Passing In the Night

by Tinnean

Summary

Jim Ellison, a former hustler, thought things would be better once he left the business. When a former boyfriend is murdered, and Detective Blair Sandburg is assigned to investigate it, Jim becomes sure of it.

Notes

This is an alternate reality. Jim has become a hustler, and Blair is the detective. They've both had other partners. Spoilers for No Way to Treat a Lady, and since it's based on that movie, there will be minor character deaths.

No Way to Treat a Lady was released in 1968, so some of the action will reflect that.
No Way to Treat a Sentinel

Being a hustler sucked. I learned that the hard way.

Limping out of apartments on the upper West Side, my ass sore because even though I'd prepared myself before my 'date', the john would like to fuck rough...

My eyes burning and my nostrils clogged from the smell of my last client, marijuana smoke and alcohol, and Canoe trying to conceal the body odor...

Coming home at three or four or five in the morning. The smells overwhelming, the garbage trucks starting their runs, the bums on the street stinking of vomit and urine...

But it didn't start out that way.

William Ellison had been overjoyed when I was born. He had an heir, he boasted to anyone who would listen, a son who would be a credit to him, who, after graduating college with every honor that was awarded, would join the family business, get married and raise a bunch of little Ellisons, and who one day, after Ellison, Sr. was gone of course, would take over the family business.

William Ellison barely paid any attention to my brother Steven, who was born some years later.

That was until William Ellison realized that his oldest son was 'like that.' He refused to accept that I was gay; he refused to look at me.

I was sent to William Tecumseh Sherman Military Academy to get the gay drilled out of me, and my brother became his favorite.

I used to wonder if my father knew how I was treated. I used to wonder if it would have mattered. I stuck it out - I was an Ellison, after all - and once I'd graduated, I took off for the big city.

The bus was the cheapest way to go, and along the way I met some men who were nice to me, nicer than my father had ever been. That made the trip longer, but it did wonders for my ego.

New York was an expensive town, and once I arrived there, I knew I'd need money. A high school diploma didn't put me in line for a job that paid big bucks, so I found something that did.

I became a hustler.

It wasn't bad. I enjoyed it, and I was lucky the men I 'dated' treated me well.

After almost a year in the city, though, I ran into someone I knew, someone who had been at WTS the first month or so that I was there. He'd been nice to me, not in the way the men on my cross country journey had been, but like a... a relative who cared what happened to me, and I knew that he would make living in the military academy more bearable.

But by that Thanksgiving he was gone.

There had been wild rumors. He was a long distance sniper, he was black ops called back to duty, he was all things deadly.

The only thing I knew for sure was that he was gone.

And then there he was on the streets of Manhattan, over six feet tall, ruggedly built, and so handsome
I nearly swallowed my tongue.

"James."

I was surprised that he recognized me. "Major Pendergrast." But so flattered that he did. I wasn't sure whether to salute or shake his hand. Or throw myself at him and kiss him.

"Call me Jack." He smiled and offered his hand. "I'm not in the military anymore."

"I'm sorry, sir. You were a very good instructor."

"I liked teaching you boys." His smile became sad, but then he shook his head. "That's in the past. What are you doing in New York?"

I shrugged and looked away. The clothes I was wearing had to tell him what I was doing in the Big Apple. Black mesh shirt that allowed a peek of the nipple ring I wore. Black boots. Snug black jeans. Fringe that draped my right calf and swung with each step.

"Aren't you a little cold in that?" He looked me over, and it felt physical. My cock twitched, and I wondered if he wanted me.

"It's warm for April." I licked my lips and shivered, but I wasn't cold. "I'm fine."

He raised an eyebrow and removed his jacket, putting it around my shoulders. "Come on, James. I'll buy you dinner, and you can tell me all about it."

I opened my mouth to tell him he had to have better things, more important things, to do than listen to me, but he waited patiently, holding the jacket closed. I shut my mouth and nodded.

Jack took me to the restaurant in his hotel. The host who seated us was an occasional client. He watched me with lust in his eyes. Normally I would have flirted and come on to him, but I was with someone. Someone I wanted to spend time with.

He held the seat for me, and I removed the jacket, draped it over the back of the chair and sat down, and he eased it forward. He leaned down. "I hope you enjoy your meal." His breath was hot in my ear.

I said something noncommittal, accepted the menu, and was relieved when he left.

Jack had been watching. I gave him a weak smile.

Our waiter approached. "May I take your order?"

"I'll have the Porterhouse, medium rare. Baked potato, dry, and mixed vegetables." He closed the menu and handed it to the waiter. "What would you like, James?"

"Oh." I'd been watching him. I quickly scanned the menu, then bit my lip.

"You look disappointed."

"No. It's okay. I'll have the same, except I'd like butter on my potato." I gave the menu to the waiter with a smile.

The waiter dropped both menus. He flushed. "Sorry," he whispered. He bent to retrieve them and hurried to the kitchen.
"You do seem to have an effect on the male population." Jack took a sip from his water glass.

"It's my job." I felt my cheeks turn red. "But you knew that, didn't you? Do you want me to go?"

"No." He laid his hand on mine, and his thumb ran over my knuckles. "You have that effect on me. Stay."

I shivered again, unable to drag my eyes away from his.

"Will you stay?"

"Yes."

That was the beginning of our time together.

I wouldn't have objected to staying in the hotel, but Jack wanted us to have a place of our own. He rented an apartment in Washington Heights and taught me how to cook. And other things.

On occasion he would leave for a few days or a few weeks. He never told me where he'd been, and I never asked. I never had to. The only thing I was concerned with was whether he'd spent that time with a man. Or a woman.

I'd hug him, burying my nose in the side of his neck. A couple of discreet sniffs assured me that if he'd been with anyone, he hadn't been in bed with them.

Sometimes he'd give me an odd look, but when I questioned him about it, he'd smile, get his shoulder into my gut and hoist me up over his shoulder, and stride into the bedroom with me, fondling my ass before he tossed me onto the bed and followed me down.

Living with Jack was like having a dream come true. He treated me very well, and though I didn't love him, I thought maybe if I tried hard enough, I could.

One day Jack came back from one of those out-of-town trips carrying a large, camouflage duffel. As he walked past me, he grabbed my wrist and dragged me along with him.

"Jack?"

"We're going to Peru, Jimmy."

"We?"

"You're coming with me." He dropped the duffel onto the bed and unzipped it. "Start packing." He crossed to the closet and hauled out another duffel that could have been the twin of mine.

"Why Peru?"

"I carried out an operation there once."

"But you've never taken me on one of your... "

"This isn't an operation. Start packing, okay?"

"What do we need?"

"Jeans, shirts, those boots I bought for you."
The whole year we'd been together he'd never taken me anywhere out of the city. I went to the dresser and took out the clothes we would need.

"Shorts?"

"Your call." He grinned at me.

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Lima had a fantastic gay scene, and we danced the evenings away and then fucked through the night.

"I love you, Jimmy," he whispered in my ear one night while he was still buried deep inside me. I sighed happily, and we fell asleep like that.

The next day he began to stock supplies. "I'm going into the Peruvian Amazon, Jimmy. There's an old friend I want to visit."

"Should I be jealous?" I made my voice teasing. I didn't want him to think I was serious.

"No." He ran his hand over my hair. "You're very special, Jimmy. You never have to be jealous."

The next morning, when I woke up, he was gone. Something told me I had to go after him, so I did, but I got lost in the rainforest, and when they finally found me, I had the tattoo of a black jaguar behind my left shoulder. I could never remember how it got there or what had happened. All I knew was that I had to return to the States.

And that Jack was okay.

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A few years passed. I thought of Jack. Not often, and never with sorrow, but with mild regret that I would never see him again.

I fell back into the routine I'd had before Jack.

I'd call Steven every so often, to let him know I was still alive, hoping he'd pass the information on to the family. Grace, our mother, was long gone, living the high life somewhere, but our father was still in Washington State.

No birthday or Christmas cards ever came in the mail. I did get an invitation to Steven's graduation from Rainier University. For a minute I toyed with the idea of going, but I tore it up and threw it away instead, and I sent him a check.

Steven called to thank me, but he never once asked how a junior ad executive could have afforded a gift like that.

It took me two weeks on my knees to cover that check.

I sucked it up.... er... pushed it out of my mind.

And time rolled on.

After five years, I realized - I couldn't do this anymore; I wanted the tenderness I'd had when Jack had been in my life. I wanted one man in my bed.
So when Randy Beautiful asked me to give up the business and move in with him, I jumped at the opportunity.

Randy - who had a penthouse that overlooked Central Park. Randy - blond, blue-eyed, and so freaking gorgeous both men and women couldn't catch their breath.

"I don't care that you were a pro," he told me. "All your experience, everything you've learned, that's all going to be directed at me, only me."

He loved me in leather, black, buff, devil red, trousers that hugged my ass and thighs and calves, vests that exposed my pecs, biceps, and abdomen. He loved to show me off.

Stupid me. I thought that meant he loved me.

He wasn't happy when I insisted he wear a condom.

"Aw, pumpkin. You're mine now. Please?"

I liked him saying I was his, but I'd been in the business too long to be comfortable discarding the barrier right away.

"Just until there's no doubt... I'm clean?" I was afraid if I told him I wanted to be sure he was clean, he'd leave me.

I held my breath, but with a forced smile he agreed.

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Randy came into the penthouse just as I was hanging up the phone.

"Great news, Randy! Brandon said we could use his cabin in Vermont."

"Vermont? I don't think..."

"It's a great place. Vermont is gorgeous this time of year, the view is gorgeous, and best of all, there'll be no one to bother us."

"Yeah, but you know I don't like roughing it." His lip was thrust out. Jesus, had I really thought that was attractive?

"It'll be fun, Randy." We hadn't spent any time together in a while. He'd been busy with his job on Wall Street, and I'd mostly hung around the apartment, munching on M&Ms and watching Mike Douglas until it was time to start dinner.

"There won't be any electricity."

"It's powered by propane."

"Yeah, but no radio, no television, no telephone."

"We can take the radio and television that are battery operated. As for telephones, there's a general store in town."

"And what would we do?" His face darkened in an unattractive scowl. "I don't like the mountains. I'm a city boy."
"But... Randy, don't you want to be with me?" I cringed. I hated how pathetic I sounded.

He turned on his heel and walked into the kitchen.

"Randy, you didn't answer me. Don't you care about me?"

"Jesus, Ellison. We're guys." He took a beer out of the fridge and popped the cap. "And you were a whore. Get on the clue bus!"

"So... so you never... you were never interested in my mind."

"What mind? If you ever had a thought, it would die of loneliness." He never let me forget that I only had a high school diploma.

"You... All this time you just wanted my body."

"Ah hah! The light goes on."

I felt as if I were encased in ice. I left the kitchen, walked down the long hall to our bedroom, and opened the closet door. All the leather clothing that Randy had bought for me hung there.

"Going somewhere, pumpkin?"

"I'm out of here." I pulled down the camouflage duffel that Jack had given me before that trip to Peru.

"No, you're not." His fingers closed over my forearm and squeezed. "You're mine. I bought you as much as I bought those clothes."

"Lincoln freed the slaves."

"If you take a single shirt or pair of pants out of here, I'll fucking have you charged with burglary." His grip tightened.

I used a tactic Jack had taught me, and Randy was flat on his back, looking up at me from the floor, his eyes wide with shock.

"You really are a bastard." In the bottom drawer of the dresser I used was the jacket Jack had put around my shoulders that first day. "This jacket is mine. You can keep the rest."

"I'm gonna spread the word about you, Ellison! I'll tell everyone you gave me a sexually transmitted disease! You'll..."

"I'll never work in this town again? That's a really hackneyed cliché, Randy. Here's one just for you. Go fuck yourself." I dug into my pocket and pulled out the apartment key. He flinched when I tossed it at him.

I walked out and closed the door softly behind me.

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"Well, that was smart, Ellison." It was after 3. The banks were closed. I'd have to wait until the next morning to get into my safety deposit box.

Randy had no idea how much money I actually had made over the years. It wasn't a fortune, but it was enough to tide me over until I could get a job, and maybe even a little further.
One thing I did know - leaving him was the smartest move I'd made since I'd run into Jack Pendergrast.

I straightened my shoulders. I'd find a place to stay, and I'd find a job. I was never going back to selling my ass.

I spent the next few days checking out the classifieds in *The Daily News* and *The New York Post* for jobs. It wasn't looking too good.

I did find an ad for an apartment, though, in a brownstone in the East Village. I called to make sure it was still available, then took the subway down to East 14th Street.

A chunky little man opened the door.

"I'm Jim Ellison," I told him. "I called you a little while ago?"

"Yeah. Hi. I'm Richie Delvecchio. C'mon, I'll show you the apartment." He turned and led me to the staircase. "It's a studio on the third floor. Ain't got no elevator."

"Okay." I followed him up the stairs. He was balding and had a perpetual 5 o'clock shadow, but I could see he wasn't as old as I'd originally thought, in spite of the ribbed, A-style undershirt and tan work pants he wore, maybe in his late thirties. "You're the landlord?"

"My brother-in-law owns this buildin', but I run it. Don't make no trouble, an' we'll get along just fine."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't like loud parties or sleepovers with members of the opposite sex."

"That won't be a problem." Lately, loud parties had fried my nerves. The bright lights, the loud, raucous music, the alcohol - they were no longer the fun they had been.

As for the opposite sex, I'd never gone for girls.

"Good. I had a feelin' you was a good guy. I got a talent that way. All my tenants are good people."

"Uh... Good."

We reached the third floor. A long, fairly narrow corridor bisected the brownstone and separated the six apartments. There were windows at either end. In front of each one was a stand that held a flowering plant.

Mr. Delvecchio saw me looking at them. "I like plants. I got 'em on every floor, an' I come up a couple of times a week an' water 'em."

He walked toward the back of the building, to the door with 3E on the panel. He unlocked it and threw it open with a flourish.

"This is a nice apartment. I cleaned it after the last tenant moved out. You got a kitchenette, a dinin' area, an' over there's the bed.

I walked in and looked around. There were a lot of windows, making it very bright.

The floor in the kitchenette was worn black and white linoleum squares. It had a two-burner stove and a stained porcelain sink. In the cabinet beside the sink were plates and bowls on one shelf, and
pots and skillets on another. In a drawer were forks, spoons, and knives.

The thought of using those things made me nauseous. They looked clean, but I could smell the residue of meals past. I'd need new ones.

Tucked in an alcove was a small refrigerator with a single door. I opened it. The fridge was empty except for a box of baking soda, and as Mr. Delvecchio had said, was clean. The freezer compartment at the top was large enough for the two ice cube trays, and maybe a box of french fries, a frozen pizza, and a couple of TV dinners.

Just off the kitchenette was the 'dining area'. It contained a card table and two folding chairs.

"The other chairs are over here." He walked to a wall and pulled aside what looked like a sheet to reveal two more chairs. "In case you have company."

"I thought..."

"You can have company over. They just can't sleep over."

"Okay." I couldn't see any of my former colleagues coming to dinner; they'd cut all ties to me when I left the business. As for sex... I pushed it out of my mind.

"This cubby is good for storin' brooms an' mops."

"What's that?" Above it was a large, square cabinet.

"Pantry." He opened it. There were four shelves, the top one so high I'd need to stretch to reach it. "The bathroom is through that door."

The cubicle could barely hold the toilet, sink, and tub. There were rust stains in all of them, and even though Mr. Delvecchio said he'd cleaned it, I saw myself stocking up on plenty of Ajax to scrub that tub. I was not getting in it otherwise.

I went back into the main living area. A faded area rug covered most of the floor. The bed looked like a twin. It was going to be a tight fit, and I hoped my feet wouldn't hang off the end of it.

I sighed. I'd never lived in a place as tacky-looking as this, not even when I'd first come to Manhattan.

On the other hand, until I got a job, I really had no choice. Apartments were scarce.

But I couldn't resist asking, "Does it come with a mouse trap?"

He gave a broad grin. "Ain't no mice in this buildin', somethin' I pride myself on." I heard scrabbling on the rug, and suddenly an orange tabby was in his arms. "This is Tigger. He an' the other cats handle that."

"Well, hello, Tigger." I rubbed my knuckles under his chin. "You're a fine fellow."

The cat slitted his eyes and purred, the sound like a rusty saw.

I was surprised Mr. Delvecchio had named the tom after a character in "Winnie the Pooh;" I didn't want to ask because that was none of my business.

However, he offered the information on his own. "I've always liked cats, and Tig was given to me by Christopher, my sister's boy, when his father gave me this job. He named him, too."
The cat jumped out of his arms and sauntered around the apartment, his tail whipping restlessly. Two more cats came in to join him, one chocolate brown and the other solid black.

"This is Archy an' Mehitabel. They're from Alonzo an' Grizabella's first litter."

"Unusual names."

"I like Don Marquis an' T.S. Eliot."

Yet he spoke as if he were uneducated. Interesting.

"So, whaddya think?"

As well as pots and dishes, I'd also need towels, a couple of new pillows, sheets. Definitely sheets. For some time before I'd left him, the ones on Randy's bed had started to feel scratchy against my skin, and it had been hard for me to get comfortable and sleep. Or do other things.

But the rent was affordable. And no one I knew from my years as a hustler ventured down to this part of Manhattan.

"What's included?"

"Utilities - gas, water, electric. You'll have to pay your own phone bill, though."

"I'll take it." I'd have taken it even if I'd had to pay my own utility bills.

"Good. I'm glad you will. I like your face. Now, the rent is due on the 1st of every month, sharp."

"Okay, Mr. Delvecchio."

"Call me Richie. I need first an' last month up front. I ain't askin' for a month's security, on accounta you got a honest face."

"Uh huh." I took out my money clip and peeled off the bills.

"Welcome to the buildin'." Richie folded the bills and tucked them into his back pocket. He hitched up his pants. His belly still hung over the waistband, and he frowned. "I gotta lose some weight," he muttered as he held out his hand, and we shook on it.

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I decided the first thing I needed to buy were those sheets and pillows. And towels. I wasn't going to use the scratchy ones that were stacked under the bathroom sink. A brown bag filled with cleaning products completed my purchases at that time.

As for kitchen supplies - for the time being, I'd eat out.

It took a couple of days to get the place in shape. It shouldn't have taken that long, but the smell of ammonia and bleach really got to me, and I had to take a lot of breaks.

When the apartment was up to my standards, I bought a set of Farberware pots and flatware and Melamine dishes, and put together one of those dressers that required assembly.

Then I went shopping for clothes. I'd need some casual clothes to put in the dresser, and at least one business suit, tailored shirt, and tie. Behind my front door was a rod that would have to serve as my closet.
It took a while to find clothes that didn't irritate my skin, but once that was done, I turned my attention to finding a job.

Jack Pendergrast had told me, those last days in Peru, that if I decided to get out of the business, I should see a friend of his, Simon Banks.

I didn't want to use Jack's name, but I couldn't find anything, so I walked down 1st Avenue to East Houston Street, and I found Banks, a small, store-front security firm. There was a Help Wanted sign in the window.

The chimes over the door announced my entrance, and a woman at the lone desk looked up from her typewriter. She was a handsome redhead in her early thirties. "Yeah?"

"You've got a sign that says you're looking for help."

She studied me intently, then relaxed. "Well, you're over twenty-one, mate." A hint of an Aussie accent. "And you look like you can take care of yourself. Hey, Simon! Haul ass outta there."

A man came from the rear of the store. His skin was the color of mahogany, and he was tall and lean, and I found myself thinking of Shakespeare's Cassius.

He rolled a cigar between his teeth and studied me as well.

"I'm Banks."

"I'm Ellison. I'm looking for a job."

"If you don't have at least a high school diploma, you're wasting my time."

"I've got one." The diploma from WTS might finally prove to be useful.

"I'll need to see it."

"I'll need to get it. It's in my safe deposit box."

"I like a man who knows how to take care of important papers." He chewed on his cigar. "All right, then. You also have to have some familiarity with security."

"No problem." Jack had taught me a lot of stuff.

"Megan, make an appointment for Mr. Ellison for... Is two this afternoon available?"

"I'll free it up, Boss." She made a notation in a book on her desk in green ink. "Two it is."

There were other names in the book, in other colors. I wondered if the colors stood for anything. I wondered if I'd have the chance to find out.

"Thank you, Mr. Banks. I'll be here."

We shook hands, I turned and headed for the door, and I heard him say, "He looks promising, Megan."

"I think you're right this time, Simon."

"Well, we'll see."
I looked over my shoulder at them, but Simon Banks was heading back to his office.

"Yes?" Megan raised her eyebrow.

"Uh... " I gave her a smile that felt strained. "See you later." Was I hearing things?

She nodded and returned to her typewriter, and I left.

I must have been hearing things. I'd noticed lately... I shook my head. No, that was bullshit.

A bus was idling at the corner, waiting for the light to change. I caught it just before the light turned green, and rode it up to 23rd Street. A branch of my bank was there, and I'd opened a safe deposit box there. It contained my diploma, the fake passport Jack had rigged for me, other papers, and the cash I didn't want to carry or keep in my apartment.

I retrieved my diploma and walked home, weighing the options of walking to Simon Banks' security firm or taking a cab.

If I walked, I'd arrive all sweaty - it was August in New York, and the humidity was sky-high.

One the other hand, if I took a cab, I'd arrive fresh.

That settled it. I'd take the cab.

It was about noon when I arrived at 852 East 14th. Outside the building was a hotdog vendor. I bought two dogs, no onions or chili though - I didn't want to knock my possible future boss on his ass from my breath - and a coke, and went up to my apartment to eat.

As I ate, I studied the diploma. It brought to mind too many unpleasant experiences at the military academy. I pushed it away and opened *The Daily News* that I'd bought earlier. Nothing seemed to be going on beyond the usual political hanky-panky, so I turned to the funnies to see what Dick Tracy and Brenda Starr were up to.

Once I finished my lunch, I washed my hands, laid out suit, shirt, black socks and tie on the bed, and called for a cab to pick me up at 1:45. Then I stripped off my short-sleeved shirt, trousers, and briefs.

I'd sweated through everything. These weren't called the dog-days of summer for nothing. I needed a shower.

As the water poured down my back, I soaped carefully, rubbing the lather over my chest, watching my nipples peek through. For the first time since months before I'd left Randy Beautiful, tingles of desire curved over my ass, through my groin, and into my cock, causing it to swell and thicken. I used teasing touches to heighten my passion.

My hand felt good on my cock. I began to work it with harder strokes while I pressed on the slit with my thumb and rubbed in lazy circles.

I liked what I was doing. I closed my eyes. In my mind I pictured the lover I was waiting for. He'd be my height, fair-haired, and have eyes that were a warmer blue than mine.

I leaned back against the cool tiles and braced a foot on the edge of the tub, and ran a fingertip over my hole, dipped in, fantasizing it was my lover's cock breaching my opening.

I curled my finger and rubbed it harder over my prostate, and groaned and bit my lip, and the spray of my semen joined the spray of the showerhead.
I eased my finger out of my hole and stayed slumped against the tiled wall, struggling to catch my breath and not drown myself at the same time. I relished the residual tingles until the water finally cooled.

I stepped out of the tub and dried off, and when I saw the time, I rushed to get dressed and ran down the stairs to my waiting cab.

The cab got me there in good time. I paid the driver and tipped him, and faced Banks.

I had my hand on the doorknob, about to pull it open, when someone pushed it open from the inside. "Keep an eye out for me, Simon!" he yelled over his shoulder, and he walked right into me. "Oops, sorry." He patted my arm.

There was something about him that caught my attention.

Four or five inches shorter, his hair a mass of brown curls, streaked with red and gold. I couldn't see his eyes, though; he wasn't looking into my face. His attention was on something else, and he headed down the street at a brisk jog.

He was wearing a dark blue suit, and I stared after him until he disappeared down a subway entrance. I wished I could have seen his eyes. For some reason, I thought they might be blue, although considering the color of his hair, they were probably a similar shade of brown.

I wondered if he was as uncomfortable in his suit as I was in mine.

Oh, well. The odds were I'd never see him again. I rolled my shoulders, ran a hand over my hair to make sure it was in place, and drew in a deep, relaxing breath. I had to make sure there was no hint of how much I needed this job.

Megan looked up from her typewriter and gave a wolf whistle. "Oh, I do hope you get the job, mate." She grinned and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "The boss is in his office. Back and to your left."

I nodded at her and followed her directions.

"Ah. Mr. Ellison." Simon Banks stood in the doorway. "Right on time. I like that in my people."

"Thank you, sir."

He grinned around the fat cigar between his teeth. "Come into my office."

It was a spacious office. Against one wall were filing cabinets and against another bookcases that contained books about security matters and police procedures.

"I used to be a cop," Mr. Banks told me when he saw what I was looking at.

"Yes, sir." I hoped he hadn't been Vice. I'd never been picked up by them, but a couple of my johns had been Vice.

"Take a seat."

I did. He went around his desk and sat in a large, comfortable-looking chair.

His desk was huge. The surface was covered by a pristine blotter. On the left was a multiple line telephone, and next to it was a thick address book and a large coffee cup with Banks' Boys printed
around the diameter. It was filled with pens and pencils. Facing away from me were two picture frames. I assumed they held photos of his family.

"You wanted to see my diploma, I believe?" I took it out of its envelope and handed it to him across the desk.

He examined the embossed lettering at the top, decorative and ostentatious.

"William Tecumseh Sherman Military Academy? I knew someone who taught there." He ran his eyes over the information that had been written in calligraphy. "James Ellison? By any chance were you a... friend... of Jack Pendergrast?"

"Yes." I noticed the hesitation, and I worried my lip. He knew Jack?

Of course he knew Jack. Jack had told me as much. But what had Jack told him about me?

"Well, it's about time!"

"Excuse me?"

"Jack asked me to keep an eye out for you." He turned around one of the frames on his desk, and my breath caught in my throat.

Jack, a young Jack, in his Army fatigues, laughing into the camera. His arm was around the shoulders of a black soldier, and I recognized a youthful Simon Banks. There was a cigar in his mouth, and his dark eyes were crinkled with laughter.

"I didn't think you were going to turn up. It's been a lot of years since he contacted me about you."

I shrugged, relieved when he didn't press me for more about my relationship with Jack.

"I guess you wanted to try to make it on your own."

"Yes." If he wasn't aware of how I'd spent those years, I wasn't going to tell him.

"You should have come sooner. Jack vouched for you, and I think you'll do very well. You'll need a license so you'll be able to carry a gun. A class starts up next week. In the meantime, I need someone to keep this office in shape while my boys are out on the job. Megan answers the phones, sets up assignments. Until the class starts, you'll vacuum the carpets, see the coffee is always fresh, dust, do whatever needs to be done. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No problem, sir."

"Call me Simon. We're one happy family here."

"No problem, Simon."

"Then I guess you've got the job."

"Thank you. Do you want me to get to work now?"

"No, you're dressed too fine. Besides, there's a shit-load of paperwork you need to fill out." He took out a sheaf of papers and plucked a pen from the coffee cup. "I'll show you the break room. You'll be more comfortable doing this in there."

The door to the break room was across the hall and a little further toward the front of the building. I'd
passed it on my way to Simon's office, giving it just a cursory glance.

It was a good-sized room. There was a small couch and a few easy chairs at one end, with magazines scattered across them. At the other end was a sink with a couple of coffee cups in it, a refrigerator that was slightly larger than the one I had at home, and a table with more cups on it and chairs around it. On the counter beside the sink was a hot plate with a single element, and a percolator. I wrinkled my nose at the smell of the slightly scorched coffee.

"Have a seat." Simon didn't seem to notice the smell. "Bring these back to me when you're done, and I'll show you around."

"Yes, sir. Simon," I corrected myself. "Thank you. You won't be sorry you hired me, I promise you."

"I have no doubt." He patted my arm and left me there. Was this 'Pat Jim Ellison's arm day' today? Did I look like I needed reassurance?

I turned off the hot plate, dumped the grounds into a waste basket and the remains of the coffee into the sink, washed out the pot, then found the can of Chock Full o' Nuts and spooned enough into the basket to make a full pot.

When I had the pot back on the hot plate, I sat down at the table and began to read over the papers. I'd need to do a little tap-dancing to explain the years between the time I'd spent with Jack and now, but I had no doubt I would be successful.

