claimed him, he fell into a jumbled dream. Incacha’s bloody fist gripped his arm. A wolf whimpered, then howled, sounding nearly frenzied, and a jaguar’s guttural, broken scream pierced his mind. Fear enveloped him, consumed him. Something was wrong, badly wrong, desperately wrong. Jim! Where was Jim? Jim!

“Jim!” Blair woke shouting, and gasped. His heart thundering, he looked around and realized he was in his apartment, that it had all been a dream. “God,” he husked, and raked his hair back from his face. His heart was still pounding, the breath tight in his chest. Fear still pulsed through his body. Glancing at the balcony doors, looking out over the bay at the distant islands, he could see that it was still dark in the west, barely dawn. Exhausted, he once again willed himself to empty his mind, to breathe deeply and evenly, and he was just about to roll over to try to get back to sleep when a thunderous explosion rattled the windows.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, and rolled to his feet. Alarmed, he stumbled down the hall to the living room windows and gasped. Billowing black clouds, fueled by scarlet and orange flames, were filling the golden eastern sky on the other side of the harbor, a block up from the water in one of the older downtown neighborhoods.

“My God,” he breathed in horror. Thankful he’d never undressed the night before, he raced to the entry hall. With mindless, mechanical efficiency he donned his shoulder holster and clipped his badge to his belt, even as he shoved his feet into his boots. Still pulling on his jacket, he grabbed his keys and cellphone from the hall table and sped out of the apartment and down the six flights of stairs to the parking garage. Mere minutes after he’d awakened, headache pounding, feeling breathless and sick with fear, he was on his way to the scene of the disaster, praying that it wasn’t where he thought it was, wasn’t really Prospect that was on fire.

Another explosion split the silence of the predawn hour. He soon heard the wail of distant sirens that grew louder as he got closer to the center of the chaos.

Blair had to abandon his vehicle more than a block from the burning buildings, behind a hastily erected barrier. Flashing his badge, he darted down the street, skirting around clumps of stunned, pajama-clad people, skipping over fire hoses and dodging emergency workers. Red and blue lights strobed the scene, and the blinding lights from the news cameras pierced the gloom. His heart pounded as he took in the sight before him. Two buildings were shattered and burning. Little remained of the one that housed a number of boutiques, with offices and storage spaces above, and a few apartments but it was being renovated and he was pretty sure most, if not all, the apartments were empty. The other was 852 Prospect, the residential building Jim lived in. The front half of it was gone, the rest of the structure barely visible through the choking smoke that stung his eyes, making them water, and tickled the back of his throat.

“What happened?” he yelled at a passing fireman.

“Don’t know. Maybe a gas explosion,” was the hurried response. “Get back behind the lines!”

Ignoring the instructions, Blair hurried toward the building he’d called home for nearly five years, and his gaze raked the crowd of displaced people huddled on the far side of the parking lot on the edge of the street. Thankfully, he recognized most of his old neighbors, including the two dogs and five cats who also lived in the building, but not the one person he most anxious to see.

“JIM!” he shouted at the building, knowing it was hopeless but unable to stifle the need to scream his partner’s name. Someone else was missing ... old Mrs. Hayak, from the second floor. Blair squinted through the smoke at the building, and he could see that the corner where her apartment had been was already gone. Jim would have gone for her ... the terror of his dream erupted, consuming him. “God, please,” he breathed brokenly before shouting again, “JIM!”
“Sandburg, over here!” Jim cried, his voice raw and breaking with effort.

Whirling around, Blair saw his partner carrying the wizened old woman garbed in an old-fashioned, flannel nightgown. Nearly overcome, coughing hoarsely, his eyes swollen nearly shut and tears streaking his smoke-grimed face, Jim was staggering out of the smoke filling the alley between the burning building and the parking lot. When flashbulbs erupted in his face, he flinched away, stumbled back. Clearly reeling with exhaustion, he dropped to one knee, but tightened his grip on the elderly woman, keeping her stable and safe.

“Back off!” Blair yelled furiously, as he and an EMT raced to Jim’s side. “Damn vultures!” he seethed, pushing through the pack of journalists. “God damn you, either help the man or get the hell out of our way!”

Conscious of the blistering heat and roar of the flames from the fire only a few feet away, Blair wrapped his arm around Jim’s back. “It’s okay, Jim. I’ve got you, man,” he murmured as the medic took charge of the woman, easing her out of Jim’s grip and carrying her to one of the ambulances. Jim lifted an arm to encircle Blair’s shoulders and, standing, leaned on him heavily as he coughed and struggled for breath. There was a cut over his right eye, and another long slash on his left arm; blood streamed from both and mingled with the sweaty soot streaking Jim’s face and body. What was left of his undershirt looked charred in places. Beside and above them, the fire snapped and the building cracked and groaned ominously.

“Chief, can’t see – the camera flashes ...” Jim rasped.

“I’m not surprised,” Blair replied, barely able to see himself in the smoke and fumes. “It’s just the smoke; your eyes are swollen nearly shut. C’mon, I’ll help you across the street. The air’s a bit clearer over there.”

Bearing most of Jim’s weight, Blair practically carried his nearly blind, stumbling partner away from the fire and the worst of the billowing smoke, to the safety of the other side of the street, close to another ambulance. Jim was coughing up his lungs, wheezing for breath, and his skin was smeared with oily smoke residue that had to be irritating the hell out of his senses. All he was wearing were his jeans, the grimy, sleeveless undershirt, and his bare feet were jammed into loafers.

Once they were out of harm’s way, Blair yelled for another medic before easing Jim down to the curb. Crouching beside him, he ran his gaze swiftly over Jim’s body, hurriedly examining him to determine the extent of his injuries, more to reassure himself that the man was there, alive and basically alright. But the soot, grime and blood coated everything, and he couldn’t tell how badly Jim might be injured. “Are you burned?” he demanded breathlessly, cupping Jim’s face with his hands and peering into Jim’s puffy, bloodshot eyes. “Anything broken?”

“No, no, don’t think so,” Jim gasped between wracking, choking coughs. “Smelled gas. Yelled, pounded on doors. Woke the neighbors. Mrs. Hayak, didn’t hear ... broke down her door. Others already out. Explosion rocked the building. Then another and the ... the staircase was burning. Got her out the back fire escape. Nearly got trapped by the fire and ... the collapsing walls.”

“Okay, easy, just focus on breathing,” Blair crooned, patting his shoulder. He felt Jim quivering under his touch, shivering from shock or cold, or maybe both. Rising, he pulled off his jacket to drape around Jim’s shoulders and shouted toward an EMT, “Could we get some oxygen over here!” The man nodded and ducked into the interior of an ambulance. Once Jim gripped it on his own, the technician examined his bleeding face and arm.

The man nodded and ducked into the interior of an ambulance. Looking around, trying to determine if his help was needed to tend to more severely injured, Blair squinted against the smoke and saw Simon materialize out of the haze. The EMT appeared beside them and held a mask to Jim’s face. Once Jim gripped it on his own, the technician examined his bleeding face and arm.
"Thank God," Simon intoned when he spotted them and moved to stand over them. "When I heard the address, I was afraid...."

Blair looked up at him and nodded soberly, his own fear still coursing through his body, leaving him shaken. Around them, people shouted and wept, the fire roared and smoke billowed on the wind created by the voracious flames. Sirens whined and a woman started screaming when she realized her husband hadn’t gotten out of the building next door before it had blown sky-high. With an almighty crash, the front half of Jim’s building crumbled. Jim winced and shuddered, huddled into himself. Dust and grit swirled up to choke them.

Though he hated to leave Jim’s side, Blair helped Simon and some uniformed officers and firemen urge people back, further down the street and away from the fire, while the EMT helped Jim to the ambulance.

"Things are under control here. You go take care of your partner," Simon ordered, gently pushing Blair back toward the ambulance. "Check in with me later."

Coughing, Blair nodded and hastened back to the emergency vehicle. "How’s he doing?" he asked, as he climbed inside. Taking saline-soaked gauze from the EMT, he began to gently clean Jim’s swollen eyes.

"He’s doing fine," Jim husked sardonically, peering up at him, but he still sucked oxygen from the mask.

Frowning, Blair watched the medic loosely bandage Jim’s arm. "How bad is he hurt?" he asked.

"A few shards of splintered glass need to be dug out of his arm, and he’ll probably need some stitches. Maybe some first degree burns. Hard to tell." Looking out at the inferno not many feet away, the technician said, "He’s lucky he got out. They all are."

Blair’s throat was tight and his eyes stung from the oily smoke. "Yeah," he breathed, gripping Jim’s shoulder.

"I think everyone got out of our building," Jim wheezed. But he shook his head, and his expression was stark as he added, "I don’t know if any got out of the one that blew up next door."

"Some did," Blair told him. "I passed them on the street." Thinking of the woman who had screamed and then collapsed in tears, he murmured, "Not everyone, though. People in your building were lucky you smelled the gas and got them all out."

Jim swallowed hard, and the muscles along his jaw flexed.


Jim’s gaze flicked toward him before faltering and dropping. But he nodded slowly.

More people suffering from smoke inhalation crowded into the ambulance, and Blair realized he’d have to get out to make more room. "I’ll meet you at the hospital," he said.

"I can go with you," Jim rasped, and started to lift the mask from his face.

But Blair restrained his hand, and pushed until the mask was once again firmly in place. "No, you need the oxygen. Keep your dials turned down, okay?"

"Yeah," Jim grunted, but he pulled off the mask and handed it to an old woman the attendant and
Blair were helping onto the stretcher beside him.

Shaking his head, but accepting that Jim was constitutionally unable to keep the oxygen mask when someone else needed it, too, Blair jumped out onto the street to help others board. Glancing inside, he could see Jim rifling in the supplies to help the EMTs bandage the worst wounds before transporting everyone to the hospital. With a bemused smile borne of admiration and fond frustration, Blair reflected that Jim couldn’t help himself. So long as he was conscious and breathing, he’d always be helping people who were worse off than himself ... and even some that probably weren’t as badly hurt.

When he saw that the EMTs were ready to transport, he confirmed their destination. Before running back through the smoke and chaos to his own vehicle, he spared a moment to look up at the burning edifice. The firemen seemed to be getting the flames under control, and he could see that at least some of Jim’s apartment looked like it might still be intact because it was furthest from the main fire and on the back of the building, which was still standing. But, between the fire, smoke and water damage, he doubted that anyone would ever be able to live there again – let alone a sentinel – and it was anyone’s guess whether Jim would be able to salvage any of his possessions.

Feeling an odd sense of déjà vu, still shaky from the relief of finding Jim alive, Blair hurried to his car and headed to the hospital. Fragments of his hazy dream surfaced and, away now from the fire’s heat, he shivered, not entirely just because of the early morning chill. Jim was the one who usually had the visions, but Blair wondered if he’d experienced something like precognition; nothing explicit, no, but a sense of impending danger, a warning maybe, one that had too quickly become reality.

Recalling the devastation behind him, he trembled to think how easily Jim might have been killed. His fists tightened on the steering wheel, and the breath caught in his chest. God, what would he have done if Jim ....

Refusing to think about the horror of what might have been, Blair whispered a prayer of thanksgiving to whatever gods or goddesses might be listening.

**

When Blair got to the hospital, he palmed his badge and flashed it at anyone who looked like they might even consider stopping him as he wove his way through the packed waiting area and into the restricted area beyond. He checked one treatment room after another until he found Jim stretched out on a gurney, oxygen mask once again firmly in place. A nurse was cleaning and patching the cut over his eye, and the young emergency doctor was stitching up the gash on his arm.

“Hey, how’s he doing?” Blair asked, not happy with the sound of Jim’s breathing.

“And you are?” the doctor asked archly, his attention still focused on the wound.

“Oh, sorry. Detective Blair Sandburg,” he replied and held up his badge, but neither the doctor nor the nurse looked at it. Letting his arm fall to his side, he added, “Jim’s my partner.”

“I’m fine,” Jim wheezed.

“Yeah, you sure sound fine,” Blair retorted, moving closer.

“As you’ve noticed, he’s suffering from smoke inhalation, and I’m debating having him admitted,” the doctor said.

“No, no,” Jim protested, and then coughed roughly.
Detective,” the physician continued, sounding tired, “from what I understand, your home burned down and you have nowhere else to be anyway.”

“I’ll get a room in a hotel,” Jim insisted.

“Uh, that would be a ‘no’,” Blair interjected, knowing Jim would rest better in an environment less likely than either the hospital or a hotel to aggravate his senses. “I can take him home with me, but it sounds like we’ll need an oxygen tank.”

“Hmm,” the doctor murmured and frowned. “He may also have some minor burns. I’ll give you some ointment to smooth over his skin once he’s cleaned up. If you see any blistering, you’ll need to cover that area with a sterile dressing.”

“I can do that,” Blair agreed.

“Chief, Blair, you don’t have to —”

“Yeah, I do,” he cut in. “Lucky I furnished the spare room in case Naomi ever came for another visit, huh?” he added, trying to sound wry. But since she hadn’t visited since the dissertation fiasco, he was conscious that Jim wasn’t likely to find it any more amusing than he was. But he had furnished the room. Just in case. Because, someday, she was bound to come, right? Turning back to the doctor, he asked again, “And the oxygen?”

Glancing at the nurse and giving her a nod as he spoke, the doctor replied, “We can requisition a portable tank. That should be enough, but if it isn’t, you’ll need to bring him back here for reassessment.”

Jim grimaced and Blair knew he wasn’t happy about being talked about as if he wasn’t there. The nurse quietly left the room, presumably to implement the doctor’s order. The doctor finished the stitching and put a waterproof bandage over the wound. “The stitches will dissolve on their own in the next week. If you experience any swelling or discharge, you need to see your doctor to get some antibiotics. You can shower and bathe with this bandage, and it will need to be changed in two days.” He handed Blair some dressings as he spoke, and then helped Jim to sit up on the side of the gurney. “You may experience some dizziness because of your breathing difficulties, but those should ease in the next few hours.”

“Thanks,” Jim acknowledged and peered at Blair through his reddened, puffy eyelids. “Can we go now?”

“Just as soon as the nurse comes back with the oxygen tank,” Blair agreed.

A few minutes later, he was helping Jim into his car, and placing the small oxygen tank on the floor between his partner’s legs. As he was walking around to the driver’s side, his cell phone buzzed. “Sandburg.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Fine, Simon. We’re just leaving the hospital now, to head to my place. Jim’s still on oxygen and I think I should stay with him, to make sure he doesn’t, you know, react to all the smoke and crap that he breathed in and got on his skin and in his eyes and lungs today.”

“Your place? Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Blair grimaced at the underlying questions and explained, “I’ve got a spare room.”
“Oh, oh, right, sure. And, yes, stay with him to make sure he doesn’t have any, uh, delayed reactions.”

“Thanks, Captain. I should be in as usual tomorrow,” Blair added before terminating the call.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, he cranked on the ignition.

“Sandburg, Simon’s right. I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Jim muttered, stiff and uncomfortable.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied blithely as he steered out of the lot. “It’s karma, man,” he went on with a small smile. “You once took in a guy whose place had gotten blown up, remember? The Universe is now paying you back.”

Jim snorted, and then hacked a cough. Resettling the mask on his face, clearing his throat, he took a few breaths and then said, “Just for a week, right? Until I get myself sorted out.”

Blair laughed with weary resignation. Figuring the Universe was also trying to tell him something, especially after the dream he’d had, he glanced at his partner and offered, “Let’s just see how it goes, okay? No rush to figure things out right now.” Looking at Jim, at the filthy clothes that were all he had left in the world, Blair felt a rush of compassion. “You’ve lost everything, man. I’d be a damned poor friend, let alone partner, if I didn’t at least give you a safe and secure roof over your head.”

Jim turned to face him and the vulnerable hope that was evident on his face, under the mask of streaked soot, made Blair’s heart ache. “Okay,” Jim rasped, with a faint, very tentative smile. “Thanks.”

“No thanks are necessary, Jim. You’ve done the same for me – and you even took in an ape,” Blair teased gently. “All I have to put up with is you.” He waited a beat and then added with a smirk, “But this time, I get to make the rules.”

Jim laughed and then doubled forward, coughing. His eyes on the road and one hand on the wheel, Blair thumped Jim’s back until he was breathing a bit more easily. Before returning his hand to the wheel, he squeezed Jim’s shoulder gently. “Just take it easy,” he soothed. “Soon as we get home, we’ll get you cleaned up and you’ll feel a whole lot better.”

Jim nodded and, closing his badly swollen eyes, rested his head back on the seat.

Fifteen minutes later, one arm around his waist for support, Blair guided Jim into the apartment. Though Jim wasn’t complaining, he was pretty sure that Jim could barely see past the puffy, reddened lids. Without pausing, he drew his partner directly into the guest bathroom.

“Let’s get these things off you,” he muttered after turning on the shower to warm the water. “I’ll wash them later so at least you’ll have something of your own.”

Jim leaned against the counter for support as he fiddled with the mask to free it from the folds of the t-shirt Blair drew up over his head. “I can do this,” he protested, then started to cough.

“You concentrate on breathing and standing up,” Blair directed, as he popped the button on Jim’s jeans and drew down the fly. “Not like we haven’t seen it all before,” he added, hoping he sounded matter of fact, while he slid Jim’s pants down his legs and off one foot and then the other. His partner must’ve been sleeping nude and had only paused long enough to pull on the minimum of clothing before rushing out of the apartment. “Besides, you can barely see, so the odds of you getting all this crap off your skin is just about nil,” he said. “Hold on a minute, and I’ll help you into the shower.”

He hastily stripped off his own filthy clothing, and then assisted Jim into the large shower stall that
easily accommodated them both. “Lean on the wall,” he directed while he worked shampoo into
Jim’s hair and then rinsed. The water running off their bodies was black. Getting the oily soot out of
their hair and off their skin was going to take some scrubbing. But he was mindful of Jim’s sensitive
skin as he soaped his partner with the mild oatmeal bar that he’d bought without thinking. After so
many years of ensuring the loft with stocked with hypo-allergenic, environmentally friendly supplies,
he’d unconsciously just continued to buy all the same stuff for his new place.

One of Jim’s shoulders, the upper part of his back, and the arm that had been wounded were all very
red and Blair took care to look for any blistering. “You’ve been burned a bit,” he observed. “Looks
okay. Can you tell if it’s worse than it seems?”

“I think it’s okay,” Jim replied through the mask. When Blair tugged lightly on his arm to turn him,
he resisted. “Uh, Chief, I...”

Understanding that their bodies were both enthusiastic about the hands-on contact, Blair snickered.
“Don’t worry about it, tough guy. It’s a normal reaction.” And he thought that he’d be a little
concerned if there’d been no reaction to their proximity, after so many months apart.

“It’s not funny,” Jim protested, but he turned.

“No, I guess it’s not,” Blair agreed. “But we’ll just have to grin and bear it.”

Jim chuckled. “Puns now?” he asked, as he rested his hands on Blair’s shoulders.

“No, not ‘bare it’,;” Blair retorted, but laughed at how bizarre the whole situation was. “Let’s just get
 clean, okay?”

“Want me to wash your hair?”

“No, no, that’s okay,” he demurred, conscious that they were treading a very narrow line, one that he
didn’t want to cross, at least not yet. But then he realized Jim had gone deathly pale and he felt the
tremble through the hands that clenched his shoulders. “Uh, hey, easy, man,” he soothed as he eased
Jim down onto the molded seat in the corner of the shower stall. “Methinks the spirit is willing but
the flesh is weak.”

“Yeah,” Jim huffed and leaned back to rest his head against the wall, closing his eyes against the
stream of water.

Blair hastily finished Jim’s shower, and got him out of the stall. He handed the oxygen mask to Jim,
and then wrapped him in one massive towel before winding another around Jim’s head. After he’d
finished drying him off and coating his burned skin with the soothing aloe and lanolin ointment, Blair
helped Jim into the next room, sitting him in an armchair first, while he swiftly made up the bed.
“The sheets aren’t silk,” he said, “but I think you’ll be comfortable.” Then he helped Jim into the
bed, ensuring that the oxygen line wouldn’t crimp if Jim rolled over in his sleep. “Rest,” he
commanded. “I’ll be back to check on you in a few minutes.”

In the kitchen, he boiled water and set teabags to steep while he hastily finished his own shower.
Scooping up their discarded clothing, he dumped it all in the washer and then went to his room, to
draw on his robe. Back in the kitchen, he put together a tray containing a chilled water bottle, a cup
of tea, a toasted bagel lathered with cream cheese, and the cooling tea bags.

“You still awake?” he whispered when he entered the bedroom.

“Uh huh,” Jim murmured, squinting at him, and wincing at the light now blazing through the
wraparound windows.
“I want you to eat something while I soak your eyelids with these teabags,” Blair said as he set the tray on the bedside table, and then hastily drew the blinds to mute the light. “Just a bagel and cream cheese, but the carbs and protein will be good for you. And I’ve got a bottle of water here, too, ’cause I think you’re probably dehydrated from the heat. And finally, some sugared tea, to counteract the residual effects of shock.”

Jim’s lips twisted into a grin, and he started to push himself up, but Blair interceded to slip more pillows behind his back so he could swallow without choking, but could still be lying flat enough for the teabags to rest on his eyes. He handed Jim half a bagel and applied the teabags. For the next several minutes, Jim slowly munched in silence, while Blair just looked at him and thought again how glad he was that Jim hadn’t been hurt more badly that morning. After Jim had finished the bagel, he removed the teabags and gently dabbed Jim’s eyes to dry them. Then he supported his partner while Jim took a long drink from the bottle of water.

“You want the tea?” he asked.

“Nah,” Jim sighed as he replaced the oxygen mask. “Why don’t you drink it? Keep me company until I fall asleep?”

“Okay,” Blair agreed, settling in the chair and feeling his own stress reaction set in now that he could really relax in the knowledge that Jim would be fine.

Again, silence descended between them, easy and comfortable. After a moment, Jim said sleepily, “I was dreaming, heard you calling me. You sounded so scared, Chief – woke me right up. That’s when I smelled the gas.”

Blair gaped at him, but didn’t say anything, couldn’t. He felt the chill of the mysterious creep up his spine as he remembered his dream, remembered waking himself up, shouting in terror, so afraid something had happened to Jim. God ... Jim had heard him? That just wasn’t possible. What if ... what if Jim hadn’t wakened? Blair’s mouth was bone dry and he felt sick with the thoughts of what might have been.

Oblivious to his reaction, Jim went on, “When the flames were surrounding us and the smoke was so thick I couldn’t see, there were a few minutes when I wasn’t sure if ....” He broke off and cleared his throat. “I was real glad to hear your voice, Chief. Wasn’t sure you’d be there ... should have known better.” He paused and shifted onto his side, his voice increasingly drowsy as he said, “You’re always there when I need you.”

Between one breath and the next, he was snoring softly. Deeply moved by Jim’s admission of fear and his simple expression of gratitude, still reeling from what Jim had said about being awakened by his shouts, Blair took a shaky breath and then pressed his lips together to stop their trembling. His throat too thick to speak, he could only nod and, swiping at his eyes, sit back to keep watch. Jim was safe but his breathing was still rough, and he might still have skin reactions to the crap he’d been exposed to that morning.

The angry voices in his head, the hurtful memories, were stilled – at least for the moment – if not assuaged. In awed silence, he thought about his dream, about what it might mean. Gazing at Jim, he also pondered the nature of unconditional love and what it meant for how he felt about Jim, and their future.