Simon had told me how much I'd be making once I starting working in the field. It wasn't a patch on what I could have made in a night on my hands and knees, but I wasn't doing that any more.

I clicked the pen and started to fill out the papers.

****

A few weeks after I'd moved in, I ran into another tenant. He was in the lobby, hovering by the mailboxes when I went to check my mail.

"Hello." His voice was tentative. He had to be in his early twenties, slim, and with soft blond hair. "I'm new here."

"Hello, New Here. I'm Jim Ellison."

His grays eyes lit up, and he laughed. "I'm Albert Malloy. I'm in apartment 2E."

"I'm in 3E."

"Oh! You're right over me!"

"Yeah, I guess I am." I shut the box and turned the key.

"You didn't get any mail?"

"No." I'd called Steven to let him have my new address, but there was nothing from him - from home.

"Me neither," he sighed. "I'm... I just moved from Boston. I was hoping... " He sighed more deeply. "I guess it was stupid to think they'd write me this soon."
"Your family?"

Albert nodded, looking unhappy, then brightened. "Maybe the mail went to the Y. I was there before I found this apartment, you know. I'll bet it got hung up there!"

I doubted it. He was a babe in the woods, but I wasn't going to tell him and burst his bubble.

"Sure," I said. A scent tickled my nose, and it twitched. Where had I smelled that before? I sniffed discreetly. No aftershave or cologne, but there was definitely the scent of another man on him. "Come on." We walked into the hallway and toward the staircase that led to the upper floors. "Would you like to keep me company over dinner?"

A door at the end of the hallway opened, and the superintendent poked his head out.

"Albie! Hi!"

The kid's face lit up. "Hi, Mr. D."

"What did I tell you?" the super growled playfully.

"Richie," he acknowledged with a shy smile.

"That's right. Hey, I made a pot of spaghetti sauce. You're too skinny. How 'bout I feed you?"

"Oh! I'd really like to, but..." Albie looked at me uncertainly.

"You too, Jim." But I could see I was just an afterthought.

"Nah, that's okay." I shrugged. "I've got to study."

"You really don't mind, Mr. Ellison?"

Jesus, he made me feel old. "Call me Jim. And no, I really don't mind."

"Okay, then. I'd love to join you, Mr... Richie."

"Good, good. You sure, Jim?"

"Yeah. Thanks." I felt something brush against my legs and looked down. "Hi, Tigger." I stooped to rub the spot under his chin.

"See ya, Jim."

"Bye, Jim."

"Bye."

They disappeared into his apartment, and I could hear behind the closed door, "You really gotta eat more, Albie. Not that you wanna wind up fat like me."

"I don't think you're fat, Richie. I like the way you look."

I straightened, shook my head, and trotted up the stairs.

Jack's teachings came in handy. I shot better than the instructor, and I held my own against the small man who taught martial arts. When I completed the course, Simon found a place for me to work in a bank.
"Once you have some experience under your belt, I'll let you play in the big leagues."

"Okay, Simon." I took a dark gray uniform from the rack in the corner of the locker room, changed, and put my street clothes into a locker. I stashed my gun in a briefcase that would hold it until I got to the bank.

Usually I stood just outside the gate that divided the vault with its cash and safety deposit boxes from the rest of the bank, or sometimes to the side of the revolving door at the front of the building, depending on where they wanted me.

Once I even got to stand guard with my hand on the butt of my gun while an armored truck delivered sacks of cash for the payroll of a business that rented four floors of the Empire State Building.

It wasn't a bad job. The pay was okay, and my life was on track.

But jesus, I missed having someone in my bed.

The more so as I realized the scent I'd picked up on Albie had been Richie's, and they were becoming a pair.

****

It was Friday evening. Instead of going clubbing, as I'd done when I'd lived the wild life, I was going out to get my grocery shopping done for the following week. Thursdays and Fridays were the only days grocery stores were open late.

I locked my door and turned to see Richie tacking up some plastic sheets over the front window.

"What are you doing, Richie?"

"Winter's gonna be a bitch this year. Gotta protect the plants."

"That makes sense." I blinked. "You look good, Richie. Have you lost some weight?"

"Yeah." He preened. "I can't expect to keep a cutie like Albie interested if I look like a schlub."

It hadn't been difficult for me to learn that most of the time, when Albie wasn't at work, he was with Richie, cooking, learning to deal with the brute of a furnace in the cellar, or even just sitting around on the sofa watching movies on Picture for a Sunday Afternoon.

"He's an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art, y'know."

I did know. Richie had told me a number of times. I grinned at him. "Where is he now?"

"He went down to Rossetti's deli to see if Mrs. Rossetti has some homemade pasta. I made a nice marinara sauce. It's Friday, y' know."

"Uh..."

"No meat," he explained.

"Yeah. That's right. Well, I've gotta go. I'll see you later, Richie."

"You bet."

It was about eight that evening when I got home.
Albie was sitting on the stairs leading to the upper floors. His elbows were balanced on his knees, and his chin was in his hands.

"Hi, Kid. How was dinner?" I was stunned when he looked up at me, and I saw the tears in his eyes. "What's wrong? Did something happen to Richie?" I pictured pots tipping over and hot sauce or boiling water and pasta spilling all over him and leaving him with third degree burns.

"No." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. "Richie's fine."

I set down the grocery bags and sat beside him. "What's bothering you, then?"

"Richie's at Confession."

"Oh. Well, y'know, Catholics are funny about things like that."

He looked at me as if I were nuts. "I'm Catholic."

"I'm sorry, Albie, I'm not following you."

"I can't go to Confession. I can't go to Mass, and I can't receive Communion."

"Now I'm really not following you."

"I'm a fag!" He gave me a scared look. "I shouldn't have said that. Are you going to punch me?"

"Why would I?"

"Because I'm queer."

"Albie, I've got eyes in my head. I could see you and Richie were together. So you're homosexual. So what?"

"My family doesn't approve. The ... the Church doesn't approve... " He jammed the heel of his hand into his mouth, but I could hear the sob anyway.

"It means that much to you?"

"Of course it does! I was raised Catholic. I was Baptized, made my First Holy Communion, and was Confirmed at St. Therese of the Little Flower. That was where I went to school. And when I graduated there, I went to St. Joseph the Carpenter High School."

"And then you went to Notre Dame?" I was hoping he'd laugh.

Instead, he buried his head in his hands. "I'm going to hell."

"I thought Jesus was a loving god."

His head shot up, and he glared at me. "He is!"

"Then why would he have any objection to who you loved?" I could never understand why God would care one way or another about who his followers loved.

"It's an ecumenical thing." Albie scowled at me.

"Okay. But... Richie is Catholic too, isn't he?"

He nodded glumly. "Yes. He's Italian, you know."
"I really don't get it, Albie."

"Richie loving me and ignoring the Church's rulings? He was in the Korean War. He said, 'If God ain't got no beef with me shootin' gooks, then he shouldn't a oughta gotta problem with me lovin' another guy.' But I wasn't in the army, and... " Tears trickled down his cheeks again. "I want to go to Mass. I want to receive Communion. I don't want to go to hell."

Just then I heard the outer door open, and I recognized Richie's footsteps. I took the handkerchief from Albie's hand and dried his face. "Richie's home."

"How do you know... I don't want him to see me like this, like a crybaby. Please don't tell him!"

He took his handkerchief back and bolted up the stairs. I picked up my bags of groceries.

The lobby door opened, and Richie walked in, blowing on his fingers.

"Hey! Hi, Jim! Boy, I wanna tell you, the father was brutal. He gave me twelve Hail Mary's, twelve Our Father's, and twelve Glory Be's."

I didn't say anything.

"I went to Confession."

"Yeah. The kid said something about that."

He saw my expression and scowled at me. "You think my feelin's for Albie are somethin' I have to confess? I tell the father what he wants to hear - I drink, I swear, I chase tail. I just don't tell him whose tail I chase. I wish I could talk Albie into playin' the game."

So did I. "Well, I've got to put this stuff away. It's cold outside, but it's warm enough in here to melt my ice cream."

"Yeah, okay. I'll see ya."

I climbed up the stairs. On the second floor landing I paused and looked down the corridor to Albie's apartment. The door was closed, but I could have sworn I heard crying.

One of Richie's cats, a calico with a stub of a tail, sauntered to the stairs and went down.

Of course. The sound must have been Rumpleteazer.

I went up to my apartment to put my groceries away.

****

I didn't expect anything from my family for Christmas, which was just as well, because I didn't get anything, not even a freaking card.

But Albie was still living with the hope that his family would get in touch with him, especially at this time of the year.

They didn't.

****

"Ellison."
"Yes, sir?" I'd come in to pick up a clean uniform and my paycheck.

"I need you to take Rafe's evening shifts at Macy's, starting tonight."

"Sure thing, Simon."

Brian Rafe, one of Simon's senior men, had asked to take some time off when a complication in his wife's pregnancy had threatened her life.

Mrs. Rafe and the baby were doing well now. We'd all been up to the hospital to visit them, and had chipped in to buy a crib for the new addition to the Rafe family.

"Renee and the baby should be discharged a couple of days after Christmas if all continues to go well. Her mother will fly out to help them out, and Rafe should be back at work then."

"All right."

"I'm sorry if this interferes with any plans you have, and I'm even more sorry you'll have to work the day-after-Christmas shift." His teeth clamped down on his cigar. "The store will be a madhouse."

"I can handle it, Simon." I'd been in stores the day after Christmas, when everyone was desperate to return gifts they hadn't really wanted, and that could be downright scary, but I didn't want my boss to think I couldn't do it.

"I knew I could count on you. Someone Jack vouched for... " He nodded and handed me my pay envelope.

So I pulled two shifts a day during the week and an additional one at Macy's on Saturday, and I tucked away the extra money in my paycheck in my safe deposit box.

Well, I had no one to spend it on.

Macy's stayed open late on Christmas Eve, taking advantage of the people who seemed to be comfortable waiting for the last minute to get their shopping done.

I caught a bus and looked through the windows as snow began falling. We were going to have a white Christmas.

The bus stop was a couple of blocks away from the brownstone where I lived, but the bus driver was feeling the joy of the season, and he let me off right in front of 852.

"Thanks," I said. "Merry Christmas."

The entire bus called back, "Merry Christmas!" New York could be a tough city, but it was a marshmallow during the holidays.

The warmth of the season, the warmth in the lobby, it felt good. I decided I'd stop by Richie's apartment and wish him a Merry Christmas. And Albie too. I had a strong feeling he would be there.

I was right.

"Merry Christmas, Jim." Albie offered me a smile, but I could see the tiny tremors that ran through him.

"Merry Christmas."
"We were just going to have a cup of coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"Sure, Albie. Thanks."

He went into the kitchen. His stride was less than jaunty, and his shoulders were slumped.

Richie was looking after him.

"How is Albie handling it?"

"Handlin' which? No word from his family on Christmas or not bein' welcome in his own church?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I dunno, Jim. He says he's okay. I don't think so. Bastard family. How could they do that to him? Well, fuck 'em, that's their loss. Tomorrow Albie an' me're spendin' Christmas with my sister an' her family, out on Long Island."

"Do they know about you?"

"They know that Albie's my friend. I told my sister that his family was gonna be in Switzerland skiin', an' he couldn't go. Florie and Pat and Christopher have already met Albie, an' they like him. An' y'know something, Jim? My brother-in-law may be a pain-in-the-ass, but he treats that boy of his like he was made outta gold. That's how Albie shoulda been treated."

"That's the truth." I looked at my watch. "You're going to be late for Midnight Mass."

"I ain't goin'. Poor kid. He needs to know that he means more to me than the Church." He was quiet for a few minutes, then, "I'm gonna take him to Times Square on New Year's Eve. We'll ring in the New Year there, then go to the Cafe Carlyle for a champagne toast. Bobby Short's gonna be playin' there." He touched my arm. "Jim, you wanna come with us?"

"I don't want to be a crowd, Richie."

"You won't be, Jim." He looked over his shoulder. Albie was still fussing in the kitchen, taking a tin of cookies from the cabinet, putting milk in the creamer, getting the sugar bowl, pouring the coffee. "You know what this town can be like."

"Yeah." The Stonewall Inn had been raided again just the week before. At least the raid had been early enough in the evening so the Inn could re-open again in time for the midnight-and-later crowd, when things started hopping. "All right, Richie. I don't have anything planned, and I'd like to see the ball drop with you two," I didn't tell him that I'd usually spent New Year's Eve in a hotel suite, being paid for my time, "but I'll leave you and Albie to have that drink by yourselves."

"Jim, I wanna thank you. Ain't many straight guys in this town who'd accept me an' Albie an' not get ugly about it."

Richie thought I was straight? Before I could correct his notion, Albie came out of the kitchen carrying a tray with three cups, sugar and milk, and a plate with pinnoli cookies.

"Albie made 'em."

The kid blushed. "From your sister's recipe."

"Flore gave that to you?" Richie raised an eyebrow. "That was Mama's recipe, an' it ain't never left the family." He grinned and turned on the TV to channel 11.

We settled on the sofa and watched the Yule log burn. Albie fell asleep with his head on Richie's
shoulder, Richie looked down at the fair head with an expression that caused my heart to clutch. A look like that had never been directed at me, not by Randy Beautiful, not even by Jack.

Richie took the empty coffee cup from lax fingers, eased the kid's head onto the sofa back, and rose. "I'll just get this cleaned up. No need for Albie to have to do it when he wakes up."

"I'd better be going, Richie." I followed him into the kitchen and put my cup into the sink. "Thanks for the cookies and coffee."

"Thanks for coming by, Jim." He put his hand on my shoulder, then walked with me to his front door. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Richie. Tell Albie I said, 'Merry Christmas.'"

"I will. Goodnight, Jim." He closed the door.

As I walked down the corridor to the stairs, I could hear the snick of the lock, and I shook my head. Richie really needed to see about oiling that lock.

****

By the time New Year's Eve rolled around, Rafe was back working his shift at Macy's, and I was back to the single shift at the bank. The snow had melted, which was a good thing, because the temperature was dropping into the single digits. We dressed warm and went up to Times Square, and we watched the ball come down, just three guys celebrating the holiday stag.

Even after the ball had gone down, Times Square was mobbed. There were so many people.

I caught the hint of a scent, and my nose twitched, and my cock got hard. I had no trouble recognizing it - the man leaving Banks the day I'd been hired by Simon. Megan had looked interested when I'd asked her about him, but she wouldn't tell me his name. 'Simon does some work for him from time to time. All I can tell you is that he's a Jewish cop in a city where every other cop is Irish.'

"Jim." Richie's hand was on my arm. "I'm takin' Albie for that drink. You really don't mind?"

"No - no, that's fine." I had a feeling if I went east, I'd find my mystery man. "Have a good time. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Jim." They walked toward an uptown subway entrance.

I looked around, hoping I would see the possessor of that tantalizing scent, but with no luck. He was gone.

There was no reason for me to stay. I headed for the downtown subway and lucked out. A #6 was just pulling up to the platform. The car I entered was crowded. These people were probably going on to another party or maybe to a lover's pad. They'd be out until the early morning hours.

I stepped to the center of the car and grasped an overhead strap. The doors slid shut, and as the train rolled into motion, I lost myself in the sound of the car clattering over the rails and rocking from side to side.

A jab in the ribs brought me back to the present with a jolt.

"Well, well. If it isn't Jim Ellison." Randy Beautiful, and he'd had more than a bit too much to drink.
"Hello, Randy. Happy New Year." Treating a client politely was force of habit.

"I never thought I'd see you riding a subway."

"I could say the same."

"Hi, Jim!"

"Jeff! Happy New Year!" We embraced, pounding each other on the back.

"The same to you, you old horse!" Jeff was my height and weight. His hair was a little darker than mine and about the length mine used to be when I was in the business. His eyes were the same cool blue. We'd worked together a few times, passing ourselves off as brothers. Some clients liked that.

"Shut up, Jeff! I paid for you!" Randy was almost foaming at the mouth. "Don't you fucking say a word to this... this..."

"Problem, gentlemen?" A Transit cop, his winter jacket opened, and his gun visible, approached us. Randy ignored him and curled his lip at me. "So who're you screwing now, whore?"

Jeff's eyes widened, but he kept his mouth shut. I understood. As Randy had said, he'd paid for him.

"Listen, sir. This is the first day of the new year. There's no need to be unpleasant about it."

"Piss off, pig." Randy made the mistake of trying to shove the cop. He lost his balance and hit the floor of the subway car.

Jeff gazed at Randy pensively. He looked at the floor of the subway car, looked at his designer trousers, and his expression seemed to say, 'Not in this lifetime am I kneeling on that.'

The cop shook his head. "He giving you a hard time, sir?" He reached down and helped Randy get back to his feet, brushing the back of his psychedelic jacket.

"Why are you asking him that? He's trash!" Randy sneered at me drunkenly.

The cop looked at me, at the black wool coat I was wearing and the white silk scarf around my neck. He looked at Randy, dressed in tie-died bell-bottoms in scarlet, chartreuse, and magenta, with the matching jacket and a hat that slanted across his forehead at an odd angle.

"Yeah, I can see that." His words were dry.

Randy turned his sneer on the cop. "You're trash!"

"No need to get nasty, sir." The train pulled into a station, and the doors slid open. "You'd better go home and sleep it off."

Randy sneered some more, straightened his shoulders, and strode out of the subway car, only to stumble as he took his first step onto the platform. Jeff tried to loop his arm in Randy's and steady him, but he was brushed away.

"Idiot!" Randy stalked off, his gait as controlled as a drunk's could be. Jeff met my eyes, shrugged, and followed him. A hustler's life could be rough.

"Thanks, Officer."
"You're welcome. There are a lot of tourists in New York for the New Year. We can't let people like him go around giving this city a bad name. Happy New Year."

"Uh... Happy New Year."

****

I went down to Banks to pick up my bonus check.

Because of the very favorable report he had received from Macy's, and because New Year's Eve fell early in the week, Simon had given me that whole week off.

"You're almost ready for the big leagues, Jim!" There was pleasure in his voice, and he handed me an envelope that contained my bonus check. "Good work."

"Thanks, Simon." I hadn't had much free time - hadn't really wanted it - since I'd started working for him in August; I wasn't sure what I was going to do with myself.

As if I'd spoken the words aloud, he suggested, "You can go for a carriage ride around Central Park, Jim. Take your best gal. Or your best pal." He grinned around his fat cigar.

"Thanks for the advice, Simon." I shook his hand and left.

There was no point in telling him that neither was likely to happen. Aside from cruising the Baths once when I'd been desperate to hold a warm body, there had only been me and my hand.

For a minute, as I waited to board the bus that would take me to my bank on 23rd Street, I thought wistfully of Simon's detective.

Then I sighed and got on the bus. I'd cash the check, stash the bills in my safety box, and maybe go to the movies.

The movie house in SoHo was showing a couple of Sidney Poitier films: In the Heat of the Night and Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.

It might not be a carriage ride with my best pal, but it would be something to do.

****

It was the first week in March. As I left my apartment to go to work, I was surprised to see Albie by the front window, watering the flowers. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Jim! Hello! I'm so glad to see you!" He put down his watering can and came toward me, almost bouncing.

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I'm taking the day off. Richie isn't feeling well. He caught a cold."

"So you're taking care of him?"

"Yes. He's a wonderful man, Jim."

"You both are." I smiled at him and started down the stairs. I was glad they were happy together.

"Just one second, Jim?"
I paused. "Yeah?"

"Richie told me you work for a security firm."

"Yes, Banks."

"The Museum is having a Salvador Dali exhibition."

"That's... uh... that's nice."

"The thing is, we need additional guards for the afternoon, evening, and weekend shifts. Would you be interested?"

"You'll have to clear it with my boss, Simon Banks." I gave him a business card with the phone number on it.

"Thanks, Jim."

"Tell Richie I hope he feels better."

Albie gave me a vivid smile and went back to watering the plants, and I went to work.

That evening, Simon called me. "Thanks for the referral, Jim. I've taken on the job. There's a spot on the weekend shift open, Sunday from 10:30 to 5:30. It's only until the beginning of April. Do you want it?"

"Sure." It would keep me busy. I took whatever Simon could give me.

"Good. I'll fill you in when I see you on payday."

****

My uniform was gray, my gun was discreetly tucked away, and I would walk through the exhibit, trying to blend in with the surroundings.

No good deed goes unpunished. Who should come in about an hour before the Museum was scheduled to close my first Sunday there, but Randy Beautiful.

"Well, well, well. Isn't it a small world?"

"Hello, Randy." The odor of alcohol on his breath was so strong I couldn't prevent myself from flinching.

"Wassa... " He cleared his throat. "What's the matter?"

"Isn't it a little early to have started drinking?"

"It has to be eight o'clock somewhere in the world. 'Sides, I only had one little one."

"Randy!" Tugging his sleeve was a young man who had to be his latest lover. His looks were enough to make a thinking man catch his breath.

I guessed I wasn't a thinking man.

"Shut up, Chris. You're just supposed to stand beside me and look pretty." Randy slanted a glance at me. "And be good in bed."
Chris stiffened, then turned to me. "Can you tell me where the men's room is?"

"Of course. Go to the end of this corridor," I pointed, "and turn left."

"Thank you." He walked away, brisk, and... angry?

"Always thought you were God's gift, didn't you?" Randy sniped. "Who'd've thought you of all people would wind up with an honest job?"

"What I did was honest, Randy. I gave you your money's worth."

"Until you walked out on me."

"I couldn't be what you wanted, Randy. I'm sorry about that."

For a brief moment I saw regret in his eyes, then he turned and leered at the retreating form. "He's better than you ever were!"

"How fortunate for you."

"The only good thing you ever did was hire Maria Hernandez."

"Maria is still with you?" When I'd first moved in with him, he had just fired the last in a very long line of cleaning women. I'd offered to find someone. She told me she was from Puerto Rico, and I accepted that, even though I recognized her accent as Mexican.

"She won't leave. She knows if she ever tried to, I'd turn her in to INS. She's a wetback."

How had he found out about that? I thought I'd covered Maria's tracks. My expression must have given me away.

"I have friends in the right places, Jimbo." Randy smirked. "I think I'll just go and make sure Chris doesn't get lost." He swaggered away.

I stared after him, wondering if I should be concerned. I could see him getting a little tight during the holidays, but on a March Sunday... that didn't make any sense.

The head of the Museum's own security came over. "Trouble, Jim?"

Randy wasn't my concern any longer, but we had been lovers once. Maybe I owed him at least something for that time.

"Would you mind if I checked up on them? The gentleman seems a little under the weather."

"Is that what they call being bombed these days? Go ahead, Jim. The museum will be closing soon, and it's starting to empty out. I think we can handle the crowd," he looked around at the almost empty space, "until you get back."

"Thanks, Mike."

When I got to the men's room, I found the door locked. I could hear low grunts and moans, and I rattled the knob and knocked on the door.

"It's in use."

"There's more than one stall, Randy."
"Jim! Fuck, I'm not done! Just a second!" There were more grunts, a satisfied moan, and then rustling sounds. Finally the door swung open, and Randy stood there, his dick tucked away, but his trousers undone.

"I'm sorry. Fire rules." I walked toward him, forcing him to step back. "This door must be kept unlocked at all times. Zip your pants, Randy. I could haul you in for indecent exposure. Are you all right?" I asked his companion.

"Yes. I'm fine." He didn't look fine. His mouth was swollen, and white liquid - I knew it was semen - spotted his tie and jacket. His eyes had a strange look in them, almost... He blinked, and it was gone. He went to a sink, washed his hands, then patted his mouth with the dampened paper towel. "Randy?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Let's go. Goodbye, Jim."

They walked out, and I was relieved to see the back of my former lover. It was a small world, but maybe if I was lucky, I wouldn’t see him again.

****

According to the calendar, spring was only a matter of days away, but that was hard to believe. Sleet was spitting on the streets in sheets.

I was getting dressed for work when someone started pounding on my door so hard I thought it was going to rattle off its hinges. I hadn't put my shoes on yet, and I skidded across the floor as I ran to open it.

Richie was standing there, dancing from foot to foot, looking frazzled and at his wits' end.

"Jesus, Richie. What's wrong?"

"It's Albie!"

"What's the matter with him?"

"He caught a cold!"

"Uh... Richie? There's been a lot of that going around. We've had nothing but crummy weather since the day after New Year's. Everyone's had a cold or the flu."

"Albie caught my cold. He's miserable! He came home early from the Museum yesterday an' didn't even tell me!"

"Didn't you think it was strange that he didn't come down to your place?"

"I didn't wanna crowd him. Sometimes he likes to be by himself."

"So how did you find out he was sick?"

"We usually have breakfast together, y'know? an' this mornin' when he don't show up, I go up to his apartment. I had to let myself in with my master key. I ain't seen him since yesterday mornin'. 'Hey. Albie,' I yell. 'Are you mad at me or somethin'? 'No. I'm fine. Go 'way,' he says from the bedroom. And then I hear him start coughin' like he's gonna puke up a lung. So in I go, an' there he is, layin' in bed. Sick as a dog, I tell ya!"
"Are you okay, Richie?" It hadn't been that long since he'd been sick.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But I can't leave him. Jim, would you mind goin' grocery shoppin' for us? Aw fuck, you got work! Never mind, I can call... I'll call... "

There really wasn't anyone else in the building he could call. Except for Albie and me, the rest of the tenants were on the shady side of sixty, and the cold made their bones ache miserably. And if they sat with Albie while Richie did the shopping, most likely they'd get sick.

"It's okay, Richie. I'll call the bank and tell them I'll be late. Give me your list."

"You're a good man, Jim. Gimme a couple a minutes to write it up, okay?"

"Go ahead. I'll make that call and be right down."


I dialed the bank's number. "It's Jim Ellison. I have to help out a friend, so I'll be a little late."

"Sure thing, Jim. Pat can hold the fort until you get here."

"Thanks. I'll be in as soon as I can." I hung up and got myself together. Shoes on and laced up. Gun in its holster at my hip. Coat over my arm.

All set. I trotted down to the first floor and paused at the lobby door. Richie probably hadn't had time to check if the newspaper had been delivered.

I opened the door.

The Daily News was lying on the radiator in the lobby. Richie always gave the paperboy a good tip, and the kid always saw to it that in bad weather, like today, the paper was inside and dry.

I picked it up and carried it to Richie's apartment.

Albie was lying on the sofa, his head propped on a bunch of pillows and an afghan Richie's sister had crocheted tucked around his legs. A TV tray holding a box of tissues and a glass of orange juice was next to him.

"How are you feeling, Albie?"

"Awful!" he moaned, his voice hoarse. "I'm dying!"

"I ain't gonna let you!" Richie yelled from the kitchen. "I'm gonna make you some of my gramma's chicken soup, and you're gonna be tiptop before you know it."

"No, I won't." Albie blew his nose noisily. He saw the newspaper I held. "What's happening in the world outside, Jim? Richie won't let me watch television. He's getting even with me. I wouldn't let him watch As the World Turns."

"I heard that!" Richie yelled "An' I ain't tryin' to get even!"

I laughed softly. "It's the same old thing, Albie. You know - murder, mayhem. And I'm not just talking about the city."

As I'd hoped, that made him laugh. I tossed my coat over the back of the sofa and thumbed through
the pages, reading the items I thought he’d find interesting.

A small article on page seven caught my eye.

"Oh, fuck!" I stared at it in shock.

"Jim? Richie, get in here!"

"What's wrong?" Richie came running in.

"Jim swore!" Albie sneezed and fumbled for a tissue.

"What happened?"

"Someone I knew was killed, strangled."

"Oh, my God!"

"Yeah. I ran into him at the Museum on Sunday!" And I’d wished I’d never see him again. I bunched up the paper and tossed it to the end of the couch, feeling a little sick. "The article said he was found in his penthouse apartment by Marc, who... uh... lives on that floor."

Albie had reached down for the paper and was scanning the article. "Jim, it just says 'another tenant on that floor.' You know his neighbor's name?"

"It's a small world." I didn't want to tell him I'd lived with Randy and I'd gotten to know Marc at a party I had thrown for Randy's birthday. "Anyway, Marc called the police. The detective on the case said it was well-planned, well-executed. Jesus, whoever did this is going to think he's being complimented!"