Time drifted past unnoticed, while Blair tried to wrap his head around what he could never begin to explain. All he could be sure of was that the Universe wasn’t yet finished with either of them, and it seemed that they were bound together in ways that transcended what passed for ‘normal’. But, then, he’d known that, hadn’t he, ever since he’d found himself in a blue jungle with a jaguar and a wolf,
and had turned away from the light to respond to Jim’s call. They’d never spoken of it beyond those few minutes in the hospital and, after a while, it had all just seemed surreal, more dream than reality. But it had been real. And something similar had just happened again. If Jim hadn’t wakened, hadn’t smelled the gas ... Blair shivered and rubbed his arms.

Jim shifted in his sleep and stillled sharply, his face creasing in pain and he hissed as he jerked into wakefulness.

“What?” Blair asked, immediately on his feet and at Jim’s side.

“My skin’s on fire,” Jim rasped. “My shoulder and back.”

“Okay, okay, I understand,” Blair soothed as he lightly gripped Jim’s uninjured arm. “Let’s get your pain dial sorted out. I’ll bet it’s off the charts. C’mom, you can do this; you know you can.”

Jim nodded and closed his still puffy eyes. After a moment, the tension eased from his body and he sighed deeply. “That’s better,” he murmured.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t fix the problem. Roll over and let me put on more lotion to cool the heat and help your skin heal.”

Jim took a breath, as if gathering himself for the effort and, careful of the oxygen mask, he shifted onto his stomach. Blair drew down the covers, warmed some of the lotion in his hands, and then very gently stroked his hands over Jim’s burned shoulder and upper back. After months of being apart, the intimacy, first with the shower and now touching Jim’s skin, was playing hell with Blair’s libido but there wasn’t much he could do but ignore it as best he could.

“Mmm,” Jim hummed and blew a long breath of contentment. “Feels good.”

“Go back to sleep if you can,” Blair urged quietly as he drew the sheet and blanket back up over Jim’s shoulders. He checked to ensure the oxygen line wasn’t impeded and, when Jim began to snore again, he padded out of the room.

The washing machine had stopped, and he drew out their clothing. Jim’s undershirt was scorched and no amount of washing would make it any better. After tossing the rest of their clothing into the dryer, Blair put the ruined shirt in the garbage and then went to his room, to sort through his clothing for stuff he knew would fit his partner.

“What’s mine is yours,” he said mockingly to himself. Holding pairs of rolled up socks in his hands, he sank down on the edge of his bed. Just last night, he’d decided that he’d had enough, that Jim would have to work to get him back. Now, Jim was sleeping just down the hall. Circumstances were pushing them back together, but none of the underlying issues had yet been resolved. Blair literally ached to be able to trust to the Universe or karma or whatever was going on, but this was just too important. They just couldn’t afford to screw this up, not again. It was too hard, too heart-breaking, to keep messing up, and he didn’t think he had it in him to ... to what? Give everything he was to Jim again, and have it tossed back in his face? To have his heart broken, his life left in tatters, not knowing where he stood or what to do, or even where to go next?

He flopped back on the bed and inhaled deeply to calm the fear quivering inside.

They had to get it right.

And if they couldn’t, he had to find the strength to walk away, for good this time. “And not just for myself,” he whispered to the ceiling before scrubbing his hands over his face. If Jim were truly happy in their relationship, he would not have done what he did. Blair stumbled over that thought,
and floundered, because ... because he didn’t have the power to make Jim happy, no matter how hard he tried.

The problem was, he didn’t know if Jim himself knew what he needed, whether that was to be happy or to love either unconditionally or for a lifetime.

Elements of his dream seeped into his mind, the spirit animals sounding as if they were in pain. Was that just because of the threat to Jim’s life that had been imminent in the moments before dawn, or was their suffering caused by the rift between the two of them? Incacha, with his dying breath and with his bloody fist, passing along the way of the shaman – was that to remind him of his role, and that it was one he couldn’t blithely walk away from?

“Am I the problem? Am I supposed to be doing something I’m not, or am I doing something I’m not supposed to be doing?” He didn’t know, and didn’t know how he could ever find answers to those questions.

Heaving a sigh, he pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed. “Maybe I’m over-thinking this,” he muttered and rubbed his forehead, as if that might alleviate the headache behind his eyes. “I can’t be responsible for Jim or his choices. I can only be responsible for mine.”

Rising, he scooped up the clothing he’d chosen for Jim. On his way to check on his partner, he stopped in the kitchen, to call their therapist and make another appointment. After hanging up, he blew a long, slow breath, and then he harried at his lip and wished he could see into the future, and know how it was all going to turn out. Blair didn’t know if they’d be able to get back together, because he still didn’t understand why Jim had betrayed him in such a fundamental way; nor was he sure that even Jim fully understood why he’d done what he’d done. All Blair knew was that they had to work through it, had to figure out what had gone wrong and if it could be fixed.

Frowning, he bowed his head and, leaning back against the counter, he thought about that, about what ‘fixed’ meant. Did it mean getting back together as lovers in a committed relationship? Or did it mean healing their friendship enough that they could continue to work together? Remnants of his dream haunted him and, when he thought of Jim lying in the bed down the hall, he felt as if the Universe was mocking him – maybe both of them.

Shrugging off his irritation with his desire to know the unknowable, he took the clothing to the spare room and laid it on the dresser. Studying his partner, he was glad that Jim’s breathing had eased considerably and the lines of strain had smoothed from his face; his eyes were still a little puffy, but the worst of the swelling and redness was gone. Jim’s arm and shoulder were still pink but when Blair held his hand close to the skin, he could readily feel that the angry heat of the burns had dissipated.

Nodding to himself, the unsettled feeling he’d had since he’d realized he and Jim had somehow been connected that morning eased. He didn’t understand it, and wasn’t sure he either wanted or really needed to understand, any more than he understood how Jim had harnessed their spirit guides to bring him back from the dead. It was enough to know their guides were still there, watching out for them ... and hadn’t given up on them.

At least, not yet.

**

Blair had just pulled the casserole from the oven, and was finishing the salad, when the intercom from the lobby buzzed, its sound loud in the silence of the apartment. By the time he’d gone into the hall to answer it, he could hear Jim moving in the spare room.
“Yes?” he said into the grille on the wall.

“It’s Simon.”

“C’mon up,” Blair replied in welcome, and pushed the button to release the glass door in the lobby, five stories below.

Sleepily rubbing his head and unconsciously further disarraying hair that was spiked in all directions, Jim wandered out of the guest room. He was wearing the sweatpants Blair had left on the dresser, and that was all.

“I went out earlier to get you a razor, tooth brush and some other supplies,” Blair told him, gesturing toward the bathroom. “You seem to be breathing okay now. How’s the burn?”

“Fine,” Jim replied, twisting to examine his shoulder and upper back. “A bit tender, that’s all.”

“Good,” Blair observed, looking everywhere but at his partner. “Uh, dinner’s almost ready, and Simon’s on his way up.”

“Simon?”

“Yeah, he called earlier, said they’d found the probable cause of the explosions.”

“Gas leak?”

Blair shrugged. “Looks like it.”

Jim looked toward the door, and then moved to open it before Simon could knock.

Banks gave him a long-suffering look, and then his brow arched when he took in Jim’s state of undress. “Glad to see you’re feeling better,” he said dryly, shifting his questioning expression to Blair.

“Jim just woke up,” Blair supplied, and waved Simon further into the apartment. “C’mon in. I’ll get you a beer. Dinner’s just about ready.” Blair turned away without waiting for either man to say anything more.

“Some of us put some clothing together for you,” he heard their boss say behind him, and belatedly realized that was what was in the oversized bag Simon was carrying. “Some shirts, pants, a jacket, a pair of sneakers ... you know, to tide you over until you can do some shopping.”

“That’s great, Simon, thanks,” Jim replied.

“Yeah, well, maybe you can put something on before we eat,” Simon suggested.

Turning into the kitchen, Blair didn’t hear Jim’s response. He pulled three bottles of beer from the refrigerator, and handed Simon one when he came into the room.

“Dinner smells good,” Simon said with a smile as he uncapped the bottle. “Thanks for inviting me over.” He paused and glanced back toward the hallway. Lowering his voice, he asked, “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

Giving him a crooked smile, Blair nodded. “Yeah, for now. Long term?” He shrugged. “After a week, I’ll start charging him rent,” he added, remembering Abby’s offer to him.

Simon gave him a skeptical look but didn’t push it. Blair knew Jim could hear every word, so he
wasn’t inclined to discuss it any further, either, at least not before he and Jim had a chance to talk.

Jim was shaved and had put on a sweatshirt when he joined them a few minutes later and, though his eyes were still a little reddened and puffy, he looked a thousand times better than he had that morning. Blair handed him a beer and finished putting the food on the table.

“So it was a gas leak?” Jim asked, with an appreciative sniff of the casserole before he picked up his fork.

“Yes,” Simon affirmed. “That’s an old part of the city, overdue for infrastructure maintenance. Lucky more people weren’t killed.”

“How many?” Blair asked, remembering the distraught woman he’d seen.

“Only one man, a vagrant,” Simon sighed as he buttered a roll. “I guess he and a few others were camping out in the basement, and he was still sleeping off the binge from last night. The others had gone up to the street to start hustling, so they got off with fairly minor injuries when the building behind them went up like a bomb had gone off. The people who live in the one occupied apartment in that building are out of town.” He glanced at Jim. “People in your building were damn lucky you woke up before the explosions, smelled the gas and got them all out of there.”

Jim nodded and frowned as he chewed. “Had a dream, that Sandburg was calling me,” he relayed. “Weird. Even after I woke up, I could’ve sworn I heard your voice, Chief.”

Head down, Blair debated mentioning his own dream and, with a sigh, decided he probably should. In the past, when one or the other of them hadn’t been straightforward about the mystical stuff, they usually ended up in trouble. He gave Simon a look of apology before turning to Jim. “You probably did hear me. I woke up about ten minutes before the first explosion, calling for you. I, uh, I had a dream about the jag and the wolf – our spirit animals,” he explained to Simon, who grimaced uncomfortably. “In the dream, I couldn’t find you,” he went on to Jim. “And ... and I felt you were in danger.”

Jim’s face closed up, just like it always did when he was confronted with anything that wasn’t ‘concrete’ or ‘real’. “Huh,” he grunted, his gaze dropping away.

Simon frowned at Jim and then shifted his attention to Blair. “So you think these spirit animals warned you? And, what? Enabled Jim to hear you calling? Gave you a shared dream or something?”

Blair nodded, buying time to ensure the annoyance he felt toward Jim wouldn’t bleed into his voice. “I think so. Not sure how else to explain what happened.”

“Too bad they didn’t warn us in time to fix the damned leak before everything blew up,” Jim grumbled.

“Yeah,” Blair murmured. “Too bad you lost just about everything. I’m sorry. I know how much that can hurt.”

Jim sighed and put his fork down to take a sip of beer. “No, I’m sorry. Simon’s right. All of us in that building were lucky. If the jag and the wolf – and you – had anything to do with that, I’m grateful. As for the loft?” he shrugged, and sighed again. “Maybe losing it isn’t such a bad thing. There was nothing there that still mattered a lot to me. Maybe it’s good to have a clean break with the past, a chance to start fresh.”

“Not like insurance won’t cover everything you lost,” Simon added sardonically.
Jim grinned and tipped his beer bottle toward him in a salute.

They finished eating and, not long after, Simon took his leave with the understanding that both of them would be reporting as usual in the morning. Jim helped Blair clear the table and followed him into the kitchen. Blair was rinsing the dishes and cutlery in the sink before loading them into the dishwasher when he felt Jim come up close behind him and caress his back.

“Don’t,” he said, and tried not to stiffen or twist away as if it mattered, or had sent shivers rippling over his whole treacherous body in response.

The touch disappeared but Jim didn’t move away. “Just a few hours ago, you were naked in the shower with me. And now you don’t want me to touch you?”

Blair closed his eyes and, his hands lightly gripping the edge of the sink, he blew a long breath. “That was different. You were more than half blind and having trouble breathing. We had to get that shit off your body as quickly as possible. It wasn’t about seduction, and you know it.”

“Then why am I here? Why did you offer to let me stay here?”

“Because you’re my partner ... and we used to be best friends. I guess I hope we can be again, maybe, someday.”

“Just friends, Chief?” Jim asked, his tone low and suggestive.

“Damn it!” Blair exclaimed and slapped the counter as he pushed back and twisted away to face Jim with a few feet of space between them. “What do you want from me? I’m doing my best here, man. And it’s a whole hell of a lot more than ....”

He stopped himself and took a steadying breath. Jim was looking mutinous and he really didn’t want to fight. Holding his hands up, he said more calmly, “Look, I know you’re ... you’re trying to make things better. I know that. And so am I; that’s why I suggested the joint counseling. But I’m not there yet, okay? I don’t know if I ever will be. I don’t know if I can trust you to not do it again.”

Jim’s jaw clenched and he looked away, but the tension eased from his shoulders. “Yeah, okay,” he sighed hoarsely, and ran a hand over his head to massage the back of his neck. “I just ... I just want things to be the way they were.” Once again, his gaze met Blair’s, and he looked so earnest, so vulnerable, that Blair’s heart ached. “I know I screwed up, big time. I just don’t know what else I can do to make things better.”

Blair broke eye contact and went back to rinsing plates and loading the dishwasher. “I made us another appointment with the therapist.” Behind him, Jim put the leftover salad and casserole into the fridge. Turning, Blair said, “You want to get me another beer while you’re there?”

Taking the bottle Jim handed him, he twisted off the cap and led the way into the living room. Too restless to sit, he stood for a moment, looking out over the bay. “I think ... I think we have to get to the reason you felt you needed to be with those women,” he murmured.

“Then I don’t know what you want from me. I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”
Blair smiled sadly. Turning from the window, he sank onto the sofa. “That’s why we’re in counseling, man. To figure it out. But ... but I think it might have something to do with love. What love means to you. What you need that maybe I wasn’t giving you.”

Jim’s belligerence died, leaving sorrow etched on his face. “You gave me everything,” he said. “I know that. Nobody has ever loved me the way you do. I didn’t ... I didn’t know anyone could love like that. I don’t know if I can. But I want to, Chief. Honest to God, I want to.”

Blair’s throat thickened, and he felt heat prick the back of his eyes. “That’s a good place to start,” he offered. “We need to give ourselves time, Jim.” And then he huffed a mirthless laugh. “Honestly, when I caught you with Abby, I would have never thought I’d still be working with you – let alone sharing an apartment with you – ever again. Given how furious I was that day, we’ve already come a long – very long – way.”

“I guess we have,” Jim agreed with a shadow of an uncertain smile. “So ... if we make it through the next week, how much is the rent and what are the house rules?”

Looking away, his gaze wandering the room, Blair thought about it. “We’ll split the rent on the place and decide if we want to renew the lease in four months or not. Rules? Simple. You don’t bring any lovers home.”

Jim choked on the beer he was swallowing, and coughed to clear his throat. “Don’t worry,” he rasped. “I don’t have any lovers to bring home. Don’t want anyone else – only you.”

“I hear that,” Blair breathed but made no other comment and kept his eyes focused on the news on the television screen. Or tried to. His mind replayed Jim’s words over and over, and reminded him of what Jim’s skin felt like, and what it felt like to be touched by him. God help him, he wanted so badly to believe Jim was telling him the truth.

Jim snorted, but he didn’t pursue the conversation, either. With a dissatisfied grimace, he settled back in the chair, only to wince and hiss softly.

Blair was on his feet before he realized he was moving. “Damn, I forgot. We should’ve put some more of that ointment on your back and arm when you got up.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m fine,” Jim growled, but Blair was already on his way out of the room, heading down the hall to Jim’s room where he’d left the tube on the bedside table. *Jim’s room,* he thought ruefully, and shook his head at how he’d already adapted to the idea of sharing a place with Jim again. Maybe it was nuts. Maybe this was just a big mistake ... but maybe, just maybe, there was still hope for them.

He turned to find Jim had followed on his heels and was leaning on the door frame. So he waved his partner inside. “Take off your shirt and let me see how your skin is doing,” Blair directed, determined to remain impersonal.

“You say the nicest things,” Jim drawled, but his eyes were hard, and Blair knew he was angry about his touch being rejected earlier, about his avowal of attraction being ignored.

“Don’t push me, Jim,” Blair warned. “I’m doing the best I can here, okay? Don’t push for more than I’m ready to give.”

Jim’s eyes softened and he dipped his head. With a slight nod, he came into the room and pulled off the sweatshirt, turning so that Blair could easily see and reach his shoulder and upper back. The skin was still the irritated pink of a bad burn, but there wasn’t any blistering, and Blair figured the danger
“Looks okay,” he murmured as he warmed the lotion in his hands and then with a deft, gentle touch, smoothed it over Jim’s skin. God, he ached with the knowledge that he dare not do more, despite how much he yearned to love and be loved by Jim; he despaired of the arousal he felt just touching Jim’s skin but his body didn’t care about the problems between them and only knew what it wanted.

“I’m sorry,” Jim murmured, not facing him, and Blair wondered uncomfortably if his partner smelled the pheromones he had to be exuding. “I know it’s all my fault. And I know ... I’m lucky you still ... that you’re giving me a chance to work it out.” When Blair didn’t say anything, he asked, “When’s our next appointment?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at three,” Blair told him.


Blair gave him a crooked smile. “She said she’d kept the slot open just in case we decided to keep working with her. She said that enough time had been wasted already and it was time we started talking about things that matter.”

“She’s pushy, isn’t she?” Jim muttered, sounding aggrieved, as he pulled his shirt back on.

Blair laughed. “Yeah, yeah, she is. I’m kinda surprised you’re still seeing her actually.”

Hands on his hips, Jim stood with his head bowed for a beat, and then looked up into Blair’s eyes. “I came close to telling her to shove it and quitting more times than you’d want to know. But I know I’m out of chances, that I’ve blown it one time too many, and if I don’t fix things, make things right – make whatever’s wrong with me right – I’ll lose you, for good.”

Frowning, Blair echoed, “Whatever’s wrong with you? Man, maybe there’s nothing wrong with you. Maybe, maybe we ... maybe it just wasn’t right for you.”

“Or maybe it’s the best thing that ever happened to me and I just didn’t know how to hold on; maybe I got scared,” Jim replied, sounding confused and not a little lost.

“Well, I guess that’s what we’re going to find out,” Blair said, stepping back before he gave in to his urge to take Jim into his arms. “We’ll figure it out, Jim. Whether that means we’ll get back together? I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. But we will figure out where it all went wrong.”

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“I’m glad the two of you decided to continue working with me,” Dr. Meadows said as she ushered them past her and into her inner office.

Remembering what had occurred there only days before, Blair couldn’t help feeling wary and defensive, but he was determined to do his best to at least help Jim and himself figure out what had gone wrong, even if it meant they’d never get back together, at least not the way they’d been. Working together was going okay; a bit stiff, sometimes, but not bad. After having worked together for four years before they’d become lovers, the old paths of friendship were well worn and relatively easy to find through the thicket of their failed love affair. It helped immeasurably that they both still honestly cared about one another. He could believe that, at least; he no longer really doubted that Jim cared about him. And he knew Jim needed him, or was convinced he did, when it came to managing his senses.

“So, what’s happened since you were here last?” she asked. “Have you had the opportunity to talk
much about your relationship?"

Blair looked to Jim to explain what had happened.

"The day after we were here, the building I lived in blew up – broken gas line – and Blair offered me his spare room," Jim said, keeping it all admirably brief and to the point.

Meadows blinked at him and then looked at Blair. "Why did you do that?"

With a small shrug, Blair replied, "Well, Jim lost everything he’s got, and he took me in once when I’d lost everything – or just about – when my place blew up. We’re partners and doing our best to remember we’re friends, even if we aren’t lovers anymore."

"Is that all?"

"Jim’s got a lot of sensitivities. I ... he needed a place that was safe, especially after getting out of the hospital. He’d inhaled a lot of smoke and had some minor burns."

"And ... any other reason?"

Blair felt his heart pounding in his chest, and his mouth was dry. He swallowed and bit his lip. Finally, with a deep breath to steady his voice, he admitted, "And I ... I hope that ... I hope we can find a way to make it work."

She nodded and smiled at him, and then turned to Jim. "And why did you accept his offer? Must be difficult to be relegated to the spare room when you’d like to be in the master bedroom."

Jim shifted in his chair and then clasped his hands together, as if determined to appear at ease, and failing miserably. "Uh, well, it’s a move in the right direction. And Blair’s right – he understands my sensitivities better than anyone else."

"So, you’re back to working together and living under the same roof," she observed, and jotted a note onto the page in front of her, and Blair wondered if she’d ever worked with another couple as interdependent and involved, and yet as screwed up, as they were. She put the pen down and looked at them for a moment. "Why didn’t it work out? What was missing that Jim got involved with others?"

When Jim didn’t say anything, just studied his hands, Blair offered softly, "Jim’s your typical alpha male, and I think he’s basically heterosexual. I’m not sure he was ever comfortable being my lover. And, I think Jim has trouble trusting love, trouble believing in it.” He hesitated, but decided he might as well get it all out on the table. “As if that’s not enough problems, I think Jim believes he needs me and ... yeah, I think, like that old Meatloaf song, he loves me in his own way, but I’m not sure, at least not now, that he wants me. Two out of three ain’t bad, I guess, but it’s ... it’s just not enough for, well, for marriage."

Jim gave a strangled laugh. When Blair and Meadows looked at him in surprise, he flushed. "Two out of three," he rasped, sounding strained and sad, and he shook his head slowly. Flicking a look at Blair and then staring hard at the floor, he went on, "I know you love me, and I know you want me. But you’ve never, ever, needed me the way I need you."

“Oh, man,” Blair sighed, not knowing what to say – or what Jim needed to hear. But he felt the chill of understanding shiver through his being. Despite everything, Jim still didn’t truly believe that he’d always come first, that anyone would always love him, or never leave him to pursue something they wanted or needed more than him. Was that all it had been? A pre-emptive strike? To show the world that Jim didn’t need anyone before Blair left him high and dry and hurting more than anyone could
bear? Blair’s throat thickened and he had to fist his hands, and draw a shuddering breath, to stave off the urge to weep or rage at the futility of it all. The ... shame of it and sorrow, that no one in his life had ever loved Jim the way he so deserved and needed to be loved.

Silence fell like a pall over the office, and then Meadows broke it with a gentle tone of inquiry. “The two of you lived and worked together for four years without becoming lovers. What changed? What took the two of you across that line?”

Jim sniffed and scrubbed at his face, shook his head, and Blair knew his partner needed time to get himself together. “I was at the Academy, taking the courses I needed in self defense and weapons certification. The last day, when we knew I’d made it and would be graduating with the group the next week, I came home and Jim had ... well, he’d planned a celebration. Candles, good wine, a home-cooked dinner that he knew I’d love.” Blair paused, remembering, and his heart swelled until he thought it might burst with how much it had all meant to him, and how much he’d since lost.