"I'm sure it wasn't meant that way, Jim."

"So am I, Albie. But will someone nutty enough to strangle a stranger believe that?" I went still. Randy was paranoid about letting strangers into his place. He’d had a fit when he'd come home and found Marc in the kitchen swapping recipes with me.

"It's a crazy world." Richie shook his head. "Listen, Jim, forget about the grocery shoppin'. I'll call Mrs. Rossetti, an' her boy can run some groceries up here when he gets home from school. You go see about your friend."

Randy wasn't a friend. He was just someone I'd slept with for a time. "The article in the newspaper says he... his body hasn't been released yet. Let me have the list. Albie should have that chicken soup. I'll get the shopping done and find out where Randy'll be laid out when I get back."

"I understand, Jim. You need to keep busy." Albie looked tired but intent.

"Richie?"

"Okay, my little cannoli." Richie caressed Albie's hair and received a smile that was a little soggy but otherwise incandescent. He returned it in spades, went into the kitchen, and came back with the list.

"Thanks, Richie." I grabbed it and my coat, and headed out the door. I'd call Simon later and see if I could have the day off. If I couldn't... I shrugged. Then I couldn't.

****
The wake was being held the next evening, and only that evening. The soft-voiced man on the other end of the line told me Randy's parents were having his body flown home to Maryland on Thursday morning. They'd probably have the viewing there for a couple of days, and on Saturday, he'd be buried in the family plot.

I didn't want to go to the wake, but I felt I had to. After all, I'd had Randy's dick in my mouth and my ass. The least I could do was go to pay my last respects.

It was raining. Again. Anyone would have thought it was April instead of March.

The front door of Canis and Sons Funeral Home was protected by a canopy. Once I was under it, I shook off my umbrella and closed it, entered the building, and put the umbrella into a stand.

A sad-faced man in a somber black suit sat at the desk just inside the door, and he rose to greet me.

"Good evening, sir. I'm August Canis, Jr. Who are you here to see?"

I told him.

"Ah, yes. So sad. The guest book is right here." I picked up the pen and signed it. "If you will come this way?" He led me down a long corridor to a room on the left and opened the door. "Such a popular young man. We had to elongate the room to accommodate all his friends. My condolences."

"Thank you."

He nodded and returned to his desk.

The room set aside for Randy was crowded with men. I recognized most of them. Some had been clients; some had been colleagues. They came to shake my hand, touch my arm, say a few words.

Two black men, one very tall and the other shorter and a little stocky, didn't stroll so much as stalk around the room, while they tried to appear inconspicuous. They were definitely not gay.

There were a few women too. They stayed close to men who were conservatively dressed. I assumed they represented the brokerage firm Randy worked for.

I turned my attention to the front of the room where the mahogany coffin with its champagne velvet interior held pride of place.

A blanket of white roses covered the closed end of the casket and draped over the bier. I could see the broad swath of ribbon that read: Beloved Son.

Banked around the casket and lining the walls were baskets, sprays, wreaths, and hearts - roses, orchids, other exotic blooms.

My contribution was a bronze vase filled with early spring flowers.

I started to walk toward the casket.

"Jim!"

"Jeff!" We hugged.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah. How are you?"
"I'm good, thanks. And you?"

"I'm good."

"I can't believe that Randy... He called me a couple of times after you left. New Year's Eve was the last time." His mouth twisted. "He called me 'Jim'. Not that I minded. You're not an easy act to follow."

"Thanks. I'm surprised, though. He was acting cool to me toward the end."

"You think Richard was behind that?"

Richard Lee was a close friend of Randy's. He had wanted to share me, and Randy would have let him, but I'd put my foot down. Richard had a reputation among my colleagues, and it wasn't a good one.

"Yeah. Richard always was a dick."

Jeff bit back a laugh. "Yeah." He glanced toward the mahogany casket. "We weren't sure if you'd be here tonight."

"I'd be here. Professional courtesy."

"Who are they?" He gestured discreetly toward the women and men glancing from Randy to the other men scattered around the room.

"His colleagues from work, I would think. From the looks of it, we're a surprise to them."

"I think you're right. I wonder how this will go over on Wall Street tomorrow?"

"Not our worry." A very good-looking man walked into the room and looked around. His face lit up when he saw Jeff. "A... friend?"

"A good friend. I've got to go. I'll just say a final prayer."

I walked with him to the casket. He bowed his head, and I assumed he was praying. I just stared at the body of the man who had once been my lover.

He was dressed in his favorite tuxedo, and he looked serene, an expression I'd never seen on him before. An excellent job had been done on his face, although I could see layers of cover-up the mortician had probably needed to conceal the bruising from the fingers that had dug into Randy's throat.

Abruptly I was overwhelmed by the odor of the room - cologne, deodorant, fresh flowers, and the furnace in the basement that warmed the air. Underlying it all was the smell of formaldehyde, and I couldn't stand it. I couldn't...

A hand on my arm brought me back to the present.

"Are you okay, Jim?" Jeff asked.

I was mortified. "I'm fine," I said gruffly, brushing the hand away. I thought I heard a sigh.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."
"If you're sure." He touched my shoulder, and I realized abruptly that it hadn't been Jeff's hand on my arm. "I have to go, Jim. It was good seeing you again."

"You, too." I took a quick glance around, but there was no one close to me. "Take care of yourself, Jeff."

We shook hands, and he joined his friend. They went around the room, speaking with other men and shaking hands, and then left.

I looked around once more, hoping I'd be able to spot the man who'd brought me out of the daze, but with no luck.

*You've stayed long enough, Ellison.* I started toward the door.

"Going somewhere, leather boy?" It was Richard Lee.

"I'm going home."

"You've got some nerve. You walk out on him, then show up at his funeral?"

"What was between Randy and me was between Randy and me." I hadn't had much choice. Randy had left me long before I'd walked out that door.

On occasion I'd seen the way Richard had looked at Randy, as if he wanted to possess him. I wondered if Richard had been the reason for Randy becoming so distant.

"This is your fault, do you realize that, Ellison?" Richard ignored what I had said. "If you had been with him, this wouldn't have happened."

"What? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Why the fuck didn't you stay with him? Listen, the last time I saw him was Sunday, when he came to the Museum of Modern Art. He was with someone named... " It took me a second to dredge up the name. "... Chris."

"Chris was with Randy? That means that Chris was probably the last person to see him alive! Except for his killer."

"Why didn't you tell me this, Mr. Lee?"

I recognized that voice, and with him standing close enough that the odors in the room didn't overwhelm it, I recognized his scent.

Standing there with his hands in his trouser pockets was Simon's detective. He grinned at me, and I fell into his eyes, those blue eyes, and was lost looking at him.

*We were running hand-in-hand along a beach with sand as white as sugar. We were diving into an ocean as blue as his eyes. We were rolling over silk sheets, and that gorgeous hair of his was stroking over my naked body...*

"Hey! What's wrong?" Once again a hand on my arm brought me out of my daze, and I realized that it had been this detective who had done it. "Are you all right, big guy?"
I could sense his interest. More than that, I could smell it, smell the pheromones rolling off him.

"I've never been better, Chief." I smiled and shifted to ease the tightness of my trousers.

He let me go and faced Richard, and I felt bereft. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what? Detective Sandburg." Richard's acknowledgment was sour.

**Sandburg?** So that was what Megan meant when she called him a Jewish cop in a city full of Irish cops.

"I asked you about his friends." He gestured toward Randy. "You didn't mention this 'Chris'."

"Chris was not a friend."

"Oh? Then what would he be considered?"

"He was just a fling, a good time boy, a fun time on a Saturday night."

"But as I understand it, he spent more than one Saturday night with this man."

"What are you insinuating?"

"I'm not insinuating anything. What I'm saying is if I see someone a lot, that makes him more than a fling or a fun time on a Saturday night. At least to me."

"You? You're just a cop. You wouldn't know how we do things."

"Wouldn't I?" Detective Sandburg rocked back and forth, grinning as if he knew something Richard didn't. I had to swallow. I was starting to drool. "So. What's the info on this Chris character?"

Richard shrugged. "I have no idea. Randy did not see fit to reveal his secrets to all and sundry."

"Bullshit," I said. "He may not have spilled his guts to all and sundry, but he certainly told you everything, Richard." I was glad to get a shot at him.

"That is bull... " He cleared his throat. "That is to say, that is a complete and utter lie!"

"Listen to me, sunshine." Detective Sandburg appeared to be losing patience. "I've got a dead man, and no one who wants to cooperate. So either you tell me what you know, or I'll arrest you for obstructing an investigation."

Richard backed down so fast I was surprised he didn't fall on his ass. "Well, er... none of us had met this Chris person."

"That doesn't sound like Randy. He loved showing me off."

Detective Sandburg looked interested, and I wondered - if we were together, would he love to show me off? Would he like me in leather? His hand on my arm brought me to the present once again, and I smiled at him. He smiled back.

"Yes, well, you aren't Chris." Trust Richard to state the obvious. "Randy talked - had talked - about him. Vivacious and fun-loving, and a body to die for. Not like you."

No, not like me. When Randy realized I was having a problem with my senses, with all my senses, my looks didn't matter for squat. The bloom wore off quickly after that.
"From what I can see, you've got a damned nice body," Detective Sandburg said softly.

My jaw dropped, and I stared at him. "You think so?"

"I think so what?"

"That I've... " He looked confused. "Never mind." I turned back to Richard. "So why didn't he introduce Chris to all of you?"

"I'm sure it was just a matter of time, leather boy. Randy had no doubt finally found someone who loved him."

"Maybe he did, but it doesn't seem like a smart choice." I pointed to Randy lying in his coffin. "And you can't have it both ways, Dick. Either Chris meant nothing to Randy, or he was Randy's own true love."

Richard clenched his fingers and pulled back his arm, about to punch me. I swung around and brought my fists up, ready to face him, and Detective Sandburg stepped between us. Richard had about six inches over him, but the detective was unfazed. He easily caught Richard's fist.

"Uh uh uh. Play nice, kiddies." He released Richard. "So tell me, Mr. Lee. What is Chris's last name?"

Richard shrugged. "That is something Randy never told us."

"He isn't here, is he? I mean, no one's come running over to point him out. Where does he live?"

"That is something else Randy never told us. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to pay my respects."

"Asshole," Detective Sandburg muttered. I tried to bite back a laugh, but I wasn't successful, and I got a number of disapproving looks from the people Randy had worked with.

"Sorry, I'd better go. I'm wearing out my welcome." I held out my hand. "It was nice meeting you, Detective."

He smiled and took my hand. The feel of his palm against mine was like an electrical shock, and I shivered.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Ellison."

Yes! My heart started Boogalooing. "Call me Jim, Chief. Please."

"Jim," he smiled again, and my knees wobbled, "and I'm Blair. Have I seen you before?"

"Maybe at Banks? I work for Simon."

"You're his newest security guard? I'm impressed. He's had nothing but good things to say about you!"

"Thank you. He's a good man to work for."

"He is a good man. I've known him since the Academy." He drew me toward an empty corner at the back of the room.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?"
"You said you'd seen the man who was with," he gestured to the coffin. "Can you describe him?"

"Usually I'm pretty good with descriptions, but this time... All I can tell you about Chris is that he was maybe the most gorgeous man I've ever seen."

"The most gorgeous man you've ever seen?" Blair repeated. "I see." Was it my imagination, or did he sound disappointed?

"Yeah. But he didn't do anything for me."

"He didn't?"

"No. There was something off about his looks."

"How do you mean 'off'?"

"I don't know. He was using... not makeup. Greasepaint? I think it smelled like greasepaint. I dated a guy once who was on Broadway."

"You were that close to him?"

"The guy on Broadway? It was just a fling. Oh, you mean Chris, who was with Randy." I widened my eyes innocently, and he cuffed my arm and laughed. "Actually I wasn't too close, but he must have layered it on with a trowel. I had no trouble smelling it. It may have just been me, though. It didn't seem to bother Randy, and he was all over him."

"Oh?"

"Chris went down on him in the men's room."

"Hmmm. What about distinguishing features?"

"You mean if he had a scar or bushy eyebrows or a really huge nose?"

"Yeah."

"No. Gorgeous, remember?" I took a chance and flirted, "Now you - you've got a sweet nose. I could never forget it."

"You think I've got a sweet nose?" He brought his fingers up to his nose, and I could tell the gesture was involuntary, but pleased.

I relaxed and grinned. "Yeah, I do." I glanced at my watch. "It's getting late, and I've got work in the morning. I'd better go."

"Can I call you? I mean, if I have any more questions?"

"Sure. If you have any more questions. I'll give you my phone number." I remembered I hadn't thought to being a pen. "Do you have a pen?"

"Yeah." He patted himself down. "Damn, I must have left it on my desk. Hey, Taggart! Over here."

Whoever was in the path of the big black detective got out of it quickly. "Yeah, Blair?"

"Pen?"
He laughed and shook his head. "You lost another one?"

"It isn't lost. It's simply... not on my person."

"Right." He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. "Here you go. Make sure you don't lose this one."

"Yeah, yeah." He gave it to me.

"Thanks." I didn't ask for a piece of paper. I clicked the Bic, opened his palm, and wrote down my phone number. He trembled and flushed, and as much as I wanted to tease him, draw my tongue over the numbers I had written, I didn't.

"I'll be in touch in the morning. No, wait. You'll be at work..."

"Yes. And I've already had a day off."

"I'll call you in the evening, then."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you. Bye, Blair."

"Bye, Jim."

I handed the pen back to the man beside him. "Detective Taggert."

"Yeah, bye, Jim." Taggert chuckled when Blair hit his arm. "What? I was just being sociable." I was almost out the door when Taggert said, "So, Blair. Learn anything?"

"Yeah." Blair's voice was dreamy. "He thinks I have a sweet nose." He cleared his throat. "I mean no. He couldn't give me a description of the man who was with the deceased."

"But you're going to question him again tomorrow."

"Why not? A good night's sleep might shake up the little gray cells."

"Keep telling yourself that. You just want to see him again." But there was no hostility in his words, and I was relieved.

"Did you learn anything, Joel?"

"Just that some of these men didn't like the deceased. I've got names."

"Good work. Get H. We may as well..."

I didn't learn what they may as well were going to do. Mr. Canis approached with my umbrella.

"Shall I call you a cab, sir?"

I could hear the rain beating on the pavement outside.

"Yes, please. This is no night to wait for a bus."

While I waited, I hoped Blair would come out into the corridor, but he didn't.

"Your cab is here, sir."

"Thank you." I ran out into the rain, got into the cab, and told the driver, "852 East 14th Street."
"Got it."

****

The phone was ringing as I let myself into my apartment. I crossed to the kitchen and took the receiver off the wall.

"Ellison."

"Hi." A warm voice.

"Blair?"

"Yeah. I wanted to make sure you got home okay."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I couldn't wait until tomorrow to talk to you again."

"Oh." My stomach started doing somersaults.

"I hope you don't mind?"

"I don't mind." I caught the phone between my shoulder and my ear, and shrugged out of my overcoat. "Are you still at the funeral home?"

"Yes. Everyone's left. I'm about to leave."

"So... uh... would you like to come by... " Now and make wild, sweaty love with me? I cleared my throat. "... tomorrow night for dinner?"

"I'd like that."

I let out a breath. "Great. About seven?"

"That will be fine."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow night at seven. Goodnight, Blair."

"Wait a second! Don't hang up! I need your address!"

"Of course. Sorry. Do you have a pen?"

"Shit. Okay, listen, I have a good memory. Reel it off."

"I'm in the East Village. 852 East 14th, 3E. Got it?"

"Yeah. I've got it. I'll see you tomorrow. Oh, and Jim?" His voice was like a velvet caress.

"Yes?"

There was a long pause, and then he blew out a breath. "Sleep well, big guy."

"You too, Chief." I had a feeling that wasn't what he was going to say. "Goodnight."

"Night, Jim."
I didn't think I'd be able to fall asleep right away, but I did. And when I dreamed, I dreamed of him.
Mother was beautiful. Her eyes were the blue of a summer sky, and her hair was the color of gold, as clichéd as that might sound. She had a boyish figure, and yet in spite of her slenderness, men would turn and praise her with their eyes.

Father - he was of no consequence. He owned the theater where Mother appeared. He wooed and won her - but did not deserve her - and they married. Eventually I made my appearance. That was the first time - the only time - that Mother missed an opening night.

*I do not believe she ever forgave me that.*

What was I thinking? We were famously close. After Father - was gone, it was Mother and I, the two of us.

When Mother passed on, I was lost. I could not allow myself to fall to pieces, however. Mother would have disapproved most strongly.

Why I chose to do this... That was my concern alone.

It had taken me a good deal of time to create the plan that would see my triumph. It had been like writing an award-winning play. Every action, every word, was polished, a work of art, and the actor had to be carefully chosen.

It was not my first, but I intended it to be my most notable.

Joseph Bishop was slightly older than I, and he saw what I wanted him to see, a young man selling encyclopedias.

What a fool the man was! As if anyone sold encyclopedias door-to-door any more.

I succeeded, and the feel of the flesh of his throat under my fingers was almost - not sexual, of course not sexual. It was... intoxicating, for I had outwitted him.

Once he ceased breathing, I dragged him into the bathroom. I stood over him as he lay sprawled on the commode. I was tempted to stroke a hand over the hardness hidden within my trousers, but I overcame the temptation. "Goodbye, my precious."

It was perfect… but it was ignored!

IT. WAS. IGNORED!

There had been nothing about it, not a single word, in any of the city's newspapers. Not *The Daily News*, not *The New York Post*, and most hurtfully, not *The New York Times*.

I was furious, but I could not call the newspapers to take them to task. How could I, when no one...
I pondered the debacle carefully, and it came to me. The error was not in my plan, but in the actor. He had been the wrong man. It would be a simple matter to correct that.

I would select another man to play the part, and this time they would pay attention to me.

It took some time, but when I found him, he was exactly right. Blond hair, blue eyes. Oh, yes. He was just the one for the part.

I sat before Mother's make-up mirror in the dressing room that had been hers, which I had forbidden any of the other actors to use.

My hair was a nondescript brown, my eyes the same. Father had not even let me have that of Mother. I was glad I had...

I pushed that thought away and proceeded to become the character I had selected. I put in blue contact lenses and a hair piece the color my quarry seemed to prefer, a lighter shade than my brown.

As I rose, I glanced at the portrait Lancaster had done of Mother as Medea. It had been her most famous role, and his most famous work.

I had cared for neither that painting nor the man, although Mother had appeared fond enough of him, and Father - he did not seem to care one way or the other.

I left the dressing room, making sure I was unseen.

It took longer than I had anticipated to gain this man's trust. I had to let him - touch me, whisper abominable things in my ear, but once again I succeeded. This time I drew a lipstick kiss on his forehead.

Mother had often kissed my forehead before she left for a performance. "Goodnight, my precious," she would say, and I would go to bed and fall asleep with the impression of her kiss there.

She would become angry - with the maid, I knew - when the maid brought her the lipstick-smeared pillow cases.

I would not think of that. Mother loved me, she would always hug and kiss me. I would make her proud of me.

The next day, notice of my achievement was in The Daily News.

It was there, granted, but it was only a small item. I called the city desk to complain.

"I'm sorry, sir. I imagine they were rushing the deadline. More will be printed when we know more. May I ask who's calling?"

I hung up and said quietly to myself, "No, you may not."

I smoothed open the paper. The next time, the article would be larger, I vowed, much larger. I began to read the article, what there was of it, in depth.

And then a sentence caught my eye. "Asked for a statement by this reporter, Detective Blair Sandburg of the 15th Precinct responded, 'It was well-planned, well-executed.'"

I was appreciated!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Jim wants to cook dinner for Blair. Duty calls, however, and Blair has to cancel. To make up for it, Blair invites Jimi to dinner, and Jim is more than pleased. Things go south, though, when Blair gets a work-related phone call.

It wasn't payday for any of the local businesses. The head teller hadn't ordered a delivery of cash and coins, so the armored truck wasn't making an appearance. And no robbers came in with the intention of relieving the bank of its cash.

All in all, a quiet day at work, which was a good thing, because I found myself thinking about Blair Sandburg in ways I hadn't thought about Jack, or Randy, or any of the men I'd known for more than a night.

Did he have a middle name?

He'd looked good in that suit he wore, even though I could tell it was off the rack. Sears probably, although maybe Gimbels.

He was short; all the men I'd dated were about my height or a little taller. If we went dancing, his hair would tickle my jaw, and his head would fit neatly under my chin, unless he tipped it back, in which case his lips would nuzzle my throat.

Of course, when we made love, it wouldn't matter. Lying down, we'd be the same height.

**When we made love?** "Oh, boy, you have got it bad, Ellison."

Pat, the other security guard, glanced over at me, an eyebrow raised. "Girl trouble, Jim?"

Jesus, I was starting to talk out loud in a populated building. I gave Pat a weak smile. He grinned back at me, then went to help a woman who was having trouble finding the right slip to fill out.

I'd only met Blair Sandburg the night before. He smelled great, his hand on mine felt fantastic, and I liked his voice, but we hadn't even kissed.

Maybe he didn't like to kiss. Some guys didn't.

But if he did, would it be hot and wet, devouring?

Would his eyes burn with blue fire, then slowly close as his lips met mine?

Would his mouth be shut tight or be open, gasping for air as he slid into me?

Would he lick the sweat that dripped from my chin to my neck as he plunged into me again and again?

Would his hoarse, needy sounds be the echo of mine?
What would his cock taste like?

"Uh, Pat?" I cleared my throat. "Can you handle this for a few minutes?"

He winked at me. "Not too long, boyo." He touched a fingertip to his forehead.

I copied the motion, headed for the stairway, and went to the restroom off the employees' lounge on the lower level.

It was a very good thing it was a quiet day at work.

****

This was the first date I'd had since I'd left Randy, and on the way home I dithered. What should I cook?

Jack had taught me French, Italian, German, even Chinese cuisine. He'd told me he'd learned in the countries themselves, and I'd wondered what he'd been doing in China.

But I wanted to make something special for the detective. Something ethnic, that would - impress him.

There was a used bookstore on 2nd Avenue, and after work, I visited it, hoping there might be something there.

I was lucky. I found a book of Jewish recipes, large, hardcovered, and with beautiful pictures. I thumbed through it, looking for something that I thought would tempt Blair's palate.

"Hmmm." I studied a picture. "This looks interesting."

I paid for the book and went to a Jewish deli where I would get hot pastrami sandwiches for dinner on occasion. On Jewish rye with caraway seeds, slathered with deli mustard...

Just the thought made my mouth water, but I had a dinner I had to make.

Mrs. Friedman, who ran the deli with her husband, looked up as the bell over the door rang sweetly, announcing my entrance.

"Jimmy! You caught me just in time. I'm about to close the store."

"I won't keep you too long. I'm making a Jewish dish for dinner tonight."

"How wonderful! Tell me, boychik. What do you need?"

I opened the book. "Stuffed olives, crushed peanuts, garlic, spring onions, extra virgin olive oil, brown rice... Um... that's it."

"Ah. You're gonna make Kusneyeya Rice. I got it all. Except for the olive oil. You need to go to Rossetti's for that." She went around the deli gathering what I'd need. "And the peanuts - you gotta crush them yourself."

"Okay."

"So. You found yourself a nice Jewish girl, bubbala?" She gave an arch smile as she rang up the items and put them in a paper bag.
"A gentleman does not kiss and tell, Mrs. F." I winked and paid for them.

"You're gonna need a nice wine, Jimmy."

"That's right. Any suggestions?"

"Manischevitz. That was what Mr. Friedman poured for me the evening he got down on one knee and asked me marry him. A sweet wine for a sweet moment."

"Thanks. I'll definitely get some." I hated to interrupt her reverie; she was gazing into space, a soft smile on her lips. "Bye, Mrs. F."

"Bye, bubby." She followed me to the door, and I heard it lock behind me.

Hoping that I'd have a love like that one day, maybe even with Blair Sandburg, I headed for the Italian deli.

Once I had the extra virgin olive oil, I stopped at the liquor store and bought a couple of bottles of the wine Mrs. Friedman had recommended.

When I got home, I put the wine into the small refrigerator and placed everything else neatly on the card table.

That table. I stared at it. It would need to be replaced. Come to think of it, if I was going to be cooking for two, I'd need room to prepare food, and more than two burners.

How big was Blair's kitchen? I lost myself in a fantasy of the two of us working together companionably to prepare a meal, gray-haired and with creaky joints, but so happy...

Snap out of it! You haven't even been on a date with the man, and you're planning on spending the rest of your life with him? And what is he going to think when you tell him you used to be a hustler?

I turned on the radio and started cleaning my apartment, steadfastly ignoring that last question.

Randy had gloated about my former profession. He'd brag about my technique and parade me in front of his friends. He loved seeing them salivate, but if any of them made a move toward me, he'd blow a gasket and give me the silent treatment for a week, even though I'd done nothing.

The suggestion we go to Vermont had been a last-ditch effort on my part to salvage what there was of our relationship, and it hadn't worked.

I dusted and dry mopped and changed the sheets on my bed - just in case - but I came no closer to a decision of what I should tell Blair.

After I showered, shaved, and brushed my teeth, I wrapped a towel around my hips and stepped out of my matchbox bathroom and into my matchbox kitchen to get the water for the rice boiling.

Then I went to my 'clothes closet' and dithered some more as I tried to decide what to wear. A tux for an at-home dinner would be overkill, and besides, I'd left mine at Randy's.

A three-piece suit wouldn't be quite as over-the-top, and I'd caused almost as many heads to turn wearing that, but still - this was just dinner on a weeknight.

I had a pair of Levis that fit snugly. Matched with a chambray shirt and cowboy boots - I'd always gotten lots of come-ons when I'd worn them.
Just as I reached for the jeans, the phone rang. Two steps and I was in the kitchen. "Ellison."

"Hi, Jim."

"Chief!" My heart started Boogaloo'ing again. "Wait until you get a taste of what I'm cooking. It's gonna knock your socks off." I hoped.

"What are you cooking?"

"It's a Jewish dish - Kusneyeya Rice."

"Aw, Jim. For me?" He inhaled deeply. "I can smell it from here."

"Sure you can. So why are you calling me when you should be here in about forty-five minutes?"

"That's just it, Jim." His voice was sober. "I won't be able to have dinner with you. Something's come up on the case."

"You found whoever it was who killed Randy?"

"No." I could hear him run his hand through his hair. "No, there's been another murder."

"Another? And it's connected to Randy's?"

"Yeah. This young man was strangled also. But what disturbs me is that he was gay, and..."

"Randy was gay."

"Yeah. I was hoping we didn't have a serial killer on our hands, but... The fucking bastard called me at the station! He asked to speak to me! Told me his name was Hans Schultz, but that just after Valentine's Day he had been Aaron Fielding. He said he liked how I'd described the last murder: well-planned and well-executed. Jesus, Jim! I tossed that off to get Sam off my back."

"Sam?"

"Sam. The reporter. He kept pressing for a statement, and... " He blew out a breath. "Apparently Hans or Aaron or whatever his name is, thought I appreciated his work. He gave me an address and told me 'should get zhere right away,'" Blair's voice took on a thick German accent, "'and you von't be disappointed, I am vell up to my previous standard.' Of course he was long gone by the time we got here."

"'Here'? You're at the crime scene?" What he'd said suddenly hit me. "Chief, 'just after Valentine's Day'?"

"Yeah. I don't think your friend was the first man this son-of-a-bitch killed. This poor guy... I'm sorry, Jim. You went to the trouble of making me dinner..."

"Blair." He stopped talking. "We can do this another time."

"Thanks, Jim."

"Hey, Blair!" Detective Taggert's voice from somewhere in the dead man's home.

"Hold on a sec, okay?" His hand muffled the receiver, but I still made out the conversation. "What's up?"
"The M.E. wants to take the body!"

"Be right there, Joel." Then he removed his hand. "Jim..."

"Did Detective Taggert really have to shout, Chief? I'd have thought you'd be close enough to hear him."

"What?"

"Blair! Tell your boyfriend goodbye. We have to move it!" Taggert shouting again. "Dan's getting antsy!"