“He, uh, he told me that he’d known for years how I’d felt about him, and that worried me, because I’d tried so hard to not push, to never even hint at what ... well,” he glanced at Jim and then at Meadows, “you can’t hide anything from a sentinel. Jim ... Jim can smell pheromones. He knows when someone is aroused.” Taking a breath, he swallowed hard, and wished Jim would take over but his partner was now sitting with his face turned away, staring out the window. “I thought he was working up to telling me that ... that the time had come for me to move out. But, but, instead, he told me he loved me, too. And wanted me. Wanted to make love to me.” Blair stumbled to a stop, overcome and overwhelmed with sharing something so private, so immense, with a stranger.

“How did you think he chose that time to tell you?” Meadows probed carefully.

“I thought it might be because we were finally going to be equals. I was going to be his official partner. I thought it was because he wanted what I did: to be partners in everything. But ... but now I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Jim?” she prompted.

“Equals? Not hardly,” Jim murmured then, sounding far away though it was clear he’d been listening. He continued in a low, constrained voice, “I finally read his dissertation. I read it that week, his last week at the Academy, and I thought about it, about everything he’d given me, everything he’d done for me and sacrificed for me. And I knew ... I knew what he wanted. I thought ... I thought ...” He turned to Meadows, and then to Blair. “I love you. I do. And I knew then that there’d never be anyone in my life who loved me the way you love me. I wanted to ... you’d earned ... you deserved to have what I knew you wanted. You deserved so much more but...”

Appalled, Blair stared into Jim’s eyes, and saw the pain and sorrow pooling there. As Jim’s words sank in, he could feel his heart shrivel and break, and he wished he could just disappear, just.... Jim had never wanted him, not really. It had been about evening the score, about some kind of twisted reward or some damned thing.

“Love isn’t about keeping score,” he whispered, broken, not sure if even Jim had heard him. Not really sure if he’d spoken. Sick to his soul, he tore his gaze from Jim’s and dropped his head to stare blindly at his fisted hands. Tears welled in his eyes, and one trickled slowly down his cheek but he didn’t have the strength or will to move, to brush it away. Jim ... Jim had sacrificed his body in a misguided effort to be fair. Oh God. Oh God. There was no hope of reconciliation; there never had been. He couldn’t even remember what they’d had now without a kind of horror.

Distantly, he heard Meadows ask why Jim had decided to take other lovers. Desperate to cling onto something, anything, to keep from shattering into pieces, Blair forced himself to listen.
“There’d always been talk about me and Sandburg, but it hadn’t mattered before, because it wasn’t true. But after we started sleeping together, it was true. Some of it wasn’t too bad, just that it was a damned shame because we should have kids. Some of it was ... vicious. Dangerous. All I could think of was ‘don’t ask, don’t tell,’ and that if anyone really found out, really knew, we wouldn’t be able to stay partners. And I wondered about kids, about neither of us having any....”

Jim’s voice was rough, hard to listen to, but he had to listen, had to hear it all now, like a mortal wound being cauterized, to maybe burn it all away and leave him numb and unfeeling and maybe make the pain stop.

“The women ... I knew they were attracted to me. And I knew neither of them would be able to keep it to themselves, so that would kill the rumors, at least for a while.” Jim heaved a heavy sigh. “And I guess ... I guess I needed to know, needed to test whether....”

Wishing he was dead, that Jim had never brought him back from the jungle, never called him back from going into the light, Blair pushed himself to his feet. “I’m sorry. I can’t ... I can’t listen any more. I ... I have to go.”

Rising and reaching out to him, Jim pleaded, “Chief, please, you need to hear it all.”

“I can’t!” he shouted, backing a step away, desperate now to escape, to get out of the office, out of the building, out into the fresh air. Someplace else. Any place else. But he felt as if he was frozen to the spot, trembling and panting for breath, but unable to move another step. Unable to think. He needed to think but all he could think about was that Jim had forced himself – God, he couldn’t think about it or he’d throw up.

“I love you,” Jim husked. “You have to believe me.”

Unable to look at him, Blair held up a hand to make him stop. “I know,” he whispered, tears blinding his eyes. “Apparently, too much.”

“No,” Jim protested, his voice cracking. “You don’t understand.”

In agony, Blair lifted his eyes to meet Jim’s gaze, and he saw desperation and fear. Jim was afraid of him. Afraid he’d abandon him. That’s what it had been about. All this time, he’d thought, hoped ... but it had all been about Jim’s fear, after all. “Don’t I?” he challenged, and turned away, away from the hurt and the fear. He had no strength to bear it now. No strength left to give.

“I’m not sure you do understand,” Meadows interjected. “I’m not sure either of you understands what love means to the other. Whether you talk about that here or between yourselves, I urge you not to give up, not to end this without that discussion.”

Blair stared at her, wondering what it could possibly matter. “Not now,” he said, feeling battered and exhausted. “I can’t talk about anything else right now.”

He could read compassion in her face, and he tried to smile because, really, it was better to know, wasn’t it? Better to face facts and deal with them, come to grips with reality and ... and figure out what came next? But it was just too hard. It all just hurt too much.

“C’mon, Chief. I’m going to take you home,” Jim cajoled with soft gentleness, as if he was talking to someone not quite with it, someone who was on the edge, getting ready to jump, and Blair supposed that probably wasn’t far from the truth. He flinched at Jim’s touch on his arm, but he nodded and turned toward the door.

Behind him, he heard Jim assure her, “We’ll have that talk, just as soon as he can hear me.” What
talk? he wondered, feeling lost, dislocated from the world around him. Oh, yeah. About love. What a joke that was, and the joke was on him.

Somehow, he got to the truck and, without thinking, he secured his seatbelt. Jim was there, beside him, but thank God, he wasn’t saying anything. Blair needed silence and he wanted to be alone. But he didn’t have the capacity to think or move; he felt as if he was caught like a bee in amber, stuck in the moment of eternal death.

When they got home, he continued down the hall to his room, and he closed the door. Climbing onto the bed, he curled onto his side and stared sightlessly out the window. He wanted to weep, but Jim would hear him, and he knew Jim was in pain, too.

Closing his eyes, he told himself he could deal, that he had no choice. No matter how much it hurt, at least they’d gotten to the truth. It wasn’t Jim’s fault if he didn’t feel the same things, the same way. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. He thought about the wolf and the jag, about how they’d warned him that Jim was in danger just the day before, letting him know that, no matter what, Jim still needed him. Might always need him. And wasn’t that what love was about, real love? About giving without expectation? About caring unconditionally?

He did love Jim unconditionally. Always had; always would. They’d recovered enough of their friendship since that fateful afternoon that there was no way he’d abandon Jim, not now. They’d be partners as long as Jim needed him.

But it was hard. So very hard. And it hurt. Hurt worse than anything he’d ever known before.

One breath at a time, Blair focused on just breathing and blocking out everything else. Time passed, and the light in the room faded into dusk. Gradually, the pain began to feel more distant, sealed under a numbness, the closest he could get to acceptance. But it was enough for now; enough to imagine being able to get off the bed and leave the room. Enough to pretend it was mostly okay. Enough to remember that he wasn’t the only man in the apartment who was hurting pretty bad. Blair was just beginning to think he should go check on Jim when there was a soft rap on his door.

“Chief? You okay? I, uh, I made you some tea. And there’s soup and sandwiches, if you’re hungry.”

Blair heard the uncertainty in Jim’s voice, the strained, lost notes that signaled his partner was feeling helpless and scared, but didn’t want to admit it. So he was trying to help in ways that he could, concrete ways, like making warm comfort food full of carbs. He’d probably loaded the tea with sugar.

A sad smile flitted across Blair’s face and his heart ached. They knew each other so well, fit together so well, were family in so very many ways, but it was never going to be the way Blair had wished with all his heart and soul, never going to be ... he forced himself to stop thinking about it, to stop going in endless, useless circles that led nowhere except to heartache.

“I’m ... okay,” he replied, not bothering to raise his voice, knowing Jim could hear him. Rolling onto his back and forcing himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, he added, “Tea sounds good. I’ll be right out. Thanks.”

He heard Jim’s slow retreat back down the hall, and pushed himself to his feet. With a heavy sigh, he raked back his hair and squared his shoulders. It wasn’t Jim’s fault that Jim didn’t want him in a physical, sexual way. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. It was just the way it was. Jim had tried, really tried, in order to please him, and that had to mean a lot, right? Nodding to himself, telling himself to just move, he left his room and went to the kitchen, where Jim handed him a steaming cup of tea.
“Thanks, man,” he murmured, but couldn’t bring himself to make eye contact before he turned away and walked into the living room to look out at the darkening harbor.

“Chief, we need to talk,” Jim said, standing close behind him, but not touching.

“Talk?” he echoed, and tried to get his sluggish mind into gear. Jim wanted to talk. Sure, fine, he could do that. “Okay,” he agreed, and slid past Jim, again without looking at him, to sit on the sofa and sip the hot tea. There was something he had to say ... what? Oh, yeah. “Jim, you don’t need to worry, man. I’ll keep working with you. It’ll be ... fine.”

Jim perched on the edge of the nearest chair, his hands clasped between his knees, leaning forward, as if trying to get as close as he could without getting directly into Blair’s space. Blair could see Jim out of the corner of his eye as he took another sip and swallowed. Jim’s face had softened, and he looked as if he might cry, an expression Blair had never seen before, and it unsettled him.

Uncomfortable with the silence, needing to just get past this place, this emptiness, Blair tried to think of something to talk about, but then Jim’s low voice drew his attention.

“Why? How can you ... I can’t see how .... Damn it, Blair. I don’t understand how you can keep forgiving me.”

His gaze drifting around the room, lighting anywhere but on Jim’s face, Blair gave a small shrug. He was too tired, too numb, and the hurt was too close, just under the surface, to offer anything but the simple, unvarnished truth. “I love you,” he said, and felt his voice nearly crack. Clearing his throat, he explained, “I know you don’t understand that, because love hasn’t been good to you, so you don’t trust it. But ...” He lost his train of thought, and frowned with his effort to concentrate. “Naomi had her faults, and she wasn’t ever able herself to make any kind of commitment to love. But she knows what it is and between her and her friends, I grew up in loving environments. Where people accepted one another, out of compassion, without judging. I was taught that we can’t ever judge the choices other people make or condemn them, because we don’t know what the world looks like through their eyes, or what choices they feel they have or don’t have.” He stopped and gulped more tea to moisten his bone dry mouth. “I ... I love you, Jim. You’re my best friend. I know your life has been hard, very hard, but you’ve always done the best you can.”

He sighed, but knew he had to say more. Had to offer absolution, even though he didn’t think any was required. Not anymore. Jim had tried to love him, tried to give him what he so dearly wanted and needed, but it was too hard. You can’t fault a guy for trying, especially when trying was so against his nature. “I know you’ve been aware of how I feel about you for a very long time. But we worked around it okay. Or, at least, I thought it was okay. But maybe that was at the root of some of the strain that kept growing between us. I can see where it would make you uncomfortable and wear on you. And I’m really, really sorry that you felt you had to ... to be something you’re not, that you felt you had to give me .... I’m just sorry I didn’t realize or I wouldn’t have ever .... But I understand now, I really do. And it’s okay.”

He sagged back against the sofa. “After the diss mess, I was so scared of losing everything, especially your friendship. And I was so glad that we seemed to get past the worst of it. I don’t want to lose your friendship, Jim. I ... when I heard you with Abby, I was hurt and furious and just wanted to run. But we got past that, too. With patience and effort on both sides. We can work together. But I don’t think, I don’t think we can keep living together. Not that you have to go this minute. I know you need to find a place and everything. But after ... and when you know how I feel, I just, I just don’t think it would be a good idea to live together, like we used to.”

“Blair, I need you to really listen to me. Can you do that?” Jim asked, and that lost note was back in
his voice, under a strain of raw determination and something that sounded like desperation.

Studying the mug clasped between his hands, Blair nodded.