He covered the receiver again. "I'm coming!" It was a growled whisper, but in spite of it all, I still heard him. "I have to go, Jim. Can I... can I call you when I get this done here?"

"I'd like that. You'll be careful?"

"I'll be careful. Bye, Jim."

"Bye, Chief." The phone clicked in my ear. I hung up and looked at the pot with the rice. "Oh, well. I'll use this as a dry run."

I checked the recipe and measured out the olive oil into a frying pan. The liquid from the jar of olives went in next, and while that was heating, I crushed the peanuts. When the oil was hot enough, I added first the peanuts, and then the garlic, onions, and olives.

After five minutes, I started stirring in the rice. The combined odors didn't bother my sense of smell, which was a relief. Sometimes the smell of things affected my stomach; I'd had to cut a lot of things from my diet.

When it was done, I sat down at the card table with a plate of Kusneyeya and the book of recipes, and ate my dinner.

My lovely, lonely dinner.

****

It was about one a.m. when the phone rang. I was across the room, grabbing it up, in seconds.

"Chief?"

"Yeah, Jim. How'd you know it was me?"

"Lucky guess." Except for Simon, he was the only one who had my number.

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I was up." I'd been waiting for his call. I was about to ask if he wanted to come over - there was plenty of dinner left.

Before I could, he said, "Jim, would you do me a favor?"

"Yes."

"Come down to the station tomorrow and talk to our sketch artist? If we can find Chris, maybe we'll have some idea of who killed your friend and who killed Himmel."
"Himmel?"

"Our latest victim."

"Uh huh. Well, sure, Chief. But if he was using greasepaint, I don't think it will be much use."

"I'd still like you to give it a try."

"Okay. What time do you want me there?"

He let out a breath. Had he doubted that I'd do it? "About eleven?"

"I can't, Chief. I'm sorry. I have work."

"Damn. I forgot. Well, how about after work? You get off at four, right? Okay, then, how does 4:30 sound? 15th Precinct. I appreciate it, Jim."

"Whatever I can do for ... you ... our fair city."

"And maybe when you're done... maybe we could go for dinner? I know this place..."

"I'd like that." I'd see if Pat would cover for me so I could leave work early, get home, and change into something sexier than my uniform. "Chief, can you talk about what happened tonight?"

"Sure. Why not? You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow anyway - no, it will be this morning, won't it?" He sounded tired. "Norbert Himmel. Age twenty-five. Blond, hazel eyes. Homosexual. The body was half-on, half-off the john. There was a set of lips drawn on his forehead in bright red lipstick. And those bruises around his throat."

Just like Randy? I didn't ask. "How are you, Chief?"

"I'm okay. Just really tired." He yawned. "Sorry. I'd better go. I wanted to hear your voice before I called it a night, though."

He did? "I'm glad. I like hearing your voice too. It's... it's soothing."

He gave a spurt of laughter. "Thanks. I think. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"'Night, Chief."

"G'night, Jim."

I waited until I heard the dial tone, then hung up and went to bed. I hoped he'd be able to sleep. There had been times when I was with Jack, when he'd come back from out of town, and he wouldn't be able to fall asleep until he'd had me three different ways, and then found a fourth one.

I was thinking of the ways I could have pleasured Blair until he fell asleep when I fell asleep myself.

****

Blair and I exited the precinct and walked through the evening crowd in Midtown. It was the rush hour. People were heading for the subways and buses, thinking of little else but home and dinner.

The month had decided that it was March after all. The cold evening wind made me glad I'd worn my overcoat instead of the jacket that, while it would have shown off my shoulders and waist, would have had my teeth rattling like castanets.
I sighed. I really would have liked Blair to have seen me in that jacket though. Still, I'd been able to take off my coat, and he'd seen the jeans and turtleneck I wore under it.

He'd given a soft wolf whistle and said, 'Nice jeans, Jim.'

'Thanks.' I liked his reaction. We were going to dinner afterwards, so I'd taken the time to make sure I looked good. "I'm sorry that I couldn't help your sketch artist, Chief," I said now. "Not to say 'I told you so,' but..."

"I know. You did say something along those lines. Well, George was able to sketch in some details. We've got a rough idea of the shape of his face, the distance between his eyes, where his ears are placed on his head..."

"Do you think finding Chris will give you some idea of who the murderer is?"

He shrugged. "I hope. Maybe Chris saw our killer in the hallway. In the elevator. Coming into the building as he left."

"Have you checked with Dave?"

"The night doorman? Yeah. Seems your friend had a habit of bringing men up to his apartment. Other than that, Dave didn't notice anything out of the ordinary."

"Damn."

"That's what I said."

"Okay, what about Gene? He works the day shift."

"I sent one of my men to talk to him. Brown's good with getting people to tell more than they realize. Gene said he only saw the usual stuff - your friend leaving for work, the cleaning lady coming and going, the boy delivering groceries."

"Randy always came home after Gene left for the day."

"That would explain why he couldn't describe any of your friend's... boyfriends."

"I guess." I stopped abruptly. The hairs on the back of my neck were on end, and I had the feeling that I was being watched. I rubbed the back of my neck and looked around. A Midtown bus was pulling away from the curb, and the lights inside showed a man sitting in the rear seat, looking back in my direction. He turned and stared toward the front.

"Jim?"

I frowned. Were my senses going wacky again? I shook my head and hurried to catch up with Blair.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Uh... no. So what does this tell us, Chief?"

"Maybe Chris looks like you?"

"I didn't think so, and I saw him, remember."

"Hmmm. Oh, we're here. This is the place, Jim. I think you'll like it. I hope you do." He led the way into a small diner.
We took a booth at the back and hung our overcoats from the hooks on either side. A waitress brought two glasses of water and the menus.

"Hi, Nance!"

"Hi, Blair. It's good to see you again."

"You too. Jim, this is Nancy, the best waitress on 48th Street."

"Thank you." She blushed. "Uh oh. Boss is looking." She rattled off the specials. "I'll give you a few minutes to look over the menu. Your usual beer, Blair?"

"Yes."

"I'll have a Rheingold."

"That's what I have, Jim."

"Got it." She winked at him. "I'll be right back."

Blair took a sip of water, then picked up the conversation where we had left off. "There could have been a resemblance that wasn't apparent to you, Jim. From the back? The side? At a distance?"

I was going to tell him there was no chance of that, when I realized, "You might have a valid point, Chief. Jeff said Randy had hired him a few times."

"Jeff?"

"I was talking to him at the wake before I got cornered by the Dick Man. Richard Lee. Anyway, Jeff and I look a little alike."

"I noticed. He's good-looking. Just not as good-looking as you."

"Oh." My looks had been my stock-in-trade - and I'd been complimented on them by numerous clients - but it was different when someone I was coming to care about told me he liked the way I looked. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." His grin was saucy, and I grabbed the tail of the conversation before I lost it.

"So... um... what do you do now?"

"We need to fill in the time between when the doorman saw them enter the building and when his neighbor... " He raised an eyebrow.

"Marc."

"Right. We need to find out how much time passed until Marc called us." He hesitated, then continued, "The thing is, the bastard who did this took his time, Jim. Your friend was killed in the living room, then dragged into the bathroom and posed. Norbert Himmel was posed the same way. I want to talk to this Chris. The odds are he wasn't there when the murderer came knocking on the door, but I want to talk to him anyway."

Nancy brought us two frosted glasses filled with beer, and we fell silent. "Would you like to order?"

"Oh... " I hadn't even looked at the menu.
"Jim? If you trust me, I'll order."

"I trust you, Chief." I could feel the heat of his blush.

He turned to our waitress. "We'll have two turkey dinners. Baked potato, Jim?" I nodded. "And house salad with French dressing."

"I'll have a Caesar salad."

Nancy wrote it down and left.

"Caesar salad, Jim?" He raised his glass to his lips.

"Just because I let you order everything else - I don't want you thinking I'm easy." Beer spewed out of his mouth. "Sorry, Chief."

He gasped and choked, and waved his hand. "Never mind."

I waited until he caught his breath. "Y'know, there's something that's been bothering me. If Chris had left, if Randy was alone, he wouldn't have let anyone he didn't know into the penthouse."

"What? That's..."

"Cautious?" I shrugged. "That was just the way he was."

He was quiet for a minute. "You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

"Well enough."

His eyes were a calm blue. He waited for me to continue.

"We lived together for about six months. I left him last August."

"I guess it wasn't love then."

"No. I thought he... No."

He raised his hand as if to rest it against my cheek, then realized we were in a public place and let it fall.

Which was a good thing, I assured myself. Nancy arrived with our salads, placed a basket of rolls in the center of the table, and went to check her other tables.

"So, the man who killed him could have been someone he knew?"

"Maybe." I picked up a crouton and popped it into my mouth. "I know a lot of people weren't fond of Randy, but that doesn't mean they'd kill him."

"Why not?"

"His crowd wasn't likely to get physical. Not like that. Well, you saw Richard Lee."

"He looked like he was all set to knock you down."

"Nah. As soon as he saw I was ready to face him, he'd have backed down. And the people Randy hung with... they'd throw a glass of red wine over his favorite suit, they'd say something derogatory about the art he collected, but they wouldn't resort to physical violence. And none of them would
strangle him."

"You don't think?"

"No. Sorry."

Nancy approached us and gave a cursory glance at our plates. "Are you finished?" We nodded, and she took them. "Your dinners will be right out."

"Thank you." Blair waited until she left, then continued. "Anyway, we'll keep looking for Chris." He took a roll and buttered it. "I did a little back-tracking, and I found that another man, a Joseph Bishop who lived in Gramercy Park, was killed and posed in the same way, minus the kiss. The detective on that case didn't care if a fag was killed; he's going to retire next month. He would have been assigned your friend's case, but he was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery to get his hernia repaired."

"You think this man may have been one of the killer's victims?"

"Yeah. Even without the lipstick kiss on his forehead, the murders are too similar. And he was killed on Valentine's Day."

"Maybe the killer was practicing?"

"That would be just peachy," he muttered under his breath and smiled at Nancy as she placed our dinners before us.

"Enjoy, gentlemen."

****

We finished our meal with two cups of coffee and a shared slice of blueberry pie a la mode.

There was a bit of vanilla ice cream at the corner of his mouth. I wanted to lick it off, but I didn't. Instead, I told him, "You've got ice cream at the corner of your mouth, Chief," and stared as he licked it off himself.

"What did you think of the meal, Jim?"

"You're right, this is a good place."

"I'm glad you liked the food."

Nancy hurried to our table.

"Got the check, Nance?"

"Blair, you're wanted on the phone. It's Lieutenant Dawson."

"I'll be right back, Jim."

"No rush, Chief." I watched as he strode to the phone by the cashier.

"Would you like another cup of coffee, sir?"

"No, I think we're finished." I hoped the phone call wasn't important.
"I'll get the check for you."
"Thank you."

Blair and the waitress arrived at the booth at the same time. He took the check from her and reached for his wallet.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I have to go." He peeled off some singles and gave them to Nancy.

"Thanks, Blair."

"You're welcome. I'll get this, Jim." He went to the front of the diner.

I took my overcoat from the hook and Blair's as well.

"Chief?"

"Thanks, Jim." He slid his arms into the sleeves.

"Was there another murder?"

"Yeah. Another strangulation." He told me the address. It was on Central Park West, the building where I'd lived with Randy.

"Can I go with you?"

"Just don't touch anything."

"I won't."

Outside the diner, the temperature had dropped further. We buttoned up our overcoats and jogged toward a subway station that was across the street and on the far corner.

I dropped a token in the turnstile, but Blair just flashed his badge. We got to the platform just as the train was pulling in.

Within ten minutes, we were there.

"Detective Sandburg! Detective!"

I was startled to see all the reporters outside this exclusive building. The tenants weren't going to be happy about this.

"What can you tell us about this newest murder?"

And they'd be even less happy to have another murder committed in their building.

"Is it The Strangler?"

"Dunno, Sam. I haven't been to the crime scene yet."

"But you have some idea, don't you? You're gonna let me know, right?"

Blair grinned at him and opened the door.

"The Press has a right to know! The people of New York City have a right to know!" When Sam realized he wasn't going to get a response to this from Blair, he turned his attention to me. "Hey,
who's he? What does he have to do with this?"

The door closed behind us, shutting the reporter out. There was a thud. He'd kicked the door.

There were four uniformed cops in the lobby. They looked uncomfortable, as if they couldn't figure out what they were doing in a place that had live trees in huge wooden containers, a fountain that burbled rainbow trails of water, elegant, antique sofas, and paintings by Degas, Monet, and even Picasso - all authentic - on the walls.

There was even a statue by Henry Moore, the last of his reclining figures. I'd always thought it had a big ass.

"The elevator to the penthouse is this way, Detective." One of the officers led the way.

I looked around, but I didn't see Dave, the night doorman, anywhere.

"Is the key in it?" If it wasn't, we were going to have a long climb to the top floor. Fifty flights worth of long.

The cop gave Blair a questioning look.

"Mr. Ellison used to live here, Officer Krupky. He's assisting me in a civilian capacity."

"Yes, sir. The key was left in it."

"Thank you. Come on, Jim." We stepped into the elevator. A twist of the key, the doors slid shut, and it began to ascend.

Blair smelled good. I inhaled deeply; I hadn't smelled anything like it before. His scent seemed to wrap around my cock, and I was wondering if I could persuade him to back me into a corner and kiss me, when suddenly another scent clogged my nostrils.

"Shit!"

"What's wrong, Jim?" Blair was beside me.

Normally I would have laughed it off, kept it to myself, but this time, with his hand on my arm, I couldn't.

"There's a smell in this elevator..."

"What is it?"

"It's a man's cologne." I blinked. "Men's cologne. I've smelled them both recently." It frustrated me that I couldn't recognize them. "One under the other. I just can't..."

"Don't concentrate on trying to identify them, Jim. Relax. Maybe that will help it come to you."

Before I could, the elevator came to a smooth stop - this was a high-class building and no jerking was allowed - and the doors opened.

"Chief..."

"We'll talk about it later, Jim. Will you be okay going in?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"
"This was a former... boyfriend's... apartment, he was killed in it, and you haven't been here since last August."

"Ah, Chief." I raised my hand to touch his cheek, then dropped it. "I'll be fine."

"Let me know if it's a problem."

"I will."

The elevator opened into the semi-circular foyer, and the scent of fresh flowers replaced the odor from the elevator.

There were three penthouses on this side of the building. It would have been easy to tell which one was Randy's even if I hadn't known - a uniformed officer was at the door.

Blair walked toward the door. "Officer Dolan."

"Detective Sandburg. It's good to see you again."

"Same here. How's the family?"

"Good, sir. They wanted me to thank you again for getting them curbside spots for the Parade on Sunday."

"It's my pleasure. St. Patrick's Day. How can they cheer their dad when he marches past if they can't see him?"

"Well, they haven't talked about anything else all week."

"I guess your wife must be getting pretty tired of hearing about it."

"Nah. Susie's as excited as they are."

"I'm glad to hear that."

I enjoyed listening to Blair banter with a fellow cop.

"By the way, how's Mrs. Sandburg?"

Mrs. Sandburg? I swallowed, and swallowed again, shocked by the hurt. Was he stringing me along?

"She's doing better, thanks. The new medication seems to be helping. She's gone out to San Francisco to visit my cousin Franklin."

"The lung surgeon who earns a few grand in just one morning?"

"That's the one. He and his wife just had a new baby."

He laughed. "Give her my best the next time you talk to her."

Mrs. Sandburg?

"Thanks, I will. Any problems here?"

"No, sir. This is so high up we don't have the usual ghouls who want to see the dead bodies.
Detective Brown spoke to the two gentlemen who live in the other penthouses. They seemed shaken. Well, two murders in less than a week."

"Yeah. I'll need you here until we have this scene squared away."

"Yes, sir." He opened the door for us.

We walked into the entrance hall, and I closed the door behind us with a snap.

"Are you married, Chief?" I blurted.

"Married? Me?" He grinned until he saw I was not grinning in return. "No! How could you think that?"

"Officer Dolan, who wants to know how Mrs. Sandburg is?"

"Mrs. Sandburg is my mother."

"She is?"

"Yes. I'm all she has. She became really sick when I was in my sophomore year of college, and I had to drop out of NYU. New York's Finest may not have the best pay scale, but it has great health benefits. All the guys know about Naomi and kid me about Mrs. Sandburg, because I'm twenty-eight and not married. Listen, Jim. I've done some things... well, we can talk about that another time. But I'd never marry a woman, knowing I prefer men."

"I'm sorry, Chief." I was as surprised by the relief I felt as I'd been by the hurt. "I've been involved with men who swore they were single but turned out to be married." I hadn't cared then - it hadn't been personal.

"I wouldn't do that to anyone I wanted to date. Most especially, I wouldn't do that to someone I want a relationship with, Jim."

He wanted a relationship with me?

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. I can understand if you've been burned before. Now, come on. Joel and H are going to think I stopped to have my wicked way with you."

"H?"

"Henri Brown. He's the other detective who's working with me on this case."

The entrance hall led to the formal living room. It hadn't changed in the time I'd been gone. The color of the walls was the same, a silver blue that blended well with the upholstery of the large couch and the armchairs strategically placed around the fireplace. In the center of the room was an area rug. There was artwork on the walls, and accessories that I knew had cost more than I'd made in the seven months I'd been a security guard.

And the potted plants. Maria Hernandez, Randy's cleaning lady, would have come in to keep the plants watered. I wondered if she would be able to find another job.

Three steps into the living room, and I doubled over. The smell was like that in the elevator, but more powerful and with something underlying it that made my stomach roil. I bit down on my back teeth.
"Jim?" Blair realized I wasn't beside him and turned around. "Jim! What's wrong?" He caught me before I collapsed to the floor and eased me down.

"The smell, Chief!"

"Try to relax, Jim. Let it wash over you."

I groaned and clapped my hand over my nose and mouth.

"Okay, that's not working. Try this." He touched my cheek and forced me to look into his blue eyes, and that touch seemed to ground me. "Picture the dial on a television. You're on Channel 13. Gradually change the channels, 11, 9, keep going down toward 2."

I did as he suggested, and after a minute or so I began to get myself under control. I sagged in relief.

We were kneeling on the floor. Blair was still holding me, murmuring soothing sounds, his hands stroking the long muscles of my back through my overcoat. He made me feel better.

"How are you doing?" he whispered in my ear, and his warm breath made me shiver. My cock started to harden.

"Better. Thanks, Chief." I closed my eyes and let him bear my weight. "That helped; you have no idea how that helped."

"Jim? What happened?"

"The smell was overpowering. It's British Sterling, Chief. That's the cologne Richard always wears - wore. He called it his signature scent."

"He's here? What's he doing here?"

"What was he doing here. He's dead, Chief."

"What? But how..." His eyes widened. "You could smell it!"

I nodded. "We'd better get to our feet."

"All right, but why? I like holding you like this."

"I like it too, but we're going to have company."

"Blair. I thought I heard voices." Detective Taggert came into the formal living room from direction of the master bedroom. "I'm glad you got here. Hi, Mr. Ellison."

"Detective Taggert."

"H is still talking to the doorman, Blair. He's seen the victim before, but he never got the name."

"Have you ID'd the victim?" Blair was all business.

"Yeah. Wallet in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Richard Lee. Age thirty-three."

Blair turned to look at me. "You knew." I nodded.

"The thing is," Taggert apparently hadn't heard, "we've got a victim with the wrong coloring." He handed Blair the identification.
"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, **fuck**!"

"Yeah. That's what we said when we saw him." Taggert's expression was not amused.

"What am I missing, Chief?"

"We thought our boy was going for light-eyed blonds."

"But Richard... oh, yes. I see. Richard has red hair and dark brown eyes."

Taggert scowled. "Yeah. Wait'll the Cap hears about this."

"So. Has our killer changed his MO? Do we have another killer, a copycat? And did anyone call the coroner?"

"H did, Blair. Dan Wolf is working tonight. He's on his way."

"He always seems to get these bodies. Okay. I've got to assess the scene, Jim. Stay here."

"No problem, Chief." I wasn't going to challenge his authority in front of the other detective. Besides, I'd seen someone who'd been strangled, years ago; I hadn't forgotten what the young hustler had looked like, and I didn't want to see it again.

Blair took off his overcoat and tossed it over a chair. They left the room, and I removed my coat.

Abruptly my head shot up. I could hear their conversation as they reached the master bath.

*Blair, this is Mr. Barat. He's the night doorman.* I didn't recognize the voice, so I assumed the speaker must have been Detective Brown.

*I appreciate you staying. Detective Brown has your statement, but we may need to speak to you again.*

*Yes, sir. I'm here every night during the week, and the detective has my home address and phone number. Do you need me for anything else?*

*That phone log you told me about?*

*I'll have it ready for you when you come down, Detective Brown.*

*Thank you, Mr. Barat. You can go now.*

What the fuck? I shook my head. Had I really heard that, or was it just my imagination running wild?

"Mr. Ellison!" The night doorman was coming from the direction of the master bedroom.

"Dave. How are you?" We shook hands.

"I could be better. I'm the one who found him."

"**You** did?"

"Yeah."

"So, what happened?"

"It was the weirdest thing, Mr. Ellison. I got a phone call about seven. The man had this English
accent, and at first I thought it was Cary Grant on the line. Mr. Johnson's apartment is up for rent, and it would be a real feather in the cap for the management company if Cary Grant moved in here."

"I guess it would. Johnson is leaving?" Lloyd Johnson lived in the third penthouse apartment. He had bucks, and Randy was always trying to get his investment account.

"He's getting married, and they'll be living on East 77th. He wants a bigger place."

**Bigger**? Each of the apartments on this floor was at least ten thousand square feet. My place on East 14th Street could fit into the kitchen here with room to spare.

"Will it be hard to rent his apartment?"

"Because of the murders? Not likely. People want these penthouses. And the murders didn't happen in either Mr. Johnson's or Mr. Addams'."

"You have a point." It wasn't as if Randy and Richard had been shot and there was blood all over the place. I imagined the management would wait until Blair caught this maniac, and once he was in jail and the talk died down, they'd put out the word with all the realtors on Manhattan Island that Randy's place was available. "So, what about this man with the English accent?"

"I'm not sure I'm buying his story. 'I say, old chap, I do believe there's a dead chap in the flat of that bloke what was found dead in his loo. Beastly thing, what? Better go have a look-see.' Something like that. But when I asked how he knew, he said 'Cheery-bye,' and hung up. I figured he was probably some nut job, but I'd better check it out, just in case. People are coming next week to pack up the things in this penthouse, and it wouldn't look good if there was another dead body in the bathroom."

"Not to mention the smell."

"Oh, yeah." Dave rolled his eyes.

"Did you tell the detectives about this?"

He nodded. "I had to explain why I came up here."

"That makes sense." I looked toward the master bedroom.

Blair and Detective Taggert were approaching. Blair's mouth was tight, and the lines between his eyes were pronounced.

"I'd better get back to work," Dave said. "It was good seeing you again, Mr. Ellison."

"Same here, Dave. Take it easy."

"Detectives." He walked out, and I could hear him telling the cop at the door he wanted the elevator key back when they were done.

Blair worried his lower lip, and my stomach did a loop-de-loop. He was concentrating on this problem and had no idea what his action did to me. I wanted to lick the small indentations he'd put in it, take it between my teeth, suck it into my mouth... I licked my upper lip.

"This bastard likes to use accents." Blair saw my tongue on my lip, and his breath caught in an almost silent hitch. He seemed to lose his train of thought for a second. "That... uh... that German one - I almost expected him to say, 'I know nothing!' If no one knew that Richard Lee was dead, he
would be in that bathroom, decomposing for more than a week, because according to the doorman, no one is coming here until next week. Our boy wouldn't get any acknowledgment, and that's what he wants."

"So he calls the doorman, and this time he imitates Cary Grant." Taggert blew out an exasperated breath. "Dave the doorman comes up and finds Mr. Lee propped on the john; we get the call, and his work is duly noted."

"I'd be surprised if he doesn't expect a front page headline and page 2 and 3 as well."

"What I don't get is why The Strangler came back here? And why was Mr. Lee here?"

"Jim, can you shed any light on that?"

"No. Sorry. I don't know what's happened since I left."

"What about before you left?"

"Someone's coming."

Taggert looked at me as if I had a screw loose.

The front door opened and closed, and there were footsteps in the entryway.

A tall, stocky man whose Indian heritage was obvious in his broad nose, skin tones, and black hair walked in.

Taggert's jaw dropped. "How'd you know that?"

I shrugged.

"Sorry to call you out, Dan." Blair seemed excited about something, which confused me. No one else noticed anything.

"The night shifts are murder. No pun intended. He's in the bathroom?" Dan Wolf sighed at their nods. "You don't have to show me; I know the way."

"He was the coroner for your friend. Joel, see if he needs any help? I'll be right with you."

"Henri's there. He can help."

"Yeah, well, you can help too."

Taggert left, muttering under his breath, "He's a pain in the ass when he's got no boyfriend; he's a pain in the ass when he's got one."

I blushed. "I'd better go, Chief. You're going to be busy."

"That's an understatement. But I want to talk to you for a second. Sit down, okay?"

I got a little nervous. What did Blair want to talk to me about?

"Chief, there really isn't anything I can tell you about Randy's life after I left him." I sat down on the couch. "And before... He got tired of hearing me complain about... about stuff."

"'Stuff'?" Blair sat beside me and studied me. "Jim, you were able to identify the odor of Richard
Lee's cologne."

"Well, not until I got in here."

"Yeah, but you knew you'd smelled it before when we were in the elevator. Was that some of the stuff that was bothering you?"

I hunched a shoulder and avoided his eyes.

"There's something else I've been noticing, Jim - you respond to things that no one else seems to be aware of. You knew Joel was coming from the master bedroom, that Dan was here before he walked into the apartment. Have you found that any of your other senses are becoming overactive?"

"No." I got to my feet and walked toward the entryway. He already knew about my senses of smell and hearing. Wasn't that enough?

I wasn't going to tell him about my search for clothes that didn't feel like sandpaper against my skin. I wasn't going to tell him that I'd seen a bank robber in a shadowed doorway load his gun and tuck it into his belt before crossing the street to enter the bank.

I wasn't going to tell him that at dinner I'd hesitated for a beat before putting a forkful of turkey into my mouth.

And yet I found myself doing just that. I came back to him, sat down, and spilled it all out. His eyes grew wider, and when I finished, I held my breath and waited to see how he would react.

"Jim!" He bounced to his feet and began pacing the room, hands waving in the air, literally vibrating with excitement. "This is boss! This could mean... " He took a breath and calmed down. He sat down again and took my hand. "Have you ever heard of Richard Burton?"

I gave him a look. "Who hasn't?" We were palm to palm, and surreptitiously, I tightened my grip. "I saw him last year in The Taming of the Shrew. Liz was pretty good in it too. A little plump, but that might have been the costume."

"No, I'm talking about Richard Burton the explorer."

He was an explorer? I'd had no idea. "What about him?"

"I found a monograph of his in the library on 42nd Street. It was over seventy-five years old, and I practically had to promise my first born in order to get a look at it."

"Why were you looking at monographs in the public library?"

"Oh, see, I was an anthropology major when I as in college." Blair looked wistful, and I stroked his palm with my finger. "I still take classes on and off when I know I'll have a shift that will accommodate them. Anyway, that Richard Burton postulated that primitive tribes had what he called sentinels, watchmen who were chosen because of a genetic advantage - they had enhanced senses. They kept a look-out for game, listened for the approach of enemies, felt the change in the weather. The survival of the tribe depended on these people."

"So what are you saying?"

"Jim, I think you're a sentinel!"
"Why? Because I recognized the Dick Man's British Sterling?"

"Among other things."

"A lot of men wear that cologne. And as Dave told you, Randy brought a lot of men up to his apartment. It didn't have to be Richard."

"Don't bust my hump, Jim. You were positive it was him, and you knew he was dead. Face it. You hear things. Your skin is hyper-sensitive. Your taste buds are acting up. You see things..."

"So what if I do?" I let go of his hand. "What good does this do me?"

"Nothing right now, but maybe - maybe, Jim - together we can find a way to explore this thing with your senses!"