“You’re right that I don’t know how to love the way you do, and that I’ve never trusted love, but I’m trying to learn, and I think I am learning, from you,” Jim began. “And you’re right that I took us down this path for the wrong reasons, because I wanted to give you something, something worthy of all you’ve given me, something I knew you wanted. But ... it wasn’t hard, Chief. At first, I was surprised how much I enjoyed being with you, but then I just ... it felt so right. Nobody has ever loved me the way you do, loved me completely, with your heart and soul and mind and body.”

Jim paused at that, and shook his head, as if he was in awe of the way Blair knew how to love. “But I was scared, too, that people would find out. Not because I was ashamed of you, of loving you or being loved by you – that was never it. I was scared about what it would mean for us at work. I need you as my partner, more than I think you realize. You think I’ve got it all together now but that’s only because you’re with me, and that ... that just makes it all easy somehow. I don’t understand it and I guess I never will, but you make everything in my life easier, better; not just the senses, everything.”

Blair felt the burn at the back of his eyes, and he didn’t think he could take much more. “It’s okay,” he whispered. “You don’t have to explain.”

“Yes, I do,” Jim insisted. “Because you don’t understand. Okay, so, with all the talk downtown, and, well, I know ... I know you’d never ... but I couldn’t stop thinking that you don’t need me, and you gave up too much. I hate that. Hate what I hear people saying about you; hate what you have to put up with. Hate that I’m too big a coward to make things right.”

“You’re not a coward,” Blair argued, but wanly. He briefly closed his eyes and tried to find his center, tried to find his inner strength. “I don’t want everyone knowing, either. That was the whole point. You’d be in too much danger if it was common knowledge.”

Jim bit his lip and shook his head, but he made a gesture as if to push all that away. “I don’t know what I’d do if you ever left me. I felt – feel – too vulnerable. Every which way I looked, all I could see were threats. And I had to do something, to ... to resolve at least some of them. And, and, yeah, maybe to find out for myself if I was as happy with you as I thought I was.”

Blair frowned at that. Jim had been happy? He hadn’t cheated because he was unhappy, but only because he’d been scared? For the first time since the session with Meadows, he looked right at Jim, and wondered what the hell the man was trying to tell him.

Jim leaned back in his chair and scrubbed his face as if that would help him order his thoughts or wipe away what he didn’t want to see. Staring up at the ceiling, he said, “I don’t know why you’d ever believe another word I say. I’ve skirted around this whole thing, made one excuse after another, because if I just told you the simple, honest to God truth, I knew you wouldn’t listen.”

“Jim ...”

“No, no, I know you. If I told you that I was afraid for you, because of what I heard people saying, and suffocating on the guilt I feel because ... because I’ve never set the record straight, or that, yeah, I was thinking about kids, only not mine, yours, because you should have kids. You’d be a great father. If I just came out and told you that I think I’m bad for you, that ... that you really should move on, you’d wave it all away, because you have always, always put me first. And, much as I hate to admit it, a part of me wanted to know if I could ever go back to what my life was, go back to being with women, because all my life, until I met you, I’d been told that ... that was the right way of
Jim shifted to again sit on the edge of the chair. “You taught me that the person’s sex doesn’t matter. What matters is the love a person feels, and shares, and the urge to ... to cherish someone who is worth more than anything else, who is the greatest gift life is ever going offer, a greater gift than I, at least, ever expected or deserve.”

Blair stared at Jim, and wondered if he was dreaming all that was happening, all that he was hearing. He blinked and crossed his arms, to hold the hope inside, to keep from shaking apart.

“Blair, I knew that afternoon with Abby that I wasn’t ever going to cheat on you again, that I’d never want to. She’s a beautiful woman, and yeah, my body responded, but it was ... empty. I felt nothing. All I could think about was how much I wanted your touch, and how much I wanted to make love to you, and how I’d do everything in my power to make sure you never found out how stupid I’d been.”

Jim sighed and shook his head. “I was a fool to bring her to the loft. Stupid. It was just closer than her place.” His gaze dropped. “And then I heard you downstairs, heard you packing. And I knew I’d screwed up one time too many, and that I’d hurt you again, when you don’t ever deserve to be hurt, not by me, that’s for damned sure. You were so angry, and I understand ... I do. Hell, if I’d found you with someone, I might have killed you, and then myself. But you wouldn’t listen and you said you were leaving for good and ... and ... I knew I’d destroyed the best thing that ever happened to me. The crazy thing was, I told myself that it was for the best. Because now you’d get your own life back. You wouldn’t be tied to me anymore. Only ... only I couldn’t stand to imagine what life would be without you ....” Jim jerked to his feet and paced to the windows. “I nearly ate my gun that night.”

Blair gaped at him. His chest tightened and his gut twisted, and he thought he might be sick at the horror of the idea that Jim had even contemplated ending it all. “Don’t ever do that,” he rasped. “Don’t you ever do that to me.”

When Jim turned to face him, Blair could see tears glimmering in his eyes. “When I saw you at the office the next day ... I just wanted to haul you out of there and beg you to take me back. But you were so angry, so distant, and that made me think it was hopeless, so I got angry and pushed too hard.”

“Jim, I don’t understand. This afternoon, you said ... you made it pretty clear that you’re really not into men. You tried, man. For me. You tried. And I ... appreciate that. But if you’re not bi and you’re certainly not gay, then what are you saying? Take you back as your partner? Okay, fine. We’re there. We’re good. I promise I won’t ever leave you hanging.”

Jim held up his hands. “Just listen, Chief. Please. Just hear me out.”

He stepped closer and then dropped to one knee in front of Blair. “I told you. I’ve finally learned that it’s not about wanting to be with men or with women. I didn’t understand that until I tried with Jocelyn and Abby. I didn’t really understand anything at all. I just ... love is ... it never works, for me. Never works out.” Jim’s voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. “But you’ve taught me what love is, what it looks like and sounds like and feels like. Love is ... it’s about being with you. I love you. I never thought it was possible to love anyone the way I love you,” he said, the words coming faster, his voice rough and husky with emotion. “I’ve never felt like this for anyone before. I love being loved by you and making love to you. You were wrong this afternoon when you said that you thought I didn’t want you, physically, sexually. I do want you. It’s all I can do to keep my hands off you.”

Jim’s voice cracked again, and a tear slipped over his lashes to trail down his cheek. “I’ll do anything
you want, burn the closet, whatever it takes,” he begged, “if you’ll just take me back and give me another chance. Please. Give me another chance. I swear I’ll never hurt you again. And when the time comes and you decide you need to move on, I promise I won’t try to hold you back.”

“Why are you saying this? You don’t have to pretend anymore,” Blair protested, refusing to let hope kindle in his chest.

“I’m not pretending!” Jim roared like a wounded animal, surging to his feet to pace the room with tight agitation. “If I could take it back, change the past, I would in a heartbeat. I’d never do that to you again. I’d never be such a fool and risk everything we had.”

“But you wanted to be caught,” Blair replied, trying to make sense of it, of all the stories Jim had told him, all the explanations, trying to weave through it all to find the core of truth. He raked the hair off his face as he struggled to get the synapses firing on all cylinders again.

“No, I don’t think I did,” Jim sighed, head bowed, hands on his hips. “I don’t think I thought it through at all. I ... I wanted to stop the rumors, because they’re an immediate threat to you. And I knew how easy it would be to stop them. All I had to do was sleep with someone else. Jocelyn ... well, she was definitely interested, but I heard one of the guys say she was wasting her time because you led me around by the cock.” Jim heaved a sigh. “Part of me knows you deserve better than me – you sure in hell deserve someone who would love you more than his reputation, who wouldn’t let you live a lie for self protection. But part of me hopes you’ll forgive me. Because ... because ... ah, hell. If I was half the man you deserve, I’d walk away now and not put you through all this shit.”

Piece by piece, Blair sorted through the jumbled thoughts that whirled in his mind, to put together a coherent whole. Jim had taken him as a lover to even the score – a harsh way of putting it, but essentially true – but had been surprised to find that being lovers made him happy. Then, the old rumors had taken on new edges, because they were now true, and that had scared him, because it threatened their partnership and might even be dangerous in terms of not getting backup when they needed it. Jim had fixated on the dangers, worried about kids and about how to stop the rumors, and he decided to lay them to rest in the most convincing way possible. And in the process, Jim had discovered that the fulfillment he’d felt with Blair hadn’t been some kind of fluke; that, in fact, their relationship was all he wanted. All of that fit the various stories, so he’d been given parts of the truth, bits and pieces, a confusion of information, maybe because Jim had been so confused about it all himself.

And it all fit with the man Jim was, more given to action than talk, quick to want to fix things and move on, without a whole lot of insight about how the fix might be worse than the problem. Jim was inherently an honest man. He hated the lies they lived with. So consciously or unconsciously, Blair would have laid money that Jim would have felt he deserved to be caught, no matter how much he denied it.

And Jim seemed to be so absolutely certain that Blair was eventually going to leave him ... because of the lies. Because he believed Blair deserved better. Because Blair didn’t need him. Bottomline, that basic and profound insecurity when it came to counting on anyone but himself was probably the underlying cause of everything else.

“Say something, Sandburg,” Jim rasped, holding his hands out in appeal. “I’m dying here.”

“What do you need to believe I won’t ever leave you?” Blair asked, and Jim blinked, as if that was the last question he’d been expecting.

“I ... I don’t know,” he replied. “I just know –”
“You know shit,” Blair snapped, too tired and raw to sugarcoat it. “Why would I toss everything of my old life away and become a badge-carrying, gun-toting cop, if I thought I’d ever leave you? Dammit, Jim. You have to deal with this crap. You have to start believing you’re worthy of love. You can’t keep waiting, like for another shoe to drop – or more like, axe to fall – expecting me to betray you like everyone else you’ve ever loved has betrayed you. That’s what’s at the bottom of all this. You couldn’t believe in me – couldn’t believe enough in yourself.”

“Am I deserving of love, Chief? After all the, well you said it, crap ... do I still deserve to be loved?” Blair blew a long breath and set the empty mug on the floor beside the sofa. “Everybody deserves to be loved.”

“Don’t know about that,” Jim rasped and wandered to the windows. Staring out at the night, he rubbed the back of his neck. “You know me better than I know myself. You understand me when half the time I’m ... I’m just reacting to what’s going on around me. You know what my life has been like. My mother leaving with no explanation when we were kids. My father remote and cold, more involved with his business than with Stevie and me. The only adult who paid attention to me, made me feel worthy, murdered in front of me and I couldn’t do anything about it because I was too damned scared of being a freak to ... to stand up and make the cops listen to what I saw.”

“You were just a kid, Jim,” Blair interjected.

Jim shrugged and shook his head. “Stevie and I were at each other’s throats, competing for Dad’s attention. There was no love in that house, so I didn’t learn squat about love in the years I grew up there. I got away, ran as far away as I could get as soon as I was old enough. I worked my ass off on a military scholarship, and then joined the Rangers. Discipline, that’s what mattered. Nobody got too close to anyone else in covert ops; friendships weren’t encouraged because caring about anyone made you vulnerable. There were women, sure, for physical release and satisfaction, but it was empty, transitory. The few times I thought it might mean more, I found out pretty damned fast I was wrong. I never thought about being with another man. The way I’d been brought up, the discipline of the service, it all meant that ... that I did what I needed to do to fit in, to excel because of something inside that drives me to do my best, and to survive. But nobody cared about me, and I didn’t really care about anyone else.”

Jim dragged in a deep breath, and crossed his arms, as if he was cold. “In Peru, I was all warrior, fulfilling my mission. When I joined the PD, and ended up in Vice, I was angry, so angry at the world, all tied up in knots inside. The crap I saw on the street, in the back alleys, what I had to do when I was undercover, it all made me feel so dirty. God knows what Simon saw in me that made him take the risk of bringing me into Major Crime, but I think he probably saved my life. Jack made me more human, but I still felt empty, like I didn’t really belong ... and then I betrayed him and he disappeared.”