"Blair!" Taggert shouted from the other end of the apartment, and I jumped. "Holy mother of god! Get your ass in here!"

"Promise me you'll think about it." Blair's hand curved around my neck. His palm was warm against it, and I was ready to purr.

"Sandburg!"

I flinched from the volume of Taggert's voice. "Fuck!"

"Lee isn't going anywhere."

"You'd better go see what has Taggert in a tizzy. He's muttering about coming in here and getting you."

"Dammit."

"I'll think about the sentinel thing, I promise."

He touched my cheek. "I'll call you if I don't get home too late."

"Call anyway, Chief. I'll be waiting. Are you tender, Blair?" He looked confused. "You can have me if you say 'yes.'"

"Yes." He seemed to hesitate for a second, then touched my hair.

"I cut it when I left Randy Beautiful."

"Would you grow it for me?"

"Yes. If you want."

"I want." He handed me my overcoat, turned me around and gave me a slight push, his hand lingering on my ass. "Go on home, Jim. I have cop stuff to do."

I gazed over my shoulder at him. "Be careful, Chief."

He nodded and went back to the murder scene.

*You be careful too, Jim.*
I smiled, for once not minding that I could hear something I shouldn't have been able to, and left the apartment.

"Goodnight, Officer Dolan."

"Goodnight, sir."

I took the elevator down to the lobby floor and went out a service entrance, avoiding the reporters who were still hovering around the main door.
No Way to Treat a Guide

Chapter Summary

We learn of Blair's early life and how he came to be a Jewish cop in a city of Irish cops.

Naomi, my mother, always told me, "You can be whatever you want to be, sweetheart."

When I said, "I want to be an anthropologist, Mama," she smoothed my curls and pinched my chin.

"All right." Although clearly she had no idea what an anthropologist did. I could have told her I wanted to be a doctor, soldier, or Indian chief, and she still would have said, 'All right.'

In the beginning, though, I was just a kid who had no father and whose mother was a dancer.

That was always said in a sneering tone. She wasn't a Rockette, and she didn't dance at clubs like the Copa. She danced in places that smelled of spilled beer and cigarette smoke and other things. It didn't pay too well, but it put food on the table, as she liked to say. She was working now at the Scarlett Slipper, and the tips were the best they had been.

I'd taught myself to read at a really young age, but Naomi was the only one who knew that. She left True Confessions and Hollywood Confidential magazines scattered around the crappy little apartments we had, and I learned from them.

Naomi was a good mother, even though she'd never married my father. When Old Man Mankowitz came to her, complaining that he'd found me in the back of his used book store, hiding from the cops he'd said, she'd snarled at him, "My boy has no reason to hide from the cops. Did he take anything, destroy any books?" Mankowitz reluctantly shook his head. "Then get out of my house."

After Old Man Mankowitz had left, she'd gotten a sad look on her face. "This neighborhood is no good for you, sweetheart. We'll have to move."

So we did. Again. She finally found a furnished apartment between Lexington and Third. It was larger than the furnished apartment we'd left, and I'd have my own room. The best thing about that was that I wouldn't have to sleep on a lumpy sofa in the parlor. There was also a bathroom. In our last place there had been a toilet at the end of the hall, and everyone on the floor had to share it.

The staircase was located at the front of the building. I'd finished the climb and was carrying a box with the last of our belongings down the hall to the apartment when I saw a short boy hovering by the doorway. He was about my age, with the biggest blue eyes, and blond hair that longer than mine and almost as curly.

"Hello." He smiled shyly.

"Hi."

"You're new here." He studied me. "You have the same color eyes as I do."

"Yeah?"
"Yes. They're blue."

I nodded. "This box is getting heavy. Wanna see my room?"

"I'd like that. Thank you." He was very polite.

"Come on, then. I'm Blair."

"I'm Butch," he said quickly.

We went down a short corridor. To the right was the kitchen, and further down on that side was the bathroom. My room was just across the hall, and Naomi's was at the end.

"Oh. Your room is... small."

I looked around in surprise. "You think so?" There was a bed and a chest of drawers. Only Naomi's room had a closet, but that was okay, I didn't have enough clothes to need one. I put the box beside the bed.

"I live in 202. It's at the front of the building. Would you care to see my room?"

"Sure. Ma? This is Butch."

Naomi was just coming in with bedding to make the bed.

Butch approached her with his hand outstretched. "How do you do, ma'am?"

"Hello, Butch. Call me Naomi." She smiled at him, shifted the sheets to her other arm, and shook his hand, and I could see him fall in love with her.

"Is it all right if I go see his apartment?"

"It's right down the hall, ma'am." He blushed.

"Okay. Not too long, though, Blair. It's almost dinner time, and then you'll need to unpack."

"Okay."

Butch and I left my new home and started down the hall.

"This is where I live." He opened the door, and we stepped into a room that appeared larger than our whole apartment. "This is the front room."

"My head! Keep your voice down, Reginald!"

I looked around to see who she was talking to, but it was just me and Butch.

"And close the door!"

"I'm sorry, Mother." All the shades were drawn, and the room was dim, but not so dim that I couldn't see the dull red in his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

The woman lying on a sofa had a white cloth over her head. She sat up, holding the cloth in place, and looked over at us, her expression clearly unhappy. "Who is this?"

"This is Blair," Butch said. "He and his mother just moved into 206."
"That matchbox." She frowned at her son. "Don't make any noise. I have a splitting headache."

"No, Mother."

"It was nice to meet you, Missus."

"Oh, my word, a greenhorn!" She shuddered and sank back on the sofa.

Naomi had taught me to be polite to women, even if they weren't ladies, so I didn't blow a raspberry at her.

"What is your last name, Butch?" I whispered.

"Dandridge."

"Mine's Sandburg."

"Reginald, please!" For someone with a splitting headache, she had sharp ears and a cutting voice.

He sighed and led me out of the room. His shoulders were slumped, and I patted them. "It's okay. Grownups can be like that." My nose twitched as we passed the kitchen. "Something smells good." It reminded me that it had been a long time since lunch.

"Thank you. That's the pressure cooker. I made beef stew." I wasn't surprised he knew how to cook. I'd had to learn how myself. "Mother doesn't care for beef stew - she says it's bourgeoisie - but that was all we had in the house. She'll go to General Delivery tomorrow if she's feeling well enough, and get the check, and then we'll have money for food she thinks is more appropriate for us." He opened a door at the end of the corridor. "Are you going to say something about my name?"

"Nope. You wanna be called Butch, that's okay by me."

"Thank you. I like it much better than Reginald." He smiled, a sweet smile. "This is my room."

It was larger than the room that Naomi had said was mine. There was a bed covered with a white bedspread - and I wondered how Butch kept it so clean - a dresser, a desk and a chair. The late afternoon sun splashed through the two high windows. Under them was a wide bookcase filled with books.

I let out a long, low whistle, keeping in mind his mother. "Can I look at your books?"

"Sure!" Butch brought the chair over, but I sat cross-legged on the pale, oval rug that covered most of the floor. He hesitated, then sat beside me. "Er... I'd ask you to join us for dinner, but Mother doesn't allow guests. I'm sorry."

"That's okay."

"What are you having for dinner?"

"Dunno. Depends on what Naomi can find at the corner store."

"You call your mother by her name?"

"Sure."

"Oh."
"How come your mama is going to General Delivery? That's for mail. It isn't a bank."

It was a few seconds before he responded. "She's sent a check every month." His lower lip quivered, and he looked away. "My... my father doesn't want me. He sends Mother money to keep me away from him."

"The bastard!" His head whipped around, and his eyes were enormous. I'd picked up some choice words from the boys who ran the streets in my old neighborhood. "You look like a good kid, Butch. I don't understand why your father wouldn't want you for his son."

He pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and blew his nose. "Thank you. Mother won't talk about it, so all I know is that he lives in Virginia, I think."

"You don't have an accent."

"I was born in Richmond, but we never lived there. We've lived in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and Boston before we moved here. What about your father?"

"Naomi says he was a soldier." He'd been out of the picture since before I was born.

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No. He was killed on Iwo Jima." If anyone asked, that's what she told them.

"Doesn't it bother you? That you'll never get to meet him, talk to him?"

"I've met a lot of people. Not meeting one more won't make much of a difference. Besides, what good does it do anyone if I let it bother me?"

"But he was your father!"

"But he's not here. It's just me and Naomi. I'm not going to cry over it."

"You're not?" He seemed surprised, as if it had never occurred to him that while there were some things a kid had no control over, he could control his reaction to them.

I was getting uncomfortable. "Uh... The Bobbsey Twins, Butch? Not to be rude, but these are kind of sissy books."

"Those are Mother's choice. She thinks they're suitable reading for impressionable minds." His blue eyes danced, and it was as if we hadn't just been having a serious discussion. "These are my books! Mother doesn't know about them." He moved the other books aside, and behind them were authors I hadn't seen in the little storefront libraries I'd visited in the various neighborhoods we'd lived in.

Edgar Rice Burroughs, Lester Dent, A. Merritt, H. Rider Haggard.

I took a book out. On the dust cover was a scantily clad, very well-endowed young lady. She rode what appeared to be a centaur who brandished a wicked-looking spear. Intrigued, I opened it and read the first sentence of the prologue.

_I met him in the Blue Room of the Transoceanic Liner Harding the night of Mars Day - June 10, 1967._

The date caught my eye. This took place in the future!

I took out another book, and another. _Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar. Man of Bronze. Seven_
Footprints to Satan.

"These are wonderful!"

"Would you like to borrow them?"

"You wouldn't mind?"

"No. That's what... what friends do, isn't it?"

I smiled at him. "Yeah, that's what friends do."

We sat there for a while, and he talked in fits and starts, as if he wasn't used to having someone he could talk to. His mother was disappointed in him. She'd wanted a daughter. If his school hadn't objected, she'd have kept his hair in long ringlets.

Abruptly I realized I was having a hard time distinguishing his features. I glanced up at the windows, to see they were darkening. "Oh, no! I'd better get home."

Butch got up and turned on a lamp.

"Thanks for letting me borrow this, Butch."

"You're welcome, Blair. I keep a journal," he told me, "like they do in Dracula. The book, not the movie. This was such a great day! I'm going to write about meeting you. I always write about the things that make me happy." I wondered how many entries there were in his journal. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Naomi and I are going to get me enrolled in the school a few blocks over."

"My school is uptown." We tiptoed past the supine figure on the sofa.

"That stinks. It would have been nice to have a friend there. Listen. Would you like to come to my apartment for dinner? Whatever Naomi is making, I'm sure there's enough for you."

His face lit up, but then he deflated. "I can't. Mother doesn't like waking up to an empty apartment."

"Well, maybe you can come over after dinner tomorrow night? We can do our homework together. Thanks again for the book. I'll get it back to you as soon as I finish it."

"There's no rush. I'll see you, Blair." He closed the door, and I walked down the corridor, thinking about what to tell Naomi.

I entered our apartment and locked the door behind me. "Ma?"

"I'm in the kitchen, sweetheart." A pot of water was boiling on the stove, and Naomi was opening a can of tomato paste.

"Spaghetti? Great."

She smiled at me. "So. Did you have a nice time with Butch?"

"It was interesting. His name is really Reginald. Reginald Dandridge. His mother seems to have these horrible headaches..."

"Poor woman. Nana suffered from those. I remember the rags soaked in vinegar that she'd have on
her forehead..."

"I guess. He let me borrow a book." I held it up.

"No wonder why you were late. The table is all set. Go wash your hands."

I put the book on top of the icebox, went to the sink and washed my hands, then sat at the small table.

"Ma?"

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Butch and his mother are alone, just like we are, but she doesn't have to work. He told me that she goes to General Delivery every month and picks up a check."

"That's interesting." She put a plate of spaghetti in front of me.

"Yeah. I think it's a swell idea. If you go to General Delivery and get a check, you won't have to work anymore either."

"Blair..."

"I'm kidding, Naomi." I gave her a big grin. She smiled and reached across the table to pat my hand. "Butch's mama is getting that money from his father." I didn't ask if she would have accepted money from my father.

"I guess some people just don't get along together."

"Butch says it's to keep him away from his father, that his father doesn't want to see him."

"Who told him that?"

"He said his mama did."

"That witch!"

"I think that stinks, Ma. Butch misses him, even though he's never seen him. I mean, my papa is dead, so I don't expect to see him walk up the front steps. But Butch's..."

"Blair, do you want me to give you a new papa? I can get married and do that if you want it very much."

"No, Mama."

She looked relieved. "Now, why don't you get unpacked? Once that's done, you can take a bath and then read a bit before bedtime. I'll have to leave for work in about an hour."

"Okay." Her boss had told her she could take the night off because of the move. Of course, she wouldn't be paid for the time she wasn't dancing. I really wished she didn't have to work so hard. I took the plates to the sink, washed and dried them, and put them away in a cupboard.

"Hi, BaaBaa." On top of the dresser was the stuffed lamb Naomi had given me when I'd been born. I had slept with it when I was little, but now I was too big for something like that.

I put my clothes away in the dresser and went into the bathroom. Naomi had run the tub for me. I
was a little hesitant to step into it. I'd never had a bath before.

The water rose to a little above my waist, and I liked the warmth that surrounded me.

I looked down and saw the shape of my body wavering in the water.

"Don't dawdle, sweetheart. I want you out before I have to leave."

"Okay, Ma." I washed my hair first and ducked it under the water, then soaped up the washcloth she had draped over the faucet and started scrubbing.

Once I was clean and dry, I pulled on my pajamas and went into my room. I was just hopping into bed when Naomi came in with *The Moon Maid*.

"You left this in the kitchen."

"Thanks, Ma."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. I'm leaving now. You'll be okay?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Pleasant dreams." She hugged me and kissed me goodnight, turned on my bedside lamp and snapped off the overhead light. "Not too late, now. I have my alarm set early so I can go with you to school."

"Okay. Have a good night, Ma."

She smiled and left my door open.

I listened to the sound of her footsteps as she crossed the apartment, shut the door behind her, and locked it. Then I opened the book and began to read.

It wasn't long before I began to feel sleepy, so I used a piece of paper to mark my page, got up to make a last check of the apartment, then went back to bed. I switched off my lamp, pulled the covers over my shoulders and turned on my side, and thought about the boy who lived at the front of the building. I fell asleep in the middle of wondering what it must be like to have a mother like his, and being thankful that I didn't.

The next day Naomi walked me to the public school I'd told Butch about. She handed my records to the secretary, then smiled and kissed my cheek. "I have to go now, Blair."

"I'll see you later, Ma." I watched until she opened the door to the stairwell and I couldn't see her any more.

"Wait here. I'll give your records to Mrs. Short. She's the vice principal." Within minutes she returned to her desk, smoothing a grimace off her face.

A large woman in a dowdy dress with flowers all over it came out of the office. Her salt and pepper hair was in tight pin curls, and twin circles of rouge stood out on her cheekbones. She was holding my records and frowning at them.

"This is obviously incorrect. You're seven and a half. You belong in the second grade." She led me down a flight of stairs to the second floor, to a classroom at the end of the corridor. She tapped on the door, then motioned the teacher out.
"You have a new student. Blair Sandburg."

"Hello, Blair. I'm Mrs. Edgerly. I'm so happy you'll be in my class." She was young and pretty and enthusiastic, unlike other teachers I'd seen who'd been worn down by overcrowded classrooms and lack of supplies.

"Hmph." Mrs. Short turned on her heel and walked back to the stairwell, her stride almost militant.

My new teacher touched my shoulder. "If you'll come in? Everyone, this is Blair Sandburg. He's new here, so let's welcome him."

There were some muffled 'hi's'. I wished Butch were here. At least then I wouldn't have been so alone.

"Hang up your jacket, then take that desk there." Mrs. Edgerly pointed to a desk in the back of the room and returned to the blackboard where she listed synonyms, homonyms, and antonyms. I'd taught myself about them, but I pretended to be interested to be polite.

The bell rang for lunch. "All right, children, put your work away and line up at the side of the room. Blair, would you mind waiting, please?" After the room emptied, she returned to her desk, and I joined her. "Did you understand what I was teaching?"

"Yes," I remembered Mrs. Dandridge's reaction, "ma'am."

"Explain it to me, please?"

I did. She began to question me about arithmetic, and then had me read from first a 2B reader, then 3A, and finally 4A. When I'd finished, she was clearly puzzled.

"Why were you assigned to my classroom, Blair? You're obviously on fourth grade level."

I shrugged. "I'm not old enough."

She looked startled. "Hmmm. All right, go have your lunch."

I found the cafeteria and ate the lettuce and tomato sandwich I had made for myself. Just as I was finishing, an older kid who had to be an eighth grader approached me. "Are you Blair Sandburg? Come with me. Mrs. Weston wants to see you."

"Who's Mrs. Weston?"

"She's the principal."

I threw away my trash and followed him through the corridor and up the stairs to the third floor. The vice principal frowned at me as I walked past her and into the principal's office.

Mrs. Weston was somewhere between her vice principal and the second grade teacher. She was dressed in a gray suit and wore shoes that matched. There were crow's feet at the corners of her eyes, but I had the feeling they were from smiling and not frowning.

"Thank you, David." She waited until we were alone before she spoke to me. "I understand you're quite bright."

I kept my mouth shut. I'd heard that before, or variations of it, and it always prefaced flying fists.

"Sit there."
So I sat 'there', a student's desk probably used for detention, and I took tests and answered questions, and by the end of the day I'd been promoted to the third grade.

"I can't, in good conscience, put you in the fourth grade, Blair. However, you'll see me after class every day for additional instructions."

"Mrs. Weston, my mama works nights. After school is the only time I really get to see her."

"Very well, then. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and during your lunch hour. Now, go back to Mrs. Edgerly's room and get your coat. Class is over for the day."

When I got home, I told Naomi all about it.

"How do you feel about being in school so much, Blair?"

"It's only a couple of hours three days a week, Ma."

"All right. But if it gets too much, I want you to tell me. You can stop whenever you want."

But the thought of not learning bothered me more than staying after class.

****

Naomi and I fell into a routine. I made my own breakfast and lunch, and left a pot of coffee on the stove for when she woke up. I'd walk home after school, and she'd have dinner ready.

While I did my homework, she'd get dressed for work. "Don't stay up too late, sweetheart." She'd kiss my cheek and leave.

Often Butch would come over, and we would do our homework together. I studied hard and got the highest grades in my class, and at the end of that school year, I was skipped another grade. And then another.

I'd read all of Butch's books, over and over, and I started going to the library on 42nd Street. It had books the little store front libraries I'd used didn't have space or patrons for.

As I got older, I got a job selling newspapers on the corner.

Naomi wouldn't take the coins I'd earned when I tried to give them to her. "Save them, sweetheart. I want you to go to college, just like your cousin Franklin."

Franklin was her sister Rebecca's son. Uncle Asher had been 4-F, had worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard through the whole war, according to Naomi, and was still working there, insulating the big ships. She didn't like him too much, and Aunt Rebecca always found something to criticize. Franklin, the few times I'd seen him, had been nice, but he was wrapped up in his studies. He wanted to be a surgeon.

Going to college would be nifty, but I knew it would be hard for Naomi to pay my tuition, so I put everything into a tin box I kept in the top drawer in my dresser.

It was different with Butch. His mother didn't want him doing anything menial.

He stood with me on the street corners a couple of times, but I could see he was uncomfortable doing that, so I stopped asking him.

"After I graduate high school," he told me one evening when we'd put away our books and were
talking about the future, "Mother will probably make my father pay for college."

That was the only time I ever envied him a father.

****

It was a rainy Saturday in the late fall. Butch and I had spent the afternoon at the movies, and now we were home. I'd walked him to his apartment. The shades were drawn and the lights were off. His mother was lying on the sofa, the white cloth over her forehead.

"I'll see you later?" I whispered.

"Yes. After dinner? We can go up to the roof?" His lips were puffy, and I couldn't take my eyes off them.

"Okay."

The hallway was empty, and I leaned in and kissed him quickly. His eyes were bright with happiness and just a touch of anxiety at what his mother might do if she ever found out - and I was familiar enough with her to understand it. He shut the door, and I went to my apartment.

"Blair?" Naomi called from her bedroom. "I'm in here, getting ready."

I went down the hall and hung on the frame of her bedroom door. She did her makeup at home. The lighting was better, she said.

"Hi, sweetheart." Naomi met my eyes in the mirror above her vanity and smiled at me. "You're home late, aren't you?"

"We watched the movies twice."

"I kept a plate for you in the oven."

"Thanks. Uh... Mama?"

"What is it?" She stopped in the careful application of her makeup. I hadn't called her 'Mama' since I was seven years old.

"I think I may have a problem."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No. But I think maybe I'd better."

She put down her eyebrow pencil and turned to face me. "Then talk to me, sweetheart."

"Something happened this afternoon." I swallowed and licked my lips. "You know today is Saturday."

"Yes." She didn't get impatient at the obviousness of my statement.

"And Butch and I go to the matinees every Saturday." We'd sneaked up to the balcony. It had been closed, as it usually was on a Saturday afternoon.

"Yes."
"They were showing three movies today. And Then There Were None, The Most Dangerous Game, and The Island of Doctor Moreau."

"Oh, my. Not exactly my choice of movies. I begged your Aunt Rebecca to take me to see The Island of Doctor Moreau when she went with her friends, and I had nightmares for weeks. What is the law? Not to spill blood. That is the law. Are we not men?"

I gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I know what you mean. When they dragged Doctor Moreau into the House of Pain..." I shuddered. "Butch was practically... um... sitting in the same seat with me."

Butch had actually been in my lap, his head buried in my neck. My arms had come around to hold him, and I'd stroked his back and whispered, "It's okay, Butch. I'm here."

And it was a good thing the balcony was empty, because he'd turned his head, and his lips had brushed over my neck. His breath had been hot on my skin, and I'd found myself not only with a lapful of friend, but with a hard dick as well.

I tried to shift so my dick wasn't digging into his ass.

"Blair?" Butch couldn't help but feel it.

I opened my mouth to say I was sorry, and then his mouth was on mine.

The movie finished, and a Tom and Jerry cartoon came on, and we necked through it. And after that, And Then There Were None started again, and then The Most Dangerous Game as well, and we spent the rest of the movie exploring each other's mouths.

"Uh... Mama, I kissed Butch. In the balcony. And... and..." When it was over, while they were showing the coming attractions and the matron shooed us out, scolding us because we shouldn't have been in the balcony - usually we didn't get caught - we went to the boys' room. We'd washed our hands, taking our time, and when the last few boys had left, when it was empty, we'd kissed again.

I licked my lips again, wondering if they were as puffy as Butch's had been, wishing I could still taste his kiss.

I watched Naomi through my lashes, but she didn't say anything right away.

"Mama?"

"You know people say nasty things about me."

I nodded. "Because you're not married but you have me."

"Yes. And also because I take my clothes off in front of strange men. I don't want people talking about you like that."

"They won't!"

"If they find out that you kissed another boy, they'll say even worse things."

I hadn't thought of that. "Why should they care, Mama? We're not hurting anyone."

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"That it's... That I'm not... That Butch won't..." I sighed. "I don't know, Mama."
"Do you intend to do it again?"

"Are you going to tell me I can't? I shouldn't?"

"I just want you to be careful."

I worried my lip. "After dinner I'm meeting him up on the roof."

"Blair. Butch is your friend. He's the same age as you, but... He can be so easily hurt. Don't hurt him. Don't hurt yourself."

"I won't, Mama. I promise."

She stood up and came to me, held me. "I don't think Mrs. Dandridge will be as easy-going about this as I am. Is Butch going to tell her?"

"Jeepers, no! And if she finds out... " I shuddered. I didn't want to think how my best friend's straight-laced mother would react to us keeping company.

Keeping company. I liked that phrase. It was grown-up.

"Well, Butch can stay here if he needs a place to stay."

"Thanks, Mama."

"Go eat your dinner. And Blair. A gentleman, a real gentleman, doesn't kiss and tell. I expect you to be a gentleman. Don't tell anyone about what you and Butch do, and don't push Butch to go faster than he wants."

"No, Mama." And I went to hurry though dinner so I could meet my friend on the roof.

****

Butch never wanted to go as far as I did, but that was okay. He was my best friend. I remembered what Naomi had said. I was willing to settle for kisses and the occasional handjob or blowjob.

I came home from high school one day to find Naomi staring at a piece of note paper. She held it out to me. "This was under the door. It wasn't in an envelope."

"What?"

"I don't want you thinking I'd opened your mail."

"I'd never... " I scanned the pale blue paper. I'll be in touch as soon as I can, Curly. R

Curly. That was his pet name for me, because my hair was a riot of curls, even curlier than his, especially when it was cut short.

"What does he mean, Mama? He'll be in touch? Where did he go? Why did he sign it with an R?" I felt as if I'd been hit by a steamroller.

"They're gone, sweetheart. Butch and his mother have just... just gone. Mrs. Pelligrino said she went to collect the rent, and Mrs. Dandridge told her they were moving out."

"He didn't even say goodbye. He didn't leave an address. How can I find him?"
"I don't know, sweetheart." She put her arms around me and hugged me. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought Butch was the one who needed to be looked out for, taken care of, but it was you."

I never knew what happened - if someone had seen us and spilled the beans, if his mother had gotten suspicious of Butch always doing his homework in my apartment - even though we never did anything there - or if she'd just got tired of lying on that fucking sofa.

I found a Virginia telephone book in the library and dialed every Dandridge in it, but it was useless.

For six months I fucked anyone who looked interested - who looked like Butch - and then I got tired of giving blue-eyed blonds what he hadn't wanted. I buried myself in schoolwork. By the time I graduated, I had an additional year's worth of college credits under my belt.

And the hurt had lost its intensity.

****

I applied for every scholarship I qualified for, and some that maybe I didn't. There was one for Children of Iwo Jima Combatants. It wasn't much, but it covered my books. I lived and ate at home, and the part time job I had evenings and weekends at The Starlight Lounge, the exclusive club on 33rd Street where Naomi danced, paid for the clothes I needed.

While I cleaned off the tables and emptied the ashtrays, I'd move to the music, copying the moves the girls made.

They didn't interest me in a sexual way, which was good. I didn't think I could have coped - watching my mother dance on that stage and knowing I had a hard-on.

Sometimes, when we were hosting a bachelor party, or if a fraternity came into town to blow off some steam, I'd get my ass pinched or fondled. I'd raise an eyebrow to see if they were serious about their offer, and if they were, sometimes I'd take them up on it. I'd either let them go down on me in the john, or if the joint was really jumping, take them out to the back alley and fuck them up against a wall.

In my sophomore year at NYU, I was offered the opportunity to accompany Professor Eli Stoddard on a field trip to Peru.

Professor Stoddard was visiting from Rainier University, which had one of the most comprehensive anthropology departments in the country.

Only three others out of that class had been selected to go with him to study the indigenous tribes of the Amazon where it flowed into the Peruvian rainforest.

"If you can do this, Sandburg, I'll mentor you at Rainier."

"Professor, I can't afford Rainier."

"I'll see you get a scholarship and a job as a teaching assistant to cover incidentals."

That was an interesting way to describe food, clothing, and housing.

I found Naomi at the Lounge and told her about the trip and the professor's offer.

"I'm sorry, Blair. I can't even supply half the cost." There was no way her paycheck, even with tips, would cover our living expenses as well as this field trip. And even though I'd been able to add to
them on occasion, the sad little mound of coins in the tin box wouldn't do much either. "I'm afraid you'll have to forget the trip this time."

It wasn't easy for a seventeen-year-old to earn two thousand dollars in six months, but this seventeen-year-old intended to do just that.

I'd heard through the grapevine that a friend of a friend's brother ran an escort service, and he was looking for young men. I tracked him down.

"I need a job that will earn me enough money to go to Peru in six months," I explained to Neil.

"Well, this is one that'll do it. Peru?"

"It's a field trip for my anthropology studies."

"That's a college course, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I like smart boys who are willing to work." He looked me up and down, fingered my brown hair that was a curly cap on my head, tipped my chin up and studied my blue eyes. "Y'know what an escort does, kid?"

I opened my mouth, but he interrupted me.

"Let me clarify that. Do you know what an escort who works for me does? He doesn't take girls to the prom or ladies out to dinner. He accompanies gentlemen who prefer the company of young men. And that means into the gentleman's bed. That's what you'd have to do. Think you can?"