Jim bowed his head. “What is there in all that to love, huh? Carolyn tried. We got along okay. But she said something a few years ago, after we were divorced – ‘the lights are on but nobody’s home’. Story of my life. Nobody home.” He lifted his head, and his gaze met Blair’s in the window’s reflection. “Then the senses came back online, and I met you, and you said I could be a one man crime lab, or something like that. That’s all they meant to me. Being better at my job. Because my job was all that I was good for, all I lived for.”

He turned to face Blair. “You changed all that. Oh, not all at once. I was an uphill road for you. But you showed me how to have fun. How to ... let the work go and just kick back with a beer and a game on the box. And you thought I was something special.” He huffed a humorless laugh. “I guess, when it comes to the senses, you’ll always think I’m something special.” Leaning a shoulder against
the brick wall, his head bowed, Jim went on, “In a matter of weeks, I cared more about you than I’d cared about just about anyone in my life. When Lash took you, I was frantic. I had to get you back. I couldn’t let you die, not on my watch. Not for helping me. Even then, I couldn’t imagine the world, my world, without you in it.”

He scrubbed his palms over his face, and slid down the wall, to crouch with his back against it. “You nailed me, Chief. When you said that fear drives me. I didn’t want to hear it, didn’t want it to be true. That weirdo, homeless bum, angel, whatever, said something that made me think; said I needed to learn to listen to the hearts of others to begin to learn what was in mine. I didn’t listen well. Hell, I didn’t listen at all. I’m glad the damned loft blew up. Whenever I think about it, I remember it as the place where I threw you out and got you killed. The place where I wouldn’t listen to you or deal with the dissertation mess, and I cost you your career and your reputation. And ... and,” his voice cracked, “I betrayed you, when all you’d done was give me everything, made me happy and taught me how to love. Some payback, huh? You’re right,” he rasped, “I don’t understand how you can still love me. I don’t understand how anyone could. But I ... I hope ... I want to believe you because I can’t stand to think I had it all and I blew it. I ... I can’t ... don’t want to imagine living without your love.”

Jim sniffed and scrubbed away the tears that were staining his cheeks. “I’m falling apart here,” he muttered, clearly embarrassed but unable to muster the cold veneer Blair knew he wore as a shield. “I want to fix it, Chief. I want so bad to make it right. But I don’t know how. Just tell me. Tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it. Anything. Anything you want. I know I haven’t given you any reason to trust me or believe me, but if you’ll just give me another chance, I swear I’ll never betray your trust again. I just want what we had. The last couple days, I thought there might be some hope. But today ... God, I’m so sick of hurting you but that seems to be all I do.”

Stunned by Jim’s revelations, wanting with keen desperation to believe Jim meant every word, Blair got up and crossed the floor to sit against the wall beside Jim. “Wasn’t just bad stuff that happened in the loft,” he said. “I mourn it, even if you don’t. That’s where you took me in and let me stay and gave me the first real home I’ve ever had. It’s where we became friends and where we worked out so much about how to understand and manage your senses.” He reached to thread his fingers through Jim’s. “Some of the best times in my life were in that old loft.”

“What will it take for you to believe I’ll never leave you?” Blair asked again.

Jim leaned his head back against the bricks. “I don’t know. Maybe telling me every day for fifty years?”

Blair snorted, and then he started to giggle, the exhaustion and catharsis of the emotional rollercoaster over the few days making him giddy. “Fifty years?” Blair sputtered and shook his head. But even as he laughed, his mind was playing over things Jim had said, justifications he’d made, words that had hurt at the time but that now he thought he might not have understood. Jim had protested two or three times that ‘it wasn’t like they were married’. Did he need marriage to feel safe, or was it the commitment it represented, even if it hadn’t worked with Carolyn?

“What? You’re laughing at me now?” Jim challenged. “I bare my soul to you and you laugh at me?” But he too snickered, and was soon laughing uncontrollably. He reached out to wrap his arms around Blair and draw him close even as they both rocked with laughter that had more hysteria than amusement at its core. But Blair hugged him back, and thought about how good it felt to hold him again, and to be held. And how good it would be to spend fifty years with Jim. God, how good it
would be.

Gradually, they quieted, and sat leaning against one another. Blair thought about the hurt, how bad it had been, and about how he’d vowed never to trust Jim again. Maybe the smart money would say he should stick to his guns, that there was no percentage in risking a bad bet, given their screwed up history. And the smart money could well be right.

But he’d never seen Jim cry before, not even when Danny Choi had been murdered. It wasn’t the tears themselves that convinced him that Jim was doing his best to be as honest as he could be, but the vulnerability the tears represented. Jim hated to let his walls down, hated to be seen as weak, and Blair hadn’t thought he’d ever see the vulnerability Jim had shown him that night. But Jim had dropped all his masks, all his shields, and had just spoken as clearly and truthfully as he could about what he felt.

Was he a fool to want to believe Jim? To want another chance to get back what they’d had? Clearly, some things had to change, and they still had a lot to work through, but ... it would be worth trying, right? Worth taking the emotional risk?

He felt Jim caressing his back, slow, soothing strokes, warm and comforting. “What do you say, Chief?” Jim whispered to the top of his head. “Can you forgive me? Trust me again? Give me another chance?”

“You’re really sure about this? You’re not just saying all this because you think you owe me or some damned thing?”

“I’ve never been as sure about anything in my life as I am about wanting to spend the rest of my life loving you,” Jim assured him, and tightened his hold.

Blair took a breath and drew back, so he could look into Jim’s face. “I don’t want to go back to just what we had,” he said slowly. “I want more. I want the people we care about, the people who matter to us, to know we’re together.”

Jim nodded solemnly. “You got it. And if it ends up being a problem on the job, then we’ll move on, find something else to do that ... that’s worthwhile.”

Blair studied Jim, and the words rang again in his mind: ‘it’s not like we’re married’. And he knew then that that’s what he wanted, the commitment that marriage represented, the vows to love and cherish for a lifetime. “Will you marry me?” he asked.

Jim’s eyes widened in surprise, but then he smiled slowly and he leaned in close to capture Blair’s lips and take him into a deep kiss. When he drew back, he breathed, “Yes, Blair Sandburg, I’ll marry you. Either we’ll go to Canada or have a commitment ceremony downtown with our friends present, whichever you want.”

“I’ll think about it,” Blair replied as he stood and held out a hand to draw Jim up beside him. “You know this doesn’t solve everything, right? That we still have stuff to work out? You’re carrying a ton of guilt about what you think you owe me that you have got to let go. And you have got to accept that you are worthy of love. If you don’t, you’ll drive us both crazy.”

Jim frowned. “You’re saying we have to keep seeing Meadows.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Jim blew a long breath. “You drive a hard bargain, Chief, but, hey, if that’s what it takes, then I’m there.”
Blair smiled then and it was all he could do to resist drawing Jim down the hall to the bedroom, where he could claim what was his. God, he wanted to do that so badly. But ... but that would be moving too fast, given all that had gone before.

They were both emotionally over-wrought and neither of them was thinking clearly. They needed to step back a bit, and he needed to process everything he’d heard that day. Three months before, he wouldn’t’ve thought he’d ever consider giving Jim another chance, ever be able to forgive the betrayal, the hurt, or get over his furious anger. Hell, three hours ago, he’d believed any reconciliation was truly hopeless. Even as hopeful as everything seemed now, he knew there were no guarantees. There were some significant issues that still haunted them, that needed to be worked out. But the no-doubt hard times ahead would be worth it if they could work their way through them and come out whole on the other side. Love that could only survive the good times, the easy times, wasn’t really love.

Fire was what made steel so strong.

Smiling to himself, he thought they’d been through enough fire in the last year to be strong enough to face anything and everything, so long as they met the future together.

“You said something about soup and sandwiches? I think I could eat now.”

“You got it,” Jim assured him, and led the way to the kitchen. Blair slid onto a bar chair at the counter, to watch Jim bustle around, reheating the soup and getting the sandwiches he’d made out of the fridge. As Jim put a laden plate in front of him, Jim asked tentatively, “Did you mean it? Will you marry me?”

Blair took a healthy bite of the tuna sandwich and nodded as he chewed. Swallowing, he said, “I meant it. I think you need the ritual to believe the commitment is real, and once you make the commitment, you’ll live up to it – and when you hear me make the commitment, you won’t be so inclined to believe I’m eventually going to leave you because, well, because this is for life, Jim, for both of us. But ... I think we need to work on stuff first, to be sure we aren’t going to crash and burn again. Because, honestly? I couldn’t go through all this again. As much as I love you, if I can’t trust that we’re on solid ground, I won’t risk being betrayed again. That would just be stupid, you know? I’m not into abuse.”

“I know you’re not,” Jim agreed, looking unhappy, but then he brightened. “We’re gonna make it. It’s just a matter of time now.”

Blair thought about that and took another bite before answering. Jim was settling at the breakfast bar with his own sandwich and a bowl of steaming cream of broccoli soup when he replied, “I hope you’re right. But we really do have a lot of stuff to work through, Jim, and we can’t ignore that. My new bed isn’t as big as the one in the loft – there’s room for both of us, but not for a whole lot of regrets and guilt and, well, you know what I mean.”

Jim grimaced but nodded. “I know, Chief. And I agree. I want to ... I will work it all out. I’m just glad you’re willing to help me do it.”

Blair gave him a small smile of encouragement, and finished his simple dinner. Carrying the dirty dishes to the sink, he said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m wiped out and have to get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Blair, and ... and thank you, for being willing to forgive me.”

“Ah, Jim, don’t beat yourself up too much, okay? We’ve both made mistakes or we wouldn’t be in
this situation. But ... but Meadows is right. We’ve got a lot going for us.”

He left the kitchen and went to his room, leaving Jim to turn out the lights and ensure the place was secure. Blair was sure he’d lie awake for hours, thinking about that had happened and all that he’d learned that day, but emotional exhaustion overtook him, and he fell into a deep sleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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The next morning, Blair woke feeling better than he had in months. The perpetual tension that had tightened his body every day, and the gnawing ache inside were gone. When he smelled the rich scent of brewing coffee, he smiled and rose to greet the day.

Jim, already dressed and ready for work, was in the kitchen when Blair, freshly showered and shaved, entered. “Morning!” Jim greeted him with a cheerful smile, and finished loading up their plates with scrambled eggs, sausages, and fluffy pancakes.

“Whoa,” Blair exclaimed, delighted to see the substantial breakfast. He felt as hungry as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks. “This looks great! What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion,” Jim replied, his smile widening as he filled two mugs with coffee. “This is just the basic courting behavior of a man providing food for his chosen mate.”

“Courting behavior, huh?” Blair echoed and then, remembering the long ago morning when Jim had accused him of the same thing as a way of insinuating himself into the loft beyond the agreed upon week, he laughed. “You’re making sure I don’t throw you out, right?”

“You got it, Chief. These are nice digs. I plan to stay.”

They scanned the paper over breakfast, as they had countless mornings in the past, and when they locked up to head to the station, Blair felt ... happy. Though worries fluttered on the edges of his mind, doubts and concerns about whether everything would work out as easily as they’d both hoped the previous night, he refused to acknowledge them.

On the drive around the harbor, though, he realized Jim was just a little too quiet, and some of the telltale signs of anxiety were all too evident, like the tightening of Jim’s jaw and the aggressive way he drove through the morning traffic. “What’s up, man?” he asked with a slight frown of concern.

Jim’s lips thinned, but then he checked the traffic and pulled off into a vacant spot along the curb. Putting the truck into park, he turned to face Blair. “I spent most of last night thinking about stuff you said. About how I have to believe I’m worthy of being loved. And about how our bed isn’t going to be big enough for old regrets and grief and whatever else I’m packing around.”