"Neil, I'm butch." I could see my chances of going to Peru fading fast.

"I've got some clients who prefer that, and right now, I don't have a boy for them." He studied me carefully. "Show me what you can do."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I'm your date." He led me to his back room and pulled a Murphy bed down from the wall. "We've had a lovely dinner, gone dancing, and now we're back at my place. Seduce me. Make love to me."

By the time we were done, I lay sprawled on the bed, panting, amazed by the things he'd taught me.

It took him a few minutes to catch his breath. "You're a firecracker, kid. I can definitely use you."

"Then yeah, I can do this."

"Okay, Firecracker." He kissed the corner of my jaw. "You've got the job. I think you'll do good in this business. Now, the calls come through me. I set up your dates, and you give me a quarter of your take for that. If your client wants to tip you, you keep all of that. No need for me to get greedy."

I told Naomi what I'd done, and she sighed and shook her head. "Be careful, Blair."

"I will, Mama. I promise."

She kissed my cheek and left for work, a garment bag over her arm that contained the costume she'd put together and was going to try out that evening, feathers and sequins and fringe that shimmied and
danced.

I was lucky. Neil ran a straight business, so-to-speak. His clients got what they wanted, his boys got to keep most of what they earned, and he made us see a doctor every week, which made sure we stayed healthy.

I earned the money I needed and more with a couple of weeks to spare. I was going to Peru.

****

What Professor Stoddard called our base camp was going to be set up in the town of Iquitos, on the Amazon River, near the Peruvian border with Brazil, so we could study the Aguaruna, Shipibo, and Mayaruna tribes.

"What about the Chopec, Professor?" I asked him as we all piled into the donkey cart that would take us from Lima to Iquitos. There was no airport, and the roads didn't treat automobiles kindly.

"Unfortunately, we're too far north."

The first night in Iquitos, he assigned us roommates. Toby Morgan, one of the three other students, shared a room with me at the youth hostel, and once we were in the field, we shared a tent also. He had short brown hair and green eyes, and was two years my senior.

"This is the first time I've ever been away from home," he told me as he carefully examined the drawers that were his.

"Looking for something?"

"Insects. Tarantulas, scorpions, stuff like that." He seemed satisfied the drawers were uninhabited, and emptied his suitcase.

I glanced at a hole in the corner. I could just see whiskers poking out and twitching, and I grinned and shook my head.

"I... uh... I really like girls." He'd been stealing peeks at me when he thought I wasn't looking.

"That's okay by me, Morgan. I hope you get laid."

"Have you?"

"Have I what? Gotten laid? Yeah."

"But you're younger than I am." He sounded so aggrieved.

"Go to sleep, Morgan." Wearing just boxers and an undershirt, I got into bed. I had no problem falling asleep - because of that lumpy sofa in the parlor, I could sleep anywhere and on any surface.

I was having an unusual wet dream. It wasn't unusual that I dreamt of my cock being sucked, but in this dream it was by someone who didn't really know what he was doing, I winced as his teeth scraped the underside of my cock. "Ouch!" And I woke up to realize it wasn't a dream.

My roommate had his mouth on my body. Between sucking kisses to my ribs and navel and hips, he muttered, "Gorgeous eyes, gorgeous hair, gorgeous body... Let me... please, let me... " His words became inarticulate and incoherent, and he tried to take my cock in his mouth again.

"Toby." I touched his cheek.
"You're awake!" He pulled back, his eyes enormous in the early dawn light that was filtering through the wooden blinds.

"It's okay, I don't mind. Just watch your teeth, okay?"

"You really don't mind?" He looked like he was ready to cry.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"I don't know what I'm doing. I hurt you."

I grinned at him. "I'll show you, and then you can try again." I pushed him gently onto his back and showed him how to do it, how I liked it done.

It hadn't been my intention, but after that, he followed me like a puppy, more than willing to be my slave. I had to admonish him to be careful. He could have wound up with a roommate who was homophobic.

"That wouldn't have mattered. I wouldn't have done anything in that case. It's you I wanted to try this with."

Which was flattering, but... "We're away from home, and things are different. Once we get back, this will be all over."

"I know. I understand. But until then... " And he struck a pose on his bed, fluttered his lashes, and laughed when I threw myself on top of him.

Picking up new languages had always been easy for me. Naomi and I had moved from one neighborhood to another, and I'd learned to speak Italian like a wop, German like a kraut, Spanish, French, Polish, Russian, even a smattering of Chinese. It didn't take me long to pick up Quechua, one of the languages of Peru.

Time passed quickly, and we were starting to think of ourselves as bona fide anthropologists.

There was one last expedition before we would leave for home. This would take us deep into the jungle. There were rumors of a people who worshiped the jaguar as their god.

Our knapsacks were packed and at our feet, and Toby and I waited for the other students to turn up.

"Sandburg! Morgan! Jensen! Has anyone seen Henderson?" They came pounding out of the hostel.

"All right, gentlemen. This is the trail we'll follow." Professor Stoddard opened a map that looked as if it were a million years old, and pointed to a winding pathway that headed north and east.

****

I'd always thought I had a good sense of direction, but maybe that was just because I knew my way around Manhattan.

Somehow, in the Peruvian rainforest, I became separated from Toby, Professor Stoddard, and the others.

Somehow, I could never remember how, I lost my knapsack, my knife, and my way.

There was rustling in the underbrush, and I grabbed up a broken branch to use as a weapon and backed away slowly. There were jaguars and other predators in this jungle.
A band of men seemed to appear from nowhere.

"I am Incacha, shaman of the Chopec," the one in the lead said in Quechua. "We will help you. Here. You must be thirsty."

I accepted the water gourd he offered, wondering what Chopec were doing so far north.

"Thank you, Incacha. I am very thirsty." I answered in the same language, and he nodded in approval. "I am Blair Sandburg." I introduced myself belatedly. The gourd didn't contain water, as I'd expected, but a sweet liquid, almost like nectar. "I must get back to my friends. They'll be worried."

That was the last thing I remembered saying.

I came to in a hut with the world's worst headache and a sore shoulder, and with the sense that time had passed. I just couldn't tell how much.

A white man walked into the hut. Although his skin was tanned enough to make him look like a Chopec, he was taller than the natives, and his eyes were blue. "I thought you'd wake up about now."

"Who are you? Where am I? Why was I brought here?" There was an awful taste in my mouth. "How long have I been here?"

"You're just the other side of the Chopec Pass. You were brought here because you needed to be taught."

"Taught what?"

"Here. This will make you feel better, Blair." He handed me a gourd with some milky liquid.

"How do you know my name?"

"Drink this."

I hesitated, remembering that the last time I'd drunk an unfamiliar liquid I'd been rendered unconscious.

"It's all right. It's safe to drink."

"Why should I believe you?"

"No reason, but if you want to get back to your friends, you'll do as I say."

I sniffed the liquid, then stuck my finger in it and licked it. It tasted like coconut milk. Reluctantly, I raised the gourd to my lips and drank. Something must have been added, because in a matter of seconds my mouth no longer tasted as if something had died in it, and I was feeling almost well enough to wrestle a jaguar, although my shoulder was still sore.

"Come." He exited the hut, apparently having no doubt that I would be right behind him. Which I was. "When you meet Enqueri, tell him Jack Pendergrast is well and thinks fondly of him."

"Who's Enqueri?"

But he was gone.
"Shaman."

Automatically I turned to face the Chopec who spoke. It was Incacha. There was an aura of power around him that I hadn't seen - or hadn't been able to see - the first time I'd met him. His smile was satisfied, and he nodded.

"You will remember little of this, Shaman," he told me, "but one day you will recall it all." Little of what? What would I recall? "And you will be good for Enqueri."

Again with 'Enqueri'. "Who is Enqueri?"

He just rested his hand on my shoulder, the one that wasn't sore, and smiled at me. "Go now. These men will see you safely back to your friends, but the journey is not a short one."

They launched canoes into a river and began paddling.

"Where are we?" I asked in Quechua.

"This is the Ucayali."

"But where was your village?"

They waved behind them, and when I pressed for more information, clearer information, they suddenly couldn't understand the way I spoke their language.

Finally, I gave it up.

Traveling mostly by river, but then on foot, it took some days to get back to the department of Loreto, the part of Peru where Iquitos was.

The men smiled at me. "Your path lies there, Shaman. Farewell." And they faded into the brush, backtracking to the river.

I started walking north and east. There was a knife in my belt, and a gourd of water around my neck. In less time than I'd expected, I was walking into Iquitos.

"Blair! Blair!" Toby ran toward me. "Jesus, I thought you were dead!"

"Stories of my demise have been exaggerated."

He laughed and grabbed me and pounded me on my back. I flinched.

"What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"Dunno. My shoulder is sore, is all."

"Ah, Sandburg. You're back." Professor Stoddard sauntered across the road. I expected him to be having a conniption fit with one of his students missing for however long I'd been gone, but he was taking it quite calmly. "I knew you would be. A friend sent me word, you see. What's this on the back of your shirt?"

I twisted my head, but all I could see was a vague outline in red. I tried to ease the material off my shoulder, but it was stuck. When I freed it, Toby gasped and Professor Stoddard's eyes grew wide.

"My, my, my. You've got yourself tattooed. It's Chopec, by the look of it. Very ... interesting."
I blinked at the wolf on my shoulder. So that was why it had been sore.

"Well, I suggest a meal, a shower, and a day's rest, and then it's back to work."

"Yes, sir. That sounds like a good idea."

"I'll get you something to eat, Blair."

"Thanks, Tobe. Maybe later?" Food could wait. "I want to get cleaned up." I felt as if I hadn't had a bath in forever.

I hated being cold - Naomi and I had spent too many years in cold-water flats - but the heat and humidity of the rainforest and the trip upriver had me desperate for a cool shower.

The bathroom in the hostel was at the end of the hall. There were a number of shower heads to accommodate the residents.

I stripped off the clothes I'd worn and left them in a heap on the tiled floor.

A look into the fly-specked mirror above the sink had me shying back. I'd never seen myself look so scruffy and haggard. Five o'clock shadow that seemed closer to midnight, cheekbones that stood out in relief from the hollows beneath them, and bags under my eyes that could have contained all the clothes I'd brought with me to Peru.

I forced myself to take the time to shave, using soap and the razor that was lying on the sink. There were still streaks of lather on my cheekbones, on the point of my chin, on my Adam's apple. I rinsed off the razor and turned on the shower, then stepped under the spray.

The water was tepid, and I groaned in relief as it poured over me. I washed my hair and let the spray rinse out the suds. Then I scrubbed my arms, chest, legs, ass, but I couldn't reach my back.

"Blair," the voice was tentative, "do you need some help?"

"Toby." I'd been so intent on getting clean that I hadn't realized I wasn't alone.

"Your back... Let me help you. You're almost dead on your feet."

"That's one way to put it." I gave a short laugh. "I could use a hand."

I wondered if he'd strip off his clothes and join me under the spray. He didn't. Instead, he pushed up his sleeves. "Step back a bit, okay?"

That made sense, I thought muzzily. He'd get all wet otherwise.

I did as he asked, and he stroked the soapy washcloth carefully over my shoulders, then my back and waist.

"All done. Rinse off."

I shuffled forward and braced my palms against the slick tiles of the wall. The water drizzled down on me, and I stared at the suds that whirlpooled down the drain.

The washcloth was wrung out and hung up, the faucet twisted off. "Come on. Let's get you dried off and in bed."

"Toby..."
The soft kiss I was half-expecting was pressed to the shoulder that wasn't marked, followed by a rueful laugh.

"I think you need sleep more than you need anything else." He dried my body while I dried my hair. I felt as if I were about to fall asleep standing up. "I'm so glad you're back safe. Lie down."

We were in the room we shared. I had to be more tired than I had realized for him to get me there without me being aware.

I sprawled out on the small bed, and I thought I heard him whisper something, but I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I dreamed of the jungle, of a wolf and a jaguar running side by side. They came to a halt in a cool clearing, and the jaguar licked the wolf's shoulder, earning himself a lick across his muzzle.

When I awoke the next morning, I felt much better, my shoulder no longer sore. On the dresser were two tiny figurines, a wolf and a jaguar, crafted of wood native to the southeastern portion of Peru.

"I found them in your pants pocket, Blair." Toby was lounging against the doorframe.

"Thanks, Tobe."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah." I opened the dresser and pulled out clean clothes.

"What are you going to do with the clothes you had on when... "

"Burn 'em."

He gave a bark of laughter, until he realized I was serious. "Oh. Okay. Well, I've gotta get to work."

"Yeah. Thanks." I picked up the wolf and stroked it. Then I did the same with the jaguar. Beside my bed was my knapsack. Someone must have found it. I put them in an inside pocket, dressed, and went down to have breakfast.

Professor Stoddard was the only one around. He was sitting at the table, digging into a huge plate of scrambled eggs.

"Blair. You're awake. Sit. Eat."

"Where's everyone?"

"Oh, busy."

A plump mestizo woman came bustling out of the kitchen. Her long skirts swirled around her ankles. "Señor Blair." She placed a large mug of coffee before me and a platter of warm tortillas to the side.

"Gracias, Juanita."

"Da nada. I bring you huevos revueltos now."

I waited until she left. "Professor, what happened to me?"

"Why I... I was hoping you could tell me."

"I don't remember anything." I raised the mug and took an incautious gulp, almost scalding my
mouth from the heat.

"Don't you? Now, I find that very intriguing."

"You weren't worried about my absence?"

"No. As I told you, I was informed..."

"Who informed you, Professor?"

"Beg pardon? Oh," he waved his fork, scattering bits of egg onto the table, "just an acquaintance."

"An acquaintance?" There was a name at the edge of my mind. I couldn't remember much leading up to the time I'd just spent on the Ucayali, but I remembered the name. "Jack Pendergrast?"

"Why, yes. How did you... Did you meet him? Oh, that is excellent! You must tell me all about your experiences... Oh, no, that's right, you can't remember."

"So you just took someone's word that I'd be returning?"

"I don't like your tone of voice, Sandburg." His fingers tightened on his napkin. "As I was saying, Mr. Pendergrast informed me you would be returned to us shortly, and the authorities need not be notified."

"How shortly is 'shortly', Professor?"

"It's been just a tad over three weeks."

"Three weeks?" That meant this was sometime in late September. We'd be leaving Peru soon.

Just then, Juanita brought my eggs, and again conversation came to a halt. She made sure salt and pepper and other condiments were at hand, then returned to the kitchen.

"I must say, Sandburg - I'm quite intrigued by that tattoo on your shoulder." It was obvious he wasn't going to tell me anything else on that score.

"I didn't realize it was there until you mentioned the mess my shirt was."

"How is it feeling now?"

"Better."

"I'd like to see it."

For some reason, I didn't want him looking at my wolf. I decided to change the subject. "What did you find regarding that tribe that worshipped el tigre?"

"Now, you know, it's the most amazing thing... " And he was off and away.

After we finished breakfast, he took me to the shed in which we'd stored our finds, quite excited about what they'd discovered in the time I'd been... elsewhere.

The other students were there. "Hi, Sandburg."

"You're back."

"Lucky devil to be chosen to spend time with that tribe. Tough shit you can't remember it, though."
"Yeah, that was a waste. Shoulda picked me, Professor. I wouldn't have forgotten!"

"Now, now, gentlemen. These things happen. Henderson, why don't you bring Sandburg up-to-date on our findings."

In a matter of minutes, it was as if I hadn't been gone at all.

****

The area around Iquitos had two seasons, wet and wetter. The end of the wet season, the Peruvian Amazon's version of the highlands' dry season, was only a week away, and we hurried to get everything wrapped up.

It was time to go home.

"Quickly, quickly, gentlemen. Time and tide, you know."

Toby and I were in the room we shared, packing our suitcases. "We won't be able to do this anymore when we get home, Blair."

I was aware of that. We actually hadn't done anything in the time since I'd returned to Iquitos. He seemed to have lost the desire to sleep with a man, and I had lost interest.

"Are you going to avoid me if... when we meet back in NYU?"

"That's up to you, I'd say." The gift I'd chosen for Naomi, a beautiful dress in a starburst of vibrant colors and decorated with beads and feathers, was wrapped in a soft linen cloth to protect it, and I placed it in my small suitcase.

"If my parents ever found out... Or my friends... "

I snapped shut the suitcase, set it on the floor, and swung my knapsack onto the bed. The books I'd brought as sources of reference and the notes I'd taken would go into that, as well as a linen pouch that contained semi-precious stones - serpentine, red jasper, rose quartz, tiger's eye.

"Blair, I do like girls."

I shrugged and slipped the knife that had been with me since my return upriver into the knapsack, along with the figures of the wolf and jaguar.

I looked around the room. "I guess this is everything."

"I guess it is. Let me help you with that." He reached for the knapsack.

"It's okay." I swung it up onto my shoulder. "I'm fine now."

Professor Stoddard and the other students were waiting for us in the puddled street in front of the hostel.

We rode in the cart from Iquitos back to Lima, and from there took the flight to Idlewild. The others were excited, crowding around Professor Stoddard's seat and discussing the various things they'd learned.

I put my seat back and wondered about the weeks that were missing from my time in Peru. I felt Stoddard's eyes on me, but when I glanced across the aisle, he quickly looked away.
It was a smooth flight, but all-in-all, I was relieved to set foot on US soil once more.

I caught a cab from the airport and returned home.

There was a close, musty smell to the apartment.

"Mama?" I put my suitcase and knapsack on my bed and searched the apartment. It was empty. On the table in the kitchen I found a note weighted down by the salt shaker.

**Blair**

*I'm here to pick up some things for Aunt Naomi. She got sick suddenly and was rushed to Bellevue. I called the consulate in Lima, but they didn't seem in too much of a hurry to track you down. I sent a telegram too, but I don't know when you'll get it. Mama's been staying with her -*

Black spots began to dance at the edge of my field of vision. My birth was the cause of the breach between the sisters. If Aunt Rebecca was at Naomi's bedside, my mother had to be dying. I dropped into a chair and got my head between my knees in time to prevent myself from passing out.

After some minutes I was able to continue reading the note.

**Mama's been staying with her, and Papa has been coming down on the weekends. I've been looking in on her when I can.** My cousin Franklin was doing his residency in Bellevue. **Her doctors have told me the crisis still hasn't passed. Get here as soon as you read this.**

**Frank**

There was no date, and I had no idea how long it had been lying on the table.

I crumpled it in my hand and threw is aside, then ran down to the street. My cab was long gone, but it didn't matter. It would be quicker to get to the hospital on First Avenue by taking the subway anyway.

The guard at the door gave me a sharp look as I barreled in, but he must have recognized my desperation. Working at Bellevue, he must have seen a lot of that.

I rushed to the front desk. "Please! Can you tell me where my mother is?" I asked the receptionist. "Naomi Sandburg."

She thumbed through what looked like a ledger. "Ah. She's in 742. They'll direct you at the nurse's station on that floor. She already has two visitors. One of them will have to leave the room. Please don't run."

"No, ma'am." But I took off for the elevator running and got in just as the doors were sliding shut. I repeatedly jabbed the button for 7 as if that would make the doors close and the elevator rise faster.

On the seventh floor, I was told to go to the end of the corridor. 742 was on the left.

Ever after I would associate the odor of disinfectant and illness and bedpans that hadn't been emptied with that time.

It was a four bed ward. The beds to the right were empty, but the ones on the left ...

Naomi was lying on the bed nearest the door. Her eyes were closed, and she looked so small, so frail. I went toward her.
"Don't wake her, Blair. She's sleeping." It was Aunt Rebecca. She glared at the occupant in the other bed, whose back was to us. "Finally."

"What happened?"

"We don't know."

"How bad is it?"

"We don't know. Franklin can probably tell you. He's somewhere in the hospital. Have you been? He tried to reach you."

"I just got home. I got down here as soon as I read Frank's message."

"Jesus, can't a woman get any sleep around here?" The woman in the bed next to Naomi's glared at us, then started hacking. She swung her legs over the side and fumbled for her slippers. "I gotta have a smoke."

"You can't smoke in here!" Aunt Rebecca's voice was almost strident. There was an oxygen tank at the head of the bed.

"I know it. Old bat," she muttered as she shuffled out of the room.

"Witch." Naomi was awake. "You'd think someone with lung cancer would know better than to keep smoking."

"Mama!" I wanted to throw myself at her, but instead I bent over her and held her carefully.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Her hand rested my hair, but the gesture was so weak.

"Why, Mama? It wasn't your fault you got sick."

"I... I can't work. There won't be any money to pay the rent or... or to help with the post-graduate semesters... Rainier is so expensive..."

"It's all right. I... I changed my mind about going there anyway."

"You have?"

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, I've changed my mind about college completely. As soon as you're better, I'm gonna look for a job."

"No, no. You've always wanted to be an anthropologist."

"I found out I don't like sleeping in a tent."

"Oh, sweetheart..." she whispered.

"After all this time you change your mind?" Aunt Rebecca demanded. "Do you know how your mother worried about getting the money for tuition? She even came to us to..."

"Rebecca, this is between my boy and me. Stay out of it."

"Not when you come back to the family after all those years, like a beggar of mercy, and for this ungrateful..."
"Mama, you didn't ask them for money, did you?"

"Yes. They're family."

"But the scholarships!"

"It was before we knew about them - you wanted it so badly, sweetie, I didn't see any choice."

"Mama, you didn't have to..."

"The least you could do is show a little gratitude, you..."

"Rebecca. Enough." Uncle Asher? I was surprised he could take a stand against his strong-willed wife.

Aunt Rebecca grumbled but subsided.

"Throat's so dry," Naomi rasped. I poured her a glass of water, propped her up, and held the glass while she took a sip through the straw.

"Mama, it will work out all right." I decided I'd drop the subject of her going to her sister for money for now. "I'll think of some way to support us both."

Mom waved the glass away and leaned against me wearily. "Rebecca, why don't you and Asher get something in the cafeteria."

"That sounds like a good idea, Rebecca. Come on."

"Asher, I'm trying to talk to my sister."

"Naomi hasn't seen her son in four months. Let's see if we can find Franklin. I'm sure he can tell us more about Naomi's condition." He hustled her out of the room.

"Thank goodness," Naomi murmured.

"Yeah." I could see she was uncomfortable, so I plumped her pillow and turned it over so the cooler side would be up, then eased her down. "I can't understand how you and Aunt Rebecca come from the same mother."

"Behave, Blair."

"I really wish you hadn't gone to them for money, Mama." Well, so much for that resolve.

Naomi opened her eyes, the same blue as mine. "I'm your mama. I should be taking care of you."

"You always have. Don't worry about it. I just want you to get better."

"Blair." Her voice was surprisingly firm. "I don't want you working for Neil. Promise me."

"Mama, you saw how much I made in six months, and that was only goofing off. If I was serious about it..."

"No."

And I knew the conversation was over. I could have gone behind Naomi's back, but - I couldn't have gone behind her back.
"Okay, Mama. I promise."

"Hey, cuz!" My cousin Franklin strolled in.

"Hi, Frank. Your mother and father are looking for you."

"That's why I'm in here."

"You're a rascal, Franklin." But there was a small smile on Naomi's face.

"Seriously," he grinned at her, "I did see them. Good news, Aunt Naomi. You've turned the corner. Your doctor said you're doing much better."

But she was exhausted. And pale. And...

The look Franklin sent my way told me he was aware of what I was going to say, and I should just keep my mouth shut. "Once you're discharged, you'll have to take it very easy. No more dancing in smoky bars." He turned to me. "Papa says you're dropping out of college, Blair."

I swallowed hard. "Yeah."

"So you need a job?"

"Yeah. I'll have to start looking as soon as Naomi is better." He handed me something. "What's this?"

"A friend of mine is a cop. He told me NYPD is hiring."

"Me? A cop?" My haircut was short enough, but, "What about my height?"

"No problem. The ACLU is pitching a fit about the height requirements, and the NYPD is allowing even pipsqueaks like you to apply." Franklin winked at me. "It's got great health benefits."

I looked at Naomi. She was lying back, her breathing rapid and her face almost as white as the pillow.

"Where do I sign up?"
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Blair's a good cop. However, he just keeps missing Jim.

It didn't take much to get me onto the police force. They were so floored by my transcript from NYU that they barely paid any attention to my doctored birth certificate.

It looked like I was going to be Officer Sandburg.

****

I met Simon Banks at the Police Academy. He was watching the day we were practicing hand-to-hand combat.


After some dodging and feinting, I knocked him down with a move that surprised not only him and the instructor, but me as well. Where the hell had that come from?

"Nice work, Sandburg." Simon Banks removed his ever-present cigar and grinned at me.

"Uh... Thank you, Captain."

"I want to talk to you. Al?" He glanced at the instructor.

"Sure, Simon. Sandburg, you're dismissed. The rest of you ladies hit the showers."

"Yes, sir." Slightly out of breath, I followed the Captain out of the gymnasium.

"Where'd you learn moves like that?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm serious," I assured him when his raised eyebrow told me he begged to differ.

"There was nothing in either your high school or college paperwork that suggests you took ROTC."

"I didn't." He'd looked into my file?

"Might your father have taught you something?"

"I never knew him. He was killed on Iwo Jima." I could have kicked myself for letting that slip, possibly giving away my real date of birth, but Captain Banks simply nodded.

"A lot of good men died on that island. An uncle, then?"

I couldn't prevent a laugh at the thought of Aunt Rebecca's husband teaching me anything other than how to cover a ship's network of pipes with asbestos. "No, sir."

"Hmmm. Well, your reaction to Brown's advance was definitely military."
"I watched a lot of war movies, Captain Banks." That made him laugh. "That's all I can think to explain it. Is it... is it important, sir?"

"No. I was just curious. Hit the showers. You don't want to be late for your next class."

"Yes, sir. No, sir. Thank you, sir." I breathed a surreptitious sigh of relief and hurried to the locker room.

But after that, whenever I turned around, he seemed to be watching me, his expression thoughtful. Even after graduating from the Police Academy, I would run into him, and I would wonder what it was about me that he wanted to learn.

****

I was assigned to the 15th Precinct, along with Henri Brown. Because we were rookies, we weren't partnered together, but after work, those times when Naomi was having a decent day and I didn't have to hurry home, we would go for a beer with his partner, Joel Taggert.

They were good men, and after two years on the force, I trusted them where I wouldn't trust some white cops.

Maybe it was because they were a minority. Maybe it was because in the two years we'd been on the force together, I'd never left them hanging. For whatever reason, I knew they had my back, even though I was queer.

I kept that aspect of my life to myself, but they learned about it one evening when I went to a bar after I'd clocked out.

I couldn't even say I was hoping to get lucky and get laid. I hadn't had sex in so long it felt like I was dating my right hand. The problem was every time I thought I was getting close to someone, he'd turn out to be not the one I wanted - too needy, too kinky, too ... too.

I was in the men's room, contemplating the glory hole, trying to convince myself that sticking my dick in it wasn't an act of desperation. I'd seen the young man who was in the stall. He wasn't bad looking, not that it mattered.

Just then, two men entered.

"Jesus, Sandburg!" The hissing of sibilants made it sound like a tea kettle. "What are you doing here?" It was Joel Taggert.

"Uh..."

"Are you part of the bust?" Henri Brown. They were working nights out of Vice. Gay bars being busted was a fact of life - they could be shut down just for selling beer.

"Uh..." I felt my face go up in flames.

"Fuck, man, you better get your honkey ass out of here!"

"Yeah, man. Split! We'll tell Inspector Todd the can was empty."

"Thanks." I didn't say anything else, just grabbed the guy who'd been sitting in the john and slipped out the door, dragging him behind me and collaring another couple of young men who were heading in our direction.
"Hey!"

"Move it!" I hustled them out the back door, not offering any explanations. Just as it was closing, I heard the front door being smashed open, and a high-pitched voice squeak, "Don't nobody move!"

The next day I thanked Joel and H again. "I'm serious, man. You saved my ass. And my badge."

"Forget about it, Sandman." H had called me that ever since commencement, when the mayor of the city had given a speech that was so dry it had put me to sleep. "You've been there for me when it counted."