“Not just you,” Blair interjected. “I’ve got my own issues. Like anger. As much as I believe you and understand now what led up to all this, I’m angry that you never talked to me, that you didn’t trust me enough.”

Jim looked away and nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I know. I know I need to talk to you more, let you in on what I plan before I go off half-cocked.” His gaze again meeting Blair’s, he went on, “This morning, at Simon’s regular morning staff meeting, I want to ... to ask our colleagues for a little help.”

“Help?” Blair asked. “What kind of help?”

Jim took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You and I both know that the whole sentinel thing is an
open secret that nobody talks about – well, not in front of us, anyway. But there are still too many people who scoff at the idea, who cling to their belief that you ... that you’re a liar and fraud. I can’t live with that any longer, Chief. I just can’t. Makes me sick inside. I don’t want to take out a full page ad, but I also don’t want to lie about it at work. So I want to ask the others to intervene whenever they hear any of that shit, and set people straight. Make it clear that I am a sentinel and that you didn’t lie about a damned thing, except to protect me.”

“Oh, Jim, I don’t know, man,” Blair temporized. “I’m not sure ... what if someone tells the media? It’ll be a circus all over again.”

“I know, I thought about that,” Jim agreed somberly. “We should probably figure out what to say if and when that happens.” He shrugged. “I won’t like it, but I’m sure we can spin it in a way that won’t reveal too much of what we don’t want known. If I hadn’t been so shocked and blindsided the last time, maybe I could have handled it better then, I don’t know. What I do know is that I have to do this. I owe it to both of us and to our colleagues to be straight with them. I’m tired of the games and the lies. I ... I just want to make a clean start here, one that’s fair to both of us.”

Blair felt something ease inside, deep down. As much as it had been his own decision to deny his dissertation, he’d harbored well-buried resentment and anger that Jim had left him hanging in the wind, even with their closest friends and colleagues. The last year hadn’t been easy, far from it, for a whole lot of reasons, and it had kept the wound raw. Even deeper inside, he knew he still carried old anger about everything that had happened with Alex. Jim wasn’t the only one who had to learn to let things go. Was that part of what had gone wrong? Jim had sensed or feared that what they’d had couldn’t last; could that have been related to Blair’s own fears that it was only a matter of time before Jim pushed him away again, kicked him out, told him they were done?

“So, Chief, what do you think? I really want to do this, but I’d like you to be okay with it.”

Blair nodded slowly. Inherently, Jim was a man of great integrity; the lies had to have chafed, had to leave him feeling bad about himself. It wasn’t a healthy way to live. “You’re right. It’s time we came clean with our friends and colleagues. And, yeah, given what you’ve been hearing and worrying about, we need to be sure we get the backup we need when things get hot, and not be worried that some schmuck thinks we – or at least I – deserve whatever I get. I’ll think about what we’ll say if the story breaks. You say as much as you want or need to say to be comfortable with the people we work with. I’m good with that.”

Relief blossomed on Jim’s face, and he was smiling when he put the truck into gear and pulled back into the traffic.

Later that morning, Jim’s open admission that he was a sentinel and that he relied on Blair’s help in managing his senses didn’t seem to cause anyone any surprise, and his request for support was met with solid approbation. Brown grumbled playfully that it was about time, and Megan beamed at him, as if she was downright proud of him. Joel gave them a big smile and said it would be a pleasure to set a few fools straight. Rhonda grinned at that, and nodded, and Simon simply wanted to know how they’d handle things if there was a leak. They’d already gone through all the old case files months before and were sure they’d all hold up if there was ever an appeal.

When the meeting ended, Jim signaled to Blair to linger and, after all the others had left the office, Jim said to Simon, “Captain, Sandburg and I are well on the road of working things out between us. It’s time, I think,” and he looked to Blair for confirmation, “to decide how we’re going to handle the issue with the regs, about life partners working together.”

His throat thickening, touched by how determined Jim was to make everything right as quickly as they could, Blair could only look at Simon and nod his agreement.
Simon looked from one to the other. “You’re both sure about this?”

Again, they nodded. “Okay,” he said, and seemed to be fighting a smile. “Your move this morning is a step in the right direction. My suggestion would be that we don’t say anything about your personal relationship; we’ll just take it as a given. If anyone challenges your right to be partners in the future, we’ll just play the sentinel card which, by then, will be common knowledge in the PD.” He shrugged. “I really don’t think it will be a problem.”

“Thanks, Simon,” Jim breathed with evident and very genuine gratitude. Blair couldn’t help the smile that bloomed, or the happiness he felt welling inside. But he was moved to the edge of tears when Jim continued, “When the time is right, we’ll be having a commitment ceremony or something – maybe even go up to Canada to do it up right. I think I can speak for both of us when I say that we’d really like you to be there, to stand up with us and witness it.”

“I’d be proud to be there,” Simon replied with a warm smile. “In fact, if you didn’t ask me, I’d be damned upset.” He gestured toward the bullpen. “And I think the rest of the team would say the same thing.”

Over the course of the next week, Jim took to wearing the gold filigree earring Blair had given him, on duty as well as off. On the weekend, he suggested they go for drinks at Dorothy’s, to listen to the music, and he slung his arm around Blair’s shoulders for the walk there and back. As they relaxed again with one another, they eased back into the teasing and bantering they’d enjoyed for years, until laughing together became a way of being again.

During their session with Dr. Meadows that week, they told her they were actively working toward reconciliation, and they spent the first part of the hour helping Blair drain the abscess of his deep-seated anger, which illuminated the insecurity that anger had hidden, at least from Jim. The worry Blair had been harboring that Jim would, inevitably, kick him out again, call it quits.

“I won’t,” Jim vowed with grim resolution. “Not ever. God, I’ll never forget what happened when I’ve done that in the past – and I’ll never hurt you, or leave you so open to being hurt again.” The expression on his face, and the fire in his eyes convinced Blair that he meant every word and would live up to his vow or die in the attempt.

The following weekend, Jim asked Blair if he’d mind having William and Stephen for dinner. Jim wanted to ensure his father and brother understood their relationship. He also wanted to let them know that the truth was seeping through the Cascade PD, and what line they’d be taking the next time journalists got in their faces. The evening went fairly well, though William seemed a bit taken aback at first. He recovered quickly, though, and offered them his full support if they should ever be in need of him. Stephen offered a toast to their happiness. Blair, knowing how traditional both men were, how conservative, was moved by their acceptance and deeply grateful. Jim admitted later that he’d been surprised at how well the evening had gone and that he was proud of his father and brother, maybe for the first time.

During their next session with Meadows, Jim took a deep breath and confronted the guilt he felt about the price Blair had paid to protect him. Letting the truth filter through the PD had helped, but hadn’t erased his knowledge that Blair had turned his back on dreams he’d held for nearly half his life, dreams he’d worked damned hard to achieve. The conversation inevitably got around to his sense of being unworthy of such sacrifice, of any sacrifice, if it came to that. Shaking his head, annoyed that Jim just didn’t seem to get it, Blair once again began enumerating all the reasons that proved Jim was worthy, and shouldn’t feel any guilt because none of it was his fault. But Meadows stopped him and insisted Jim tell her why he was worthy, rather than unworthy, and why the
decision had been a good one for Blair, and not simply a loss of former dreams. By the time the hour was over, Jim was beginning to look and sound as if he might finally believe all the things Blair had tried to tell him for over a year, but that he’d never really heard or accepted.

Some evenings, when they weren’t working, they just kicked back and watched television; other evenings, they talked long into the night about their worries and concerns, about the issues that still bothered one or the other of them. Jim was particularly concerned that Blair wouldn’t be having any children, and was afraid the day would come when he’d very much regret not being a father.

Blair picked at the label on his beer bottle as he thought about kids and what it would mean to have them, or not have them. “I ... I don’t know what I want,” he admitted, flicking a glance at Jim. “I’m not as sure as you are that I’d make a decent father. Other than Simon, and the way he’s raised Daryl, I don’t have any role models to emulate.”

Jim graced him with a gentle smile. “You’d be a fantastic father,” he avowed. “You’re patient, and you love to teach. You have boundless energy, so you could keep up with a frenetic kid. And any kid of yours would grow up knowing how to love ... and how to accept and appreciate this world and the people on it.”

“Thanks, Jim,” Blair murmured, knowing his voice was husky with emotion. “I’d like to think about it.”

“Fine, but don’t think too long. Adoption can be harder and take longer than we might think. I’m not getting any younger and I think the authorities have concerns about ancient parents.”

“You’re far from ‘ancient’,” Blair objected, grinning widely. “But I take your point.” His smile faded into reflection. “I’m hesitant, I guess, because we have such potentially dangerous jobs, and the possibility exists that we could go down together. That’d be damned hard on a kid.”

Jim frowned. “If you really want children, Chief, we can find a way to work that out.”

Blair shook his head. “No, no, I don’t want to ‘work it out’ because it would ultimately mean that we wouldn’t be working together. You come first, Jim. I’m your backup and I always will be.”

Jim glanced away, and Blair saw his jaw and throat working as he swallowed heavily. Sniffing, Jim nodded and took a deep breath before looking at him. “Thanks, Chief,” he managed, before his voice clogged.

Understanding, Blair moved across the floor and dropped to one knee beside his chair. Gripping Jim’s arm, he said, low and fervent, “Get used to it, man. Someone – namely me – loves you beyond anything and everything else in this world. You will always come first with me.”

Jim combed his fingers through Blair’s hair and then cupped the back of his head. Blair could see tears glimmering in his eyes, before he blinked them away. “I know, Chief,” he murmured huskily. “Still blows me away, though. I think ... I think it always will.”

“I can live with that,” Blair replied with fond affection as he caressed Jim’s cheek.

Once again, Jim suggested they head down the block to Dorothy’s, where he led Blair to a table in a shadowed corner. After they’d ordered their drinks, Jim looped an arm around his shoulders and leaned in close to ask, “You have any problems with me necking with you in public?”

Delighted, Blair rewarded him with a bright smile, a quick shake of the head, and a kiss that neither of them was in any hurry to conclude. Minutes later, Jim was nuzzling his ear, and Blair was flushed with pleasure and growing desire. “Why don’t you ever do this at home?” he asked, a little
“Because I’ve been worried about pushing too hard, too fast,” Jim murmured. “And ... and I was afraid of starting something I might not be able to stop.” His arm tightened around Blair. “I want you so bad. Love you so much,” he said with a low moan, before again capturing Blair’s lips.

No more than I want you, Blair thought, as he pulled bills from his wallet and tossed them on the table to cover the drinks that hadn’t even arrived yet. Taking Jim’s hand, he pulled him to his feet. “C’mon. We’re going home where we can get comfortable.”

Jim’s face lit with hope and anticipation, and Blair’s heart lightened at the love he saw in Jim’s eyes. There were risks, he knew that. There was no way to read the future or predict it, but he decided the risks were worth taking, the gamble worth making. The doubts he’d harbored were gone; Jim loved him, of that he was certain. He was equally sure that Jim was genuinely sorry for the boneheaded betrayal, and that it would never happen again. Though he wasn’t yet quite prepared to admit it might even have been a good thing, because being with Jocelyn and Abby had removed all Jim’s doubts about how much he loved Blair, he no longer remembered that afternoon with the same shaft of furious hurt and grief.

They held hands, bumped shoulders, laughed for the joy of it, and stopped to kiss in the shadows so that the journey home took a good deal longer than the five minutes it would have normally. By the time they reached the warehouse, the time for thinking, and analyzing, and worrying was over, at least for the night. Inside the apartment, Blair ushered Jim straight to the master bedroom. There, they made short work of stripping off Jim’s clothing and his own.

With a seductive smile and a low growl of desire, Blair pushed Jim down onto the bed. Then, he crawled on top of his lover, to lay claim to what was his – and his alone – that night, and for the rest of their lives.

Finis

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