"Yeah, but... " I'd jumped in to help him when some bigoted assholes thought the color of his skin meant he shouldn't be a cop.

"Doesn't matter to us what butters your biscuit. If we hadn't seen you there last night, we'd never have guessed."

"I just got one question for you. Don't you like dark meat?"

My jaw dropped, and all I could do was stare at Brown.

"I mean, you never made a pass at either one of us."

"Did you want me to?"

"No. But... "

"H, you're making my head hurt."

He laughed at me, and I flipped him off.

"The thing is, Sandburg," Joel remarked, "you've got enough going on being a Jewish cop. A queer Jewish cop... " He shook his head and laughed. "Just don't start decorating the squad room, okay?"

"Oh, what? You're fond of antique ugly? You're a sad, sad man, Taggart." But I was relieved to know I hadn't lost their friendship.

****

I was in the locker room, changing after shift, when Brown walked in.

"Where's your partner?"

I scowled at him. "O'Neill's gone for the day."

"I heard he's gonna try for detective again."

"Yeah. If he doesn't get it this time... What are you doing in here? Your shift's already started. I'd have thought you'd be with your partner."

"He's in the can. I thought I'd talk to you while I could."

"You want to talk to me?" I flirted my lashes at him. "Why, Officer Brown, darlin'! Are you gonna ask me out?"

"Asshole. Listen. What's up with you, Blair?"
"What do you mean, 'what's up with me'?

"Captain Banks has been asking questions about you."

"Shit. About... " I thought of the night that gay bar had been shut down. H shook his head, and I blew out a relieved breath. "Then why?"

"Dunno, but he's with the Cap right now. Why'n't ya go see?"

"Yeah." I shut my locker and spun the combination. "I think I will."

Simon Banks was just exiting the Cap's office. He was dressed in civilian clothes.

"Ah. Sandburg. I was hoping I'd run into you."

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you in a hurry?"

"No, sir."

"I'd like to buy you a cup of coffee, then."

We walked around the corner to Rosie's Diner. Cops ate breakfast there before shift, dinner there after shift, and coffee any time in between.

"Two coffees, Rosie. One black, one regular."

"How did you know I take my coffee regular?"

"I know a lot about you, Sandburg." He pointed to a booth in the back, and waited until I went first.

I slid onto the vinyl seat and folded my hands on the table. My mouth was dry, and my gut started to twist into a knot. "Is something wrong, Captain?"

"Should there be?"

"Police captains don't usually invite patrolmen for a cup of coffee. And they don't generally know how their subordinates take their coffee."

Babs, the older waitress, approached just then, and put two glasses of water before us. "Rosie's makin' a fresh pot."

"Thanks, Rosie," he called, and she gave him a wave to let him know she'd heard him.

Babs turned her smile on me. "Hi, Blair. We got blueberry pie if you want?"

I shook my head. I'd have blueberry stains all over my teeth, and that was the last thing I needed to worry about during an interview with someone in the upper echelons.

"When you gonna ask me out, sugar?"

"Ah, Babs, I can see it clearly. We go out, I fall in love with you and let you have your wicked way with me, and then you leave me for someone taller and break my heart."

She grinned and fluffed her hair. "That's the truth, sugar." She sashayed back behind the counter.
Captain Banks laughed softly.

I picked up the glass and took a small sip, determined this time not to say anything.

"I've been looking through your files."

Fuck. This was it. He was going to tell me he'd learned I was too young and would boot me off the Force.

Naomi was doing better, but going back to work was out of the question, even if she'd been given the green light by her pulmonologist. She had to stay away from any place where smoking was allowed, which left out the Starlight Lounge and every bar and restaurant in the city of New York.

I needed this job for the Major Medical, if nothing else.

The coffee arrived, and I brought the cup to my lips.

"You didn't tell me you'd been to Peru."

"Excuse me?"

"You spent four months in Peru."

"Well... yes, I did. I was on a field trip with Professor Stoddard for the anthropology course I was taking."

"What part of Peru were you in?"

"Uh... Iquitos, on the Peruvian Amazon."

"Did you go south? Anywhere near the Chopec Pass in La Montana region?"

I opened my mouth to tell him 'yes', but nothing came out. I swallowed, then said, "Why are you asking me this, Captain?"

"A friend of mine traveled to Peru. I haven't seen or heard from him in a few years. His name is Jack Pendergrast."

I knew that name. Again, I could tell him nothing.

"Jack and I were in the Army together," Captain Banks began to talk about Pendergrast, about their tours of duty in the Pacific Theater during World War II, in Korea during that conflict. "He saved my ass more times than I like to recall. I owe him."

"He sounds like a swell guy, Captain, but..."

"You can't tell me anything. I understand. Look, would you mind if we got together for coffee every now and then. I'd like to talk to someone about him."

"He had no family you could talk to, sir?"

"No. He had a... No."

I wondered what Captain Banks had been about to say.

"It's sad, I know, but you having been in Peru is about as close to him as I can get."
"Well... well, that would be fine, Captain."

"I don't bite, I promise." He studied my eyes, then smiled, and I realized he hadn't had a cigar in his mouth the entire time. "And maybe I can get O'Neill off your ass. Babs! Bring us a couple of slices of blueberry pie. And don't be stingy with the whipped cream!"

****

That was the start of our friendship. We'd meet at least once a week for coffee and a slice of blueberry pie, and he'd tell me about Jack Pendergrast, about how he'd taught at a military academy for a time, then quit to do... something else.

"He always could be a close-mouthed son-of-a-bitch," Captain Banks had chuckled. I'd looked up sharply, but there had been no malice in his expression.

I talked about Peru and what it had been like. I never told him that I had met Jack Pendergrast, if only for a short time. At least, I assumed it was a short time. And I never mentioned that there were almost three weeks that I couldn't remember.

When I first had the idea about taking the test to become a detective, I brought it up to him, and when I got my detective's badge I didn't know who was more proud, Simon or Naomi. And he offered his help if I should ever need it.

A year or so later, he left the force and opened Banks, his own security agency. He provided men to guard banks and art museums, and the occasional bodyguard. He, himself, kept his hand in by doing some private investigating.

We still got together every other week, and he'd tell me about his men and the jobs they handled, but it was Megan Connor, Simon's secretary, who whetted my curiosity about Jim Ellison.

Megan was an Australian transplant who'd come to America to become a Radio City Rockette. A bad break had left her leg unable to bear the stress of a dance routine, and she'd found herself out of work. She'd fallen in love with Manhattan, though, and she'd stayed, putting herself through secretarial school and getting the job with Simon.

On this particular day, I'd come to see him about something I was working on. Normally, I would have waited until our regular meeting at Rosie's, but this case had been driving me nuts. Now I was pretty sure I had a handle on it, and I'd wanted to share that with Simon.

Banks seemed to be empty, but then I heard something in the break room. I strolled down the corridor and gazed in to find one of Simon's younger guards. He must have been going off shift because he was dressed in casual clothes.

"Well, hello, Gabe."

He jumped and almost spilled some coffee onto his jeans. "Blair. Detective Sandburg." He put the cup down and smiled at me.

"You can call me Blair. I was looking for Simon, but finding you is even better." I'd seen him checking me out whenever I stopped by, so I flirted with him. "Are you busy?"

"Oh, I... I... " He was breathless. "No. I was just... "

"Want to have dinner with me?" I hadn't been on a date in forever, he was cute, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.
"Oh, yes, I'd..."

I crowded him back until his knees hit the sofa and he sat down. I leaned over, gripped his biceps, and brought him back to his feet. I had just started kissing him, when there was a low wolf-whistle behind us.

Megan had walked in.

Gabe's arms, which had been around my neck, were withdrawn hastily, and he shoved me away. His face was beet red. "He... he started it!"

"Looked to me like you were enjoying it," Megan remarked.

Gabe sputtered for a second, then rushed out, pulling the door shut behind him.

"I thought no one was here. Where were you?" I asked ruefully.

"In the ladies room. So, that's why you've never made a pass at me."

"Are you upset?"

"Actually, I'm relieved. I thought I was losing my touch. Are you going after him?" She nodded toward the door that had almost hit Gabe in the ass in his rush to leave.

"No, I don't think so. If he's embarrassed to be seen kissing me, then I don't think he's the one for me." There hadn't been 'a one' for me in quite some time.

She looked thoughtful, and then her expression smoothed out. "You were here for a reason, Sandy?"

"I need to see your boss."

"Simon's at JFK picking up Daryl. He'll be staying for the summer."

Simon had been married for a short time just after he'd left the military. His wife Joan was a good woman from what he'd said, but she'd gotten ill and died.

Hearing about that frightened me. She'd been even younger than Naomi.

She'd left Simon with a toddler, and ill-equipped to care for such a young child by himself, he'd left Daryl with her parents, who lived in Cascade, in Washington State. He saw the boy on long school holidays, and in the summer, but the grandparents were getting older, and he was talking about having Daryl with him permanently.

"He's gonna be busy, then. Okay, I'll catch him another time. I just wanted to tell him his tip paid off. We picked up Joey Ten Thumbs last night."

"Nice going, Sandy. I'll let him know." She went to pour herself a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, Megan. I'll see you." I walked out of the break room.

"Psst." The door to the men's room was cracked open. "Psst!"

Curious, I sauntered back towards it. A hand snaked out, latched onto my arm, and dragged me into the bathroom.

"I'm sorry." It was Gabe. "I got nervous when Megan walked in. I don't want anyone to know... I... I
do want to have dinner with you."

"Great. Where would you like to go?"

"Gabarino's? It's in the theater district."

"That sounds fine." I'd taken Naomi and Simon to the Italian restaurant after I'd gotten my detective's badge. She'd loved the veal marsala. "Give me your address, and I'll pick you up around six."

"No! Er... No. I'll meet you there, okay?"

That should have warned me, but he was cute, and I shushed the little voice in my head.

I really should have listened.

We sat down across from one another, ordered dinner, and he toyed with his breadstick, his water glass, his napkin.

"So tell me a little about yourself, Gabe." I tried the old-fashioned art of conversation.

"Oh, I was born, I grew up, I'm here in the Big Apple."

"But what happened in between."

"Nothing."

"Well, how long have you been in New York?"

"A while." The date was going nowhere fast.

"What's up, Gabe?"

"My boyfriend..."

"You have a boyfriend?" He refused to meet my eyes. I sighed. I hadn't really given much thought to the possibility that I might get laid, but a smidgen of hope had been there. It had been a very long time. "You're on the rebound?"

"Nnnno."

"Gabriel!" One of the most feminine-looking men I had ever seen stalked to our table. He was about 5'4", wearing a skin-tight jumpsuit, and his face was made up with grease paint. "You bitch!"

"You followed me?" Gabe's expression was a mixture of indignation and excitement.

"Reggie told me, but I didn't believe him! I had to see it for myself. I rushed right over from the club... You... Our place. Our table. How could you?" The little queen turned to me. "And how could you?" Tears streaked his face with eyeliner. "You brute! Breaking up our home..."

"We were just having dinner..." I tried to defend myself, unsure exactly how I'd gotten into this predicament.

"Dinner now, bed later," he sneered.

"No, really..."
"Oh, what? He isn't good enough for you?"

"Excuse me?" I blinked.

"Baby, no, it wasn't like that. I promise you."

"I know you, Gabriel. You tramp, you slut, you... "

"You weren't paying any attention to me." His tone was sulky. "What did you expect me to do?"

"I expected you to be at home after work. Waiting for me to come home from work. I'm going to miss the first performance! Now, get on your feet and march! I'll deal with you later. As for you... " He glared at me, leaned down, and snarled, "Go near him again, and I'll tear your balls off and stuff them down your throat. I may be small, but I'm mean!"

They left. I looked around to find myself the focus of interested eyes, and I felt color rise to my hairline.

There was a touch to my arm. It was the waiter. "The manager requests you not make a scene." He handed me the check and a bag. "Your dinner, sir."

I paid him. At least I was getting dinner. And Naomi would enjoy it. I walked out of the restaurant. Gabarino’s had always been a little stuffy.

****

The next time I paid a visit to Banks, Megan mentioned that Gabe had quit. "Just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Told me to mail his paycheck. What did you do to him?"

"Me?" Why did everyone think I was this Casanova? "He had a boyfriend!"

"Hmmm." She studied me carefully. "All right. I'll have to see if I can find someone for you."

"Uh... Megan, I'd really rather you didn't... "

But true to her word, she let me know whenever she came across a cute guy - at the grocery store or the movies or in the park.

"You don't even know if they're queer," I pointed out.

"It wouldn't hurt for you to ask."

"You saw what happened with Gabe."

"That was a complete and utter mistake. Which you engineered, all by yourself."

"Hey!" I protested.

"Now, there's a very personable young man behind the counter at Barney's... "

I found myself wondering what she was doing in a men's store, but refrained from asking. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"You keep telling me that."
"Any chance one day you're going to take me at my word?"

"No."

"Okay, but I'm going to keep trying."

****

It was a hot and muggy August day. I walked into Banks, loosening my tie and running a hand through my hair. I gave a fond thought to the short-sleeved uniforms I'd worn when I'd been a patrolman.

Megan looked up from her desk. "Hi, Sandy!" There was a little smile on her lips. "Simon's thinking about hiring a new boy."

I raised an eyebrow. After the debacle that had been Gabe, we'd come to a mutual agreement to stay away from Simon's employees.

"His name's Jim Ellison. A friend of Simon's was a friend of his. Jack Pendergrast."

I made a noncommittal sound. Simon hadn't talked about him in quite some time, and he still had no idea that I'd met Pendergrast briefly ten - Jesus, it was already ten years? - ago. I wondered if I tried to talk about that time, if I'd finally be able to.

"Sandburg, you were here for a reason, or was it just to flirt with my secretary?"

"Uh... " It never failed to amaze me that even after all these years, Simon had no idea of my sexual orientation. "Actually, I do have a reason." I followed him back to his office and laid out the case I was working on.

"Ah. Those girls who are being stabbed. The Secretary Slasher?"

"That's the one." The bastard didn't really slash. He slid his knife between their ribs, then let them spill out of his arms onto the sidewalk and took a souvenir, a watch, a necklace, a ring. "This time our killer took an earring. With her ear."

"He's escalating."

"Yeah."

"I've been reading about it in the News."

"Yeah. Sam Samuels. He gave him the name." I ran a hand through my hair. "We're getting some pretty strange stuff going on this time. Would you believe a midget came in to confess? We don't know much about this son-of-a-bitch, but Dan Wolf was able to extrapolate from the placement of the wounds that he's about six feet tall. I told Mr. Kupperman that, and he puffed up and claimed he was a master of disguise. And when I refused to accept his story, he said I was prejudiced against little people. Asked if I would let my sister marry one."

Simon was struggling to hide a grin. "You don't have a sister, Sandburg."

"That's what I told him. He said that was a bigot's answer if ever he heard one."

Simon lost the struggle and burst into laughter. "Sorry," he was finally able to say.

"Yeah, well. Anyway, right now I'm hitting a blank wall."
"I'll have my boys listen for any information."

"Thanks, Simon."

He patted my shoulder, then glanced at his watch. "Damn. I've got a prospective employee coming, Blair."

"Jim Ellison?"

"Someone's been talking, I see."

"You know Megan. Look, I've got to get going myself. The Cap is planning a meeting about this clown." I smoothed my hair and straightened my tie. "Good luck with your new guy. Keep an eye out for me, Simon!" I opened the door and walked right into a chest. "Oops, sorry."

I trotted toward the subway entrance down the block and caught an uptown train.

****

Simon wasn't able to come up with a tip, but one of my informants was. The Cap decided that I would go undercover as the newest secretary in the insurance company where our killer worked in the mailroom.

I shaved my legs and donned a straight blonde wig and mini skirt, and found a padded bra in my size.

"Don't ask me about visiting a ladies lingerie department, Cap. It was an experience I don't want to repeat!"

I was also wearing something to cover my ribs. Joel had helped me rig up a gizmo with tape and fine wire mesh.

When George Wimbley tried to slide his knife between my ribs, he got a surprise. He got an even bigger one when I tossed him over my shoulder, straddled his hips and yanked his arms behind his back, and cuffed him.

I got off him and removed the wig, rubbing my scalp. His eyes goggled. "Damn. You was such a pretty woman."

Taggert and Brown looked away and coughed, and I growled at them. "Book this asshole!"

So we caught the slasher, and when I went to tell Simon about it, I learned that Jim Ellison had got the job.

I'd met most of Simon's men at one time or another, but for some reason, I kept missing Ellison.

"You ought to come by on payday, Sandy," Megan suggested. "I think you'll like him. He's very cute. His hair is short, but it's the kind of texture you just want to run your palm over."

"How do you know what it feels like?"

"What do you think? I made an excuse to see for myself."

"Forward wench. But how do you know he's... um... that he'd like me?"

"I'm trying to tell you, Sandy, if you'd let me get a word in edgewise."
I nodded and pretended to sew my lips shut.

"All right then, mate. This was a while back, four, maybe five years ago. I was dating a very nice gentleman who had a very poor sense of direction. He wanted to take me to the Copa, but we wound up ... somewhere else. I think it was called The Leather Jacket. It was a homosexual bar, but we didn't realize that until we went in for a drink. I happened to see our man Jim there. He was with a very handsome man who was all over him. And it was obvious that Mr. Ellison did not mind in the least."

"Very handsome, huh?" Well, that let me out. I did pretty well in the looks department, and I could even go up against handsome, but 'very handsome'? I laughed and shook my head. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I'm not a gossip," she declared righteously, then laughed, spoiling it. "Why don't I tell him you're interested? I'm pretty sure he is. Every time I talk about you, his ears perk up."

"His... Yeah?"

"Mmm hmmm. You bumped into him the day Simon hired him, you know."

"That was him?" Now that I thought of it, that chest had felt really firm. I hoped she couldn't see how my body reacted to that bit of information.

"Yes."

"Megan," I cleared my throat, "I'm a grown man. If I want to ask someone out, I can do that all by myself."

She put a sheet of paper into the typewriter.

"I can."

She flipped open her steno pad and began to type.

"Uh... let me think about it?"

Megan paused in her typing. "Piece of advice, Sandy. Don't wait too long. He's very cute."

But it was the holiday season, things got busy, and there just wasn't time.

I stopped at Banks to drop off a tray of Christmas cookies. "Hellooooo! Where is everyone?"

Simon poked his head out the breakroom door. "The boys will be trailing in soon. Megan's gone up to Friedman's Deli to get the sandwich platter they do for us. Do I smell cookies?"

"Naomi made 'em." No one knew that my mother couldn't cook, much less bake. I made the cookies and said they were from her because New York City detectives didn't spend time in the kitchen.

He hurried toward me and lifted the lid of the box, and helped himself to a Santa covered in green and red sprinkles. "Be sure to thank her, Blair. How is she, by the way?"

"Better, thanks." Occasionally, she'd have a relapse, and she'd spent Thanksgiving in the hospital. "I think after the New Year I'm gonna see if she can spend some time with my cousin Franklin. This is shaping up to be a really cold winter, and the air hurts her lungs."

"I have something for her. I'll be right back."
"Sandy!" Megan came from behind me. She wore her winter coat, and her arms were around a box bearing the logo of Friedman's Deli. "Happy Chanukah!"

"Merry Christmas!"

"Are those Naomi's cookies? Bring them along!"

I followed her into the breakroom. While she unloaded the box, I looked around the room. There was a Christmas tree in the corner with presents piled under it, a menorah on top of the small fridge, and pine garlands draped along the walls. A portable record player was stacked with what I assumed were Christmas records.

A few television tray tables that I knew Simon kept in the storeroom were scattered around for his employees' eating convenience, and I set the cookies down on one of them.

Megan had taken a platter out of the box and put it on the table, and now she was removing the plastic wrap that protected it. The sandwiches were cut into neat triangles and stacked high.

"Can you stay for the party?" She took out a container that held pickles and another one that was divided for different types of olives. Then she put jars of mustard and mayonnaise beside the platter.

"No, I have to be back at the Precinct." I'd been working the night shift for the past few years. "I just wanted to wish you and Simon Merry Christmas and give you your presents." I kissed her cheek and handed her a flat box.

"Tickets to Man of La Mancha! Sandy, thank you! I've been dying to see this!" She threw her arms around me and hugged me so tight I thought my ribs were in danger of cracking. I eased her arms off me, but she didn't notice. She was too busy petting the tickets. "I'll ask Evan."

"Who?"

"Evan. My newest flame. He's a sweetie. You have to meet him sometime. Just let me put these away." She ran out of the room, and I took the opportunity to take a sandwich. Then she was back.

"And this is for you and Naomi." She took a couple of boxes from under the tree and handed them to me. I opened mine. It contained a yellow and black hand-knitted scarf.

"Thanks, Megan."

She pinched my cheek. "You gonna look so cute!"

I wrapped it around my neck. I was gonna look like a bumblebee.

"I knitted one for Naomi too, only it's pink and purple."

"I'm sure she'll love it."

Megan positively beamed. "So. Any plans for the New Year?"

"I've got the night off. Can you believe that? That's the first time since I've been on the force!"

"Nice. Do you have a date?"

"No. It's not an evening I want to spend with just anyone. I thought I'd go up to Times Square by myself and watch the ball drop." I helped myself to another sandwich.

"You're spending it alone?" Megan made clucking noises. "Chicken."
"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Sandy. Jim would go out with you in a minute. Why haven't you asked him? No, never mind, I don't want to hear any excuses. Men. Straight or queer, there's no difference."

"I beg to differ."

She smacked my arm.

"Hey!"

"Well, it doesn't matter. Jim is busy too."

My stomach clutched. Was he seeing someone?

Megan blithely continued, "He's working two jobs."

"Oh, well, there you go. We're both busy men."

"That may be, but as far as I can see, you're both only busy with work."

Simon came in, bringing that conversation to a halt, much to my relief. He was carrying two packages. "These are from me and Daryl, for Naomi and you."

"Thanks, Simon." I gave him a slim, flat box. He tore off the wrapping paper. "You're as bad as a kid!"

"Ah, Blair! Daryl is going to love this!" He held tickets for the first Knicks' basketball game at their new arena in Madison Square Garden on 33rd Street. "I love this! Thank you!"

"You're welcome." I set Naomi's present aside and opened mine. "Oh. Simon."

"Are they okay? Do you like them? Daryl and I found them in a used book store. I'm not too sure about the titles ..."

"Simon, thank you! These are... I don't have words!" *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana, The Perfumed Garden of the Shykh Nefzawi,* and best of all, *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* - a manuscript edition. They were all translated by Sir Richard Burton.

I stroked the covers and couldn't wait to get home to start reading them.

****

I hadn't been joking when I'd told Megan I would only take someone out on New Year's Eve if I were serious about him.

New Year's Eve had always been a special holiday to me. I'd talked Butch into sneaking out of the house and ringing in the New Year the year he and his mother had left.

This was the first New Year since then that I'd been in Times Square when I hadn't been working. It was... interesting.

The ball came down, and - as they said - the crowd went wild. There were noise makers and fireworks, but I'd been a cop too long not to recognize gunshots when I heard them.

I started shouldering my way through the crowd, heading east.
When I got there, the mounted cops had it under control. "Hey, Sandman!"

I groaned. I was going to shoot Henri Brown one day for giving me that nickname.

"Hi, Walt." We'd been in the same class at the Academy, but he'd always wanted to work the mounted detail, and he'd gotten transferred to it as soon as he could.

"Don't you ever not work on New Year's Eve?"

"I'm not on duty tonight!"

He glanced around at all cops. "So what are you doing here if you're not working?"

"I heard gunshots. What's going on?"

He snorted, a disgusted sound. "A couple of teenagers showing off for their girlfriends. We confiscated their fathers' guns. The 53rd's handling it. They're taking the kids to the Precinct, and their daddies will be getting a call shortly." His horse started to dance. "I'd better get going before Ben steps on your toes." He leaned down and extended his hand. "Happy New Year, Blair."

"Happy New Year, Walt." I patted his horse's shoulder. "Happy New Year, Ben."

The area was quieting down as the crowd thinned and people left to find a party or somewhere warm. The nip in the air was definitely becoming more noticeable. No sense in staying here attracting cold germs.

I went down into the subway and showed my badge to the old man in the token booth.

"Better hurry, Detective. The train'll be here in a minute, an' if you miss it, you'll have an hour's wait!"

"Thanks, Pop." I hopped over the turnstile rather than going through the gate and dashed down the steps to the platform. It was pretty empty. Across the tracks on the downtown side was a lone traveler. His back was to me, and he was staring up the track, looking for his train. I grinned. It was such a New York thing to do. Even out-of-towners did it after they'd been here a while.

In a moment of whimsy I was about to call, 'Happy New Year' to him, but his train pulled in, the doors slid open, and he stepped into the car.

And then my train arrived, and I forgot about it.

****

Whenever Megan would ask when I intended to ask Jim Ellison out on a date, I'd find an excuse why I hadn't, couldn't, would do it soon. Refurbishing the apartment I'd moved Naomi to as soon as I could afford it after I'd graduated from the Academy, getting Naomi on her flight to San Francisco to visit Franklin and his wife and kids, and the ever-popular swamped with work.

And so, before I knew it, we were into February.

I walked into the squad room and hung up my coat. My shift would be starting in about twenty minutes, and I figured I might as well get a head start.

O'Neill, the man who had been my partner when I'd been a patrolman, was holding court at his desk. He looked around when he heard the door close, and his expression soured when he saw me. He had made detective only a year or so before I had, and that was a wild hair up his ass.
He turned back to Monaghan and McGaffney, who were looking bored. "And I got another fucking murder case!" he groused. "A strangulation."

"I thought those were the kind you liked," Monaghan remarked innocently, surprising a laugh out of me. O'Neill was the kind of policeman who made 'cop' sound like a four-letter word.

"Not just before I'm gonna retire." He scowled at me. "The victim is a goddamned faggot! I could tell by the prissy way the apartment looked. His boyfriend probably decorated it. Doilies and shit like that. I bet they had a tiff." He stuck out his little finger and spoke in a lisping falsetto. "'Oh, precious, I don't like that color slipcover for the loveseat. It doesn't match the drapes.' As far as I'm concerned, that's one less homo, and the world is better off."

"So did you talk to the boyfriend?"

His scowl deepened. "Haven't been able to track him down."

"Hasn't been able to find anything to back his theory either," McGaffney muttered as he passed my desk.

"Whether or not he was homosexual, he was still a human being, O'Neill. He didn't deserve to be killed, to die before his time."

He curled his lip. "What, are you a fag now too?"

"And if I was? You want to take it outside? In the alley?"

He backed off. He was taller that I was, and he had about twenty-five pounds on me, but still, he backed off. "If my hernia wasn't acting up, I'd mop up the squad room with you."

"Yeah, sure. Isn't your shift over? Go home, O'Neill. Your wife may have to put up with your bullshit, but I don't."

He left, grumbling as he walked out of the squad room and slamming the door for good measure.

I wasn't surprised when that case went cold after only a week.

****

It was the Monday before St. Patrick's Day, and I was at home having breakfast even though it was almost noon. I poured milk over a bowl of Frosted Flakes, then sliced a banana on top of it. The midmorning radio personality on WMCA was talking about the City gearing up for the Parade this coming Sunday.

The telephone rang. "Sandburg."

"We've got a homicide on Central Park West." It was the Captain. "Your team is on it."

'My team' was Joel Taggart and Henri Brown. Taggart had made detective about the same time as O'Neill had, and Brown a year after I did. There was a lot of bullshit in the locker room about affirmative action, but they were good men and had worked hard to get the position.

"Wait a sec, Captain. We're working the 4-to-midnight shift. Where's O'Neill?"

"He's in the hospital."

"His hernia?"
"Yeah. This is a priority." Which probably meant the victim had money or came from a prominent family. "As of this minute, you're on 8-to-4. Taggert and Brown have already been dispatched to the scene. Santini is out with the flu, so Wolf will be the coroner on this one. The man who found the body lives on the same floor, and I want you to talk to him." He rattled off the address, gave me time to verify it, then hung up.

"And a good afternoon to you too, Cap." I sighed and took a last spoon of cereal, then emptied my bowl into the sink and looked down at myself. I was in jeans and a flannel shirt. There were some errands I'd needed to run before I dressed for work. I guessed they'd have to wait.

I went to the bedroom. At least it was tidy. I always made the bed as soon as I got up. I changed into white shirt, a suit, and tie, and fastened my holster at my waist.

The temperature had dipped during the night, and I'd need my overcoat. I rode down in the elevator, worrying my lower lip. Why had the Cap put us on this case?

The subway didn't care if you were a detective on the job. There was another breakdown on the B line. I ran back up to the street and caught a Number 10 bus just as its doors were swinging shut.

"Let me off on 74th Street?" I showed the driver my badge, and he nodded.

There wasn't much traffic, and he caught every light. It wasn't long before he pulled up to the curb, and I got off in front of the fifty story building. There were a couple of black and whites parked in front of it.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you live here?" a young cop asked as I entered the building. He couldn't have been more than a month out of the Academy. "If you don't..."

His partner gave him a poke. "He's one of us. Hi, Detective Sandburg."

"Hi, Nixon. This your new partner? He's lucky. You're a good teacher."

"Thanks."

I turned to go toward the elevators.

"Detective Sandburg? He's the Sandman? But he's ... short!"

"Shhh!"

I pretended I hadn't heard.

"Detective Sandburg! Detective!" It was Sam Samuels, who reported for The Daily News.

"I'm busy, Sam."

"Aw, come on. Gimme a break. What's going on here?"

"I can't tell you. I'm just getting here myself."

"On your way down, then? Okay?"

A uniformed officer was by the elevator. I showed him my badge. "You'll need this, sir." He handed me a key.

"Thanks." I inserted the key in the slot and pressed the button for 50. The doors slid shut on the sight
of Sam trying to get some information out of the uniform.

Another officer stood at the door to the penthouse apartment. "Detective." He opened the door, and I went in.

Henri was coming toward me. "Joel's in the big bathroom, Blair. Straight down that hallway and to the right. It's through the bedroom. That isn't where he was killed, though. There are two gouges in the carpeting. He was dragged. From one of the living rooms, it looks like. That's at the other end of the penthouse."

"Who called this in?"

"A Marc Addams. He lives on this floor, too. There are three penthouse apartments on this side of the building."

"Where is he?"

"I told him to wait in the study. That's... uh... " He looked blank for a second. "Geez, this place is huge," he griped.

"Never mind. I'll take a look at the body and then go find him."

"Y'know something, Blair? This place is almost too clean."

"You think someone may have come in and wiped it down? Well, I guess we'll see." Riley and Stephens, the Print boys, were already here. Maybe they would find something.

"We'll keep our fingers crossed. I'm gonna talk to the other tenant on this floor and see if he knows anything."

"One other thing, H. This building has almost as much security as Fort Knox. You might want to question the doorman, see if he saw anything, if anyone struck him as odd."

"Good idea. I'll let you know what I learn." He walked out of the penthouse.

I went down that hallway and to the right, and into the bedroom.

I blinked. The room was almost as large as the apartment that Naomi and I had had on Lexington and 3rd. There was an alcove with a daybed. Beside it was a long, low glass table standing on wrought iron legs. An armoire, which stood open, contained a television. Paintings of nude men in various poses, alone, in pairs, a quartet - arms and legs and hard, curved asses.

I shut my mouth, feeling like a hick in the big city for the first time.

The canopied bed had to be at least four feet off the floor. "Jesus! Is there a Sherpa around? This looks as high as Mount Everest!"

One of the two men dusting for prints glanced around and nodded at me. "Yeah, I know what you mean. You need a friggin' ladder to get into bed!"

"Unbelievable." There was actually a stepstool beside it.

"Say, I thought this was O'Neill's case?"

"He's in the hospital."
"His hernia?" The other shook his head. "He really oughta do something about that."

"The Cap said something about an operation."

They snorted and got back to work. O'Neill wasn't too well-liked.

I started to go toward the bathroom. In the corner by the door was a tall, leafy plant. I touched the soil. It had recently been watered. I dried my fingers off on my trousers and walked into the bathroom.

I blinked again.

I'd never seen anything like it. It was huge and contained a sunken tub large enough to comfortably host an orgy; the shower was separate. There were cabinets and closets, a sink topped with a marble counter and with what I was pretty sure were gold fixtures. I didn't think anything as mundane as brass would be permitted in this apartment.

The scent of death was heavy in the air. Joel looked up from where he crouched beside the corpse and nodded in somber greeting.

Sprawled over the john was a man who had been, at one time, very handsome, but now... his tongue was black and protruding. His cheeks were mottled. The whites of his eyes were dotted with red, the blood vessels having ruptured. Around his throat were the imprints of two brutal hands.

Joel rose and shook his head. "He must have pissed someone off to a very large degree."

"I'll say. It would have taken a strong man to overpower someone of his size." I figured he was about 6'2" and tipped the scales at one ninety-five, maybe a bit more. It didn't look like fat, either. The polo shirt he wore molded the muscles of his arms and torso lovingly.

"Dunno about that. I got the smell of alcohol. If he was drunk, a smaller man could have done it."

"It looks like he was attacked from behind. Notice the indentations at the front of his throat?"

"Yeah. And check out the back of his neck. Thumb prints?"

"Yeah. Dan will have to let us know after the autopsy." Joel handed me something. "His little black book?"

"Yeah. I found it in the nightstand. Found some other things in there too. I swear to God I have no idea what a man would use those things for! And would you take a look at this?" He walked toward the counter beside the sink and began to lay down pieces of glossy paper. "This was buried underneath everything else."

The pieces were a professional photograph that had been torn again and again. It was like a jigsaw puzzle, and I helped him put them together to reveal the subject.

I caught my breath. His light brown hair was thick and fell in a disordered style, as if someone had run his fingers through those strands. I wanted to run my fingers through them to see if they were as soft as they looked. The eyes smiling up into mine were ice blue, but there was nothing cold about them. They seemed teasing. You know I can make you feel good. Let me show you how good.

I swallowed. "Who is this?" I didn't recognize my voice.

"Dunno, but for him," he gestured to the dead man, "to do something like this..."
"You're right. It doesn't seem logical the killer would tear up the photo, then stuff it in the
nightstand."

"Do you think he could be our killer?" He gestured toward the counter.

I bit back the NO that automatically came to my lips. I didn't know, and I couldn't let my little head
interfere with my big head's thinking.

"There should be a number on the back of the photograph, along with the name of the man who took
it. Professional photographers identify their work that way." I knew because I'd had some photos
taken when I'd worked for Neil. As far as I knew, he still had the one of me in a white leather vest
and chaps, lounging beside a black horse. He'd liked the contrast. "Joel, would you track down the
photographer?"

"Sure." He found the piece and jotted down the information.

"I'll... uh... I'll take these pieces with me and put them together." I was afraid he was going to call me
on taking the shredded photograph, but he just nodded, and I put them in my pocket.

"What about the names in his black book?"

I thumbed through it. "There are only male names in it. Interesting." Even more interesting were the
notations after each name. 'Okay with threesomes.' 'Likes to be tied up.' 'Gives good head.' 'Only
puts out after dinner and a trinket.' There was a star beside one name, and I figured this Jeff had to be
something special.

"It looks like he's of your persuasion." Joel grinned, and I didn't take offense as I would have if
O'Neill had been the one saying that.

"Doethn't make him a bad perthon," I lisped, then got serious. "It also looks like someone whose
name begins with E did something to make him unhappy."

"How do you figure?"

"There's a ragged edge in here. A page has been torn out. And look at this." I showed him the
gouges in a number of pages after that.

"I guess scratching it out wasn't enough."

"The problem is - is E his last initial or his first?"

"Who lists people in their address book by their first initial?"

"Naomi does."

"Okay, she's your mama; I'm not saying a word about that."

"Smart man. Okay. I'll have Monaghan run the names in this book as soon as we get back to
headquarters, see if these men know of anyone with the initial E who was dating our victim."

"You think they were romantically involved?"

"Oh, yeah. You don't rip a page out of your address book because a friend pisses you off. Where's
the small study? I'll question Marc Addams now. Maybe he knows something about our mysterious
Mr. E."
"Follow the hall outside the bedroom door all the way around to the left."

"Thanks, Joel. Dan should be here pretty soon."

He shrugged and jerked a thumb toward the dead man. "He's not going anywhere."

"I guess not. See if you can find some contact information that will give us an idea who to notify." I turned around and walked into a tall man whose hair hung down his back in a tail. "Sorry, Dan."

"It's okay, Blair. Hi, Joel." He was carrying what looked like a tool box, and which actually contained the tools of his trade.

"Hi, Dan. Hi, guys."

The two men with the coroner waved but stayed put. They knew the drill. They'd wait in the hall with the gurney until he was ready for them.

Dan glanced over the body. "Handsome man at one time. Okay, I'll get started." He set the case on the floor and opened it. It was time for me to leave.

I followed the hall around to the small study. Small was a relative word. I'd seen whole families live in as much space as that small study.

Bookcases lined two of the walls. There was something about the books they held that gave me the impression they'd been chosen by the decorator with regard to only how they would appear.

A fireplace was against an inner wall, and framing it were two sofas. The opposite wall was made up of ten-foot high windows that opened onto a balcony.

Marc Addams was sitting in an easy chair, his legs crossed at the knee. He was gazing toward the door, but his eyes were unfocused - he wasn't seeing anything.

"Mr. Addams, I'm Detective Sandburg."

He blinked, refocused, rose and offered his hand, gave a polite smile. "Detective."

"Sit down, please. Thank you for taking the time to speak to me. What can you tell me about what happened here?"

"I found Randy's body. I called the cops." He shrugged. "That's all there is to it."

I stared at him and said nothing. He sat there, blank-faced, but I noticed his left thumb was picking at the cuticle of his middle finger.

"Can you give me a little more detail?" His expression remained blank. "All right. Suppose you tell me what made you come into this apartment?"

"I just... I hadn't seen Randy in a while, and I became worried."

"Detective Sandburg." Henri was standing in the doorway. I raised an eyebrow, and he jerked his head toward the hall.

"Excuse me, Mr. Addams." I met Henri in the hall. "What've you got?"

He spoke quickly and succinctly.
"Hmmm." I turned to go back into the study, and he caught my arm.

"Wait a second! There's more!" He continued filling me in.

"Thanks, H. Thank you very much." I gripped his arm, then returned to the study. "Mr. Addams, would you care to reconsider your response?"

"Excuse me? Why would I..."

"I've just been told that you were away for the last two weeks, you were not particularly close with the decedent, and if he died you would... 'dance on his grave and then piss on it,' I believe your words were."

He looked disconcerted for a second, then frowned. "So what? That doesn't mean I couldn't be concerned about him if he wasn't seen for a period of time."

"Mr. Addams. The last time the deceased was seen alive was Sunday evening when he returned from an afternoon out with a friend."

"Friend? Randy didn't have friends. He had sycophants and toadies. He mocked and tormented the people who worked for him... " For a second he looked as if he couldn't catch his breath, and he turned pale. "At work, I mean. He worked on Wall Street, you know."

"I didn't know that, but I do understand. I guess even a building this expensive won't guarantee decent neighbors."

"Exactly." His expression was relieved. "Lloyd - Lloyd Johnson, he owns the other penthouse - One of the reasons Lloyd is moving is because Randy was so condescending and disdainful to his fiancée.

"Then why did you go in to see how he was?"

"Okay, look. I... I had a feeling. Didn't you ever get one of those?"

"Actually, I can't say that I have."

"Oh. Well, I did."

"All right, let's set that aside for a moment. Was he seeing anyone with the initial E?"

"Are you kidding? Randy went through the alphabet repeatedly. The last guy he saw... " He stopped abruptly and looked away, obviously uncomfortable.

"We're aware the deceased was homosexual. Do you recall anyone whose first or last name began with an E..."

"No." It was too fast.

"... and who possibly angered him enough for him to tear out a page of his black book?"

"No." He met my eyes. "Do I need to call my lawyer?"

"You're not a suspect. At this point you're not even being held for questioning."

He nodded. "Is that all, then?"
"For now."

He walked toward the door. "By the way, does this mean I shouldn’t leave town?" He gave what I assumed he thought was a jaunty smile, but which fell far short, and left the apartment.

People were watching way too many cop shows on television.
I will be what they want me to be. They will see what I want them to see.
-Amanda Gill

Mother was never without the golden locket that hung around her neck. Even when she went on stage as Medea, she wore it, tucked beneath her costume.

I had asked her once, when I was a young boy, what it contained. She told me that within it was a picture of the one she loved most in the world.

"Me, Mother? Me?" Because of course I knew that Father did not count for as much as I, and there were only the three of us.

"You were no more than two years old, my precious, and Mother held you to her heart."

"May I see, Mother? Please?"

"Not today, Christopher. The key is upstairs in Mother's jewelry box, and I am rather fatigued. Do you understand fatigued?"

"Of course, Mother." And I had proudly recited the definition from Webster's dictionary, "A weariness from physical or mental exertion."

"What a clever, clever boy!"

"Will it be mine one day?"

"You are a boy. This is something young ladies wear."

"Please, Mother?"

"Perhaps if you find a young lady to give it to. Now, run along and play. Mother must rest for her performance tonight."

"Yes, Mother."

But I had gone up to the playroom at the top of the house, secure in the certainty that one day, Mother's locket would indeed be mine.

****

Somehow Mother never found the time to show me the picture in her locket. There was no way for me to forget about it, for it was always around her neck.

The years passed, and now there was no time for Mother to open the locket.

She lay beside my father.
Jameson tapped on the door to my study, then opened it.

"John!" I was surprised to see John Hastings, my lawyer. We had gone to Harvard together and had lost touch after graduation, when he had been struck by wanderlust. He contacted me when he joined a prestigious practice in Manhattan, and since Peters, who had been employed by my father, was obviously becoming senile, I had no qualms in dismissing him and hiring my friend. I crossed the room and accepted his hand. "I am sorry, have I forgotten an appointment?"

"No." He seemed disturbed, not his wont.

"Would you care for a cup of tea, or perhaps some sherry?"

"Thank you, no. I'd prefer to get right down to business."

"That will be all, Jameson." My butler closed the door, and I gestured to a chair. "Please be seated, John. About what did you wish to see me?"

"I know this has been a difficult time for you, Christopher." He opened his briefcase and took out a document. "Your mother had this drawn up some time before she became ill. It's a codicil to her last will and testament."

I frowned at him. "Why was this not read at the same time as Mother's will?" The reading of her will had gone without a problem. Her artwork and first editions were given to friends and colleagues. Her costumes and bedroom furniture went to the Smithsonian.

All the money came to me, as did this house, the house on Long Island, and the Rolls Royce. I also retained complete control of the Amanda Gill Theatre.

Most importantly, I had her locket.

"My deepest apologies, Christopher. An inexperienced intern who had no business handling such papers. Rest assured, he's been fired."

I took the paper and scanned it, my throat growing tight.

"The locket is not mine?"

"I'm sorry, no. It is to go to Frederick Collins."

"Who?"

"Frederick Collins. Apparently, your mother had known him when she was quite young. According to this codicil, her final wish is that her gold locket be returned to the person who gave it to her."

**The person who gave it to her?**

"I... I see." Confused, I rose from my desk and walked to the window. Raindrops were hitting the panes, and I watched as they trickled down.

I had everything. Except the locket.

"Christopher, are you all right?"

I had crushed the paper.

I looked at it in my hand, drew several deep breaths, then forced a smile. "I beg your pardon. You
I know this is a difficult time for you," he repeated. "I'll give you a few days to come to terms with this, but then I will need to present the locket to Mr. Collins." He looked as if he were about to say more, but I scarcely noticed.

"Of course. Yes, of course." I returned to my desk. "I'll see that you have it by the end of the week."

"I'm sorry, Christopher."

"No need to be," I forced myself to say, and he looked shocked. "Oh, you mean for Mother's passing. Thank you."

"We're friends, Christopher. I could do nothing less for you."

"I am sure you must have a million things to do, John. Thank you for taking the time to come see me."

"Yes." He smoothed out the paper, returned it to his briefcase, and closed it. "I must be going."

I pressed a switch on the intercom. "Jameson, would you come see Mr. Hastings out?"

"Take care of yourself, Christopher."

"Of course. Good day, John."

"Good day, Christopher."

The door closed behind him, and I waited until I heard his car drive away from the curb. Then I threw the intercom across the room. It hit the wall and fell to the floor with a satisfying clatter. "Damn you, Mother! How could you do this to me?"

Well, I had dealt with Father, and I would deal with this.

The intercom lay broken upon the floor. I straightened my suit jacket, smoothed my hair, and strode down the hallway.

"Jameson, I just remembered I have an errand to run. Call a cab for me, please."

Within a few minutes he found me. "The cab is here, sir." He held out my overcoat.

"Thank you." I slid my arms into it, and he stepped away. "Oh, and see about finding a repair man. The intercom is not working."

The cab was at the curb, and I got in, uncaring of the rain. "Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, please."

I had no doubt that Tiffany's would have the perfect locket, similar in every way to Mother's.

After all, what did Frederick Collins need with a locket that contained a picture of me with my mother?

****

He was called Randy Beautiful. His fair, handsome exterior hid a spoiled, selfish core.

I chose Randolph to be the next player in my masterpiece. Although his trust was more difficult to
obtain, I succeeded, and it was all the sweeter.

I refused to think how I had earned his trust.

It was Sunday, and we had just returned from the Museum of Modern Art.

Randolph was lounging on the loveseat in the informal living room, listening to The Beatles. The Beatles.

So bourgeois.

"Get me a Drambuie, would you, precious?" He did not know how much I loathed it when he called me that. I concealed my emotions well.

I went to the bar, filled a whiskey tumbler with ice from the refrigerator under the bar, and poured a very generous measure into the glass. This was his fourth drink since we had gotten home. I did not tell he that he had been drinking too much. I encouraged it.

The Beatles were singing, 'Can't buy me love...'

"That's bullshit. Isn't it?" Randolph's laugh was a trifle sotted. "Anything can buy love."

"Do you believe that?" As if I cared.

"I've never known any man who would love me without reservation," he murmured. He glanced at me through his lashes. "Even you, precious."

"I. Beg. Your. Pardon?"

"Oh, don't give me that snooty, old-money, blue-blood attitude. You look like you've got a poker up your ass. If I wasn't the first man to make you see fireworks when I fucked you, you wouldn't stay with me."

And Mother had said that I could not act.

"Do you think so little of yourself that that is all you have to offer a man?"

He did not respond to that. "Tell me, precious. What did you think of that security guard?"

"What should I think of him? He was simply a security guard."

"Oh, you are a snob." As though he himself were not.

I handed him his drink, and he took a sip.

"Ah, this is good." He savored the taste and relaxed against the back of the loveseat.

"Would you like me to massage your shoulders, Randolph?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

Indeed.

I went behind the couch and began to knead his shoulders.

"Mmmm." He relaxed and tipped his head back. "You have magic fingers."
I leaned over him and caressed his torso. The locket slid from my collar and grazed his cheek.

He reached up and took the locket in his hand, fondling the gold cover. "I never paid any attention... What's in here?"

"There is a picture of me in it when I was a child."

"Open it! I want to see what you looked like as a kid."

"I do not have the key upon my person." Actually, it must have been misplaced; I had never been able to find it, not even in Mother's jewelry box.

He continued to fondle the locket, and it was all I could do not to rip it from his hands.

I twisted his nipples, and he arched and hissed. The front of his trousers was obscenely tented.

"Oh, that's nice, precious. Don't stop." It was an order. Randolph never begged.

I added a touch of savagery to the twist, and he writhed under my hands.

"He almost caught us," he panted. "In flagrante, so to say."

"The guard? Yes," I said dismissively, but I stopped what I was doing. I had gone cold when I had heard the doorknob of the men's room rattle.

"I should have let him in. He used to... " He hesitated, then grinned at me over his shoulder. "He used to be a hustler. He was very talented. He could do things with his mouth... "

I shuddered. Randolph had made me do things with my mouth. The first time I had barely made it to the lavatory before I vomited.

"I wonder if he still can," he mused. "We could both have had him, Chris. Or both of us could have had you. You would have enjoyed that, wouldn't you?"

It was not enough that he debased me, but he must have someone else violate my body?

"Chris." He put down the empty glass, and unnoticed by him, it fell and landed on the plush rug. He reached for me, tugging on the chain to bring me down to his lips.

I pulled away sharply. There was a burning sensation at the back of my neck, but his words and my intent caused me to disregard it.

My hands encircled his neck and brought his chin up. His eyes were slitted and his face flushed with lust. I squeezed.

His struggles were ineffectual. He had had too much to drink.

I squeezed. And squeezed until panting, I straightened and looked down at the distortion that had been his handsome face.

"You were a fool, Randolph. A trusting fool."

*I will be what you want me to be. You will see what I want you to see.*

I walked around to the front of the loveseat, caught him under his arms, and dragged him into his luxurious bathroom.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Murder number two? Number three? They just keep coming.

The body had been removed, and Riley and Stephens were gone. A uniformed officer was left guarding the door.

Something about this case was gnawing at me, and I worried it as I stepped into the elevator. Joel and H were right behind me.

"Any luck with Marc Addams, Blair?" Joel asked.

"Hmmm? Oh, he's stonewalling." I turned the key and pressed the button for the lobby floor. "Tell me something. If you were caught in an outright lie, why would you stick to it anyway?"

Henri answered right away. "A woman." Joel poked his arm, and he coughed. "Of course, in your case, Sandman - a man." The two of them burst out laughing.

"Yuck it up. Assholes. But yeah, you're right. So. What woman is involved with the two of them?"

"Beats me." Joel shrugged. "All the names in our dead man's little black book are male, and the other address book I found in his desk just has family. The addresses are all in Maryland."

"Shit. Who's notifying?"

"The Cap will probably have Lieutenant Dawson fly down."

"Good. That's the part of the job I hate the worst."

The elevator came to a stop, and Joel and Henri stepped out.

"Uh, see you at the station, Blair." They took off, and before I could wonder about that, Sam popped up in front of me.

"What happened?"

"No comment." I strode toward the door. The doorman leaped forward and held it open for me.

"Who was killed?"

"No comment."

"When did it happen? And if you tell me 'no comment' one more time, I'll make something up!"

"Look..."

"Come on, Detective Sandburg. Gimme a break. Tell me something."

I ran my hand through my hair. "Okay, look. All I can tell you is the crime was well-planned, well-
executed. Will that get you off my back?"

"You bet! Thanks!" He hurried off, scribbling in his notepad.

I didn't think what I'd told him could account for that amount of scribbling, but I had to get back to headquarters.

****

As Addams had informed me, the deceased had acquaintances and hangers-on but no real friends. Except for Richard Lee, who seemed genuinely distressed, until I started asking questions.

"Can you tell me about his personal life?"

"I think not." He looked down his nose at me.

"Look, Mr. Lee. I need to get as much information about him as I can in order to find who did this."

"You'd like to know about his private life, wouldn't you? Who he was screwing, how much money he made, how he spent it and on whom. Sandburg. That's Jewish, isn't it? Whoever heard of a Jewish cop?" His eyes raked over my body. "I imagine you don't make very much. Everyone knows how tight-fisted Jews are. How do you feel, knowing that Randy had all that money, and that no matter how he spent it, there was always more?" His face was flushed, his lips were parted, and his chest was heaving.

I stared at him thoughtfully. Unless I was reading the signals wrong, he wanted what he saw when he looked at me, and he definitely wasn't happy about that.

"Mr. Lee, as you noted, I'm a cop. My religion and the amount of money I make have nothing to do with the way I do my job. I assure you, I don't get my jollies out of investigating the private lives of people who have been murdered, whether they're male or female." I handed him my card. "If you remember anything that might be germane to this case, please call me."

He hmphed but took my card.

When I got back to the precinct, the Captain called me into his office. He sat behind his desk, drumming his fingers on the polished surface. "Any luck?"

"Not just yet, sir. There are a couple of leads that we're pursuing... "

"Sandburg, I'm not the press!"

"Sorry, sir. Marc Addams - "

"The man who called it in?"

"Yes, sir. I've got a feeling he's hiding something or protecting someone. Detective Brown spoke with Lloyd Johnson, and it seems the three tenants on the penthouse floor shared a cleaning lady. Maria Hernandez."

"Well, then. Question her."

"We'll have to find her first."

"Do that."
"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"Detective Taggert found a professional photograph that had been torn up. He's trying to track down the photographer. It might not mean anything, but then again... "

"I'm glad you're covering all the bases. The Commissioner wants us to be very thorough on this." The Cap didn't look overjoyed.

"We always are, sir."

"Yes, well... " Commissioner Hawthorne was a thorn in his side and had been since they'd graduated from the academy together. "Now, I've just found out that the wake will be Wednesday evening. It's for the deceased's friends. His family is having the body flown to Maryland on Thursday morning."

"You're telling me this for a reason."

"I want you there. Maybe you can pick up something. You're good at that."

"I'll make sure my black suit is back from the cleaners."

"All right, that's all for now."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and say hello to Mrs. Sandburg the next time you talk to her."

"Yes, sir."

****

On Wednesday evening, I took Joel and Henri to the wake with me, hoping with the deceased right under their noses, we might have more luck, especially if we split up.

"You're gonna put us in for overtime on this, I hope," Joel groused.

"I'm gonna put us in for overtime, Joel." I couldn't blame him for being in a sour mood. The photographer was dragging his feet about releasing the name of his model, and the judge Joel had gone to for the court order almost seemed to be throwing up road blocks as well.

"Jesus!" Henri's mouth dropped. "I've never seen so many... " He shut up as he realized what he'd been about to say.

"So many what, H?" Joel asked tartly. "Men?"

"Uh... yeah." His complexion was dark, but I could still see his blush.

"I'll protect you if anyone gets fresh, H."

"Shut up, Joel. I can take care of myself."

"Knock it off, you two. Take different ends of the room, and keep your eyes and ears peeled. And try to... Never mind." There was no way they could appear inconspicuous. For one thing, their overcoats were plain cloth, not fur or cashmere as most of these men wore. For another, the color of their skin was bound to stand out.
I stood at the back of the room. Everyone was sitting in the forward chairs, and this area was empty. I was able to study the occupants without drawing their attention.

They were treating Richard Lee as if he were the bereaved. Everyone seemed to come to talk to him, shake his hand, touch his arm, before going up to stand before the coffin for a few minutes.

He stiffened, and I turned to see what had caught his eye.

I stiffened myself, and my mouth went dry. It was the man from the photograph. His hair wasn't as long as it had been, and his ice blue eyes had a chill that hadn't been in the photo.

Joel came over to me. "I guess I won't need to get that court order. You can go right up to him and ask him his name and why his picture was torn to shreds." He looked more cheerful, and I would have smacked his arm, but I was feeling pretty good myself.

To find him after all these years...

I shook my head. What was I thinking? I turned my attention back to the man from the photograph.

He stood alone, gazing toward the coffin, his expression indecipherable. Was he devastated because he would never be able to make it up with his one-time lover? I found myself drifting closer to him.

Just then, another man joined him, and they hugged. I stopped short, watching as they spoke, then signaled to H.

"Yeah, Blair?"

"See if you can find out who that man is, the one on the left."

"Will do." He strolled around the room and listened.

I turned back to the two men, only catching bits of the conversation.

"We weren't sure if you'd be here..."

"Not our worry..."

"I'll just say a final prayer..."

He followed the shorter man to the coffin, and I could see that something in the room was bothering him. I hoped it wasn't emotion. Maybe he had an allergy to the flowers. There were enough of them to make the room look like a greenhouse.

Because I was watching him so closely, I was aware when he began to list, and I got to him. He straightened and shrugged my hand off his arm, his irritation plain. I sighed and backed away, then noticed that H was trying to give me the high sign.

"What did you learn?"

"They're fairly close-mouthed, but I happened to hear that he's a working boy. A hustler." I nodded to let him know I was aware of what a working boy was. "His name is Jeff. All they're saying is that apparently he," H nodded toward the open coffin, "used his services on occasion."

"Any idea what his relationship is to the big guy next to him?" Had he and the deceased shared the hustler? I'd worked a threesome a couple of times, either in double-dicking the john or letting him have it from both ends. As a seventeen-year-old, I'd found it hot to have my dick in a tight ass while I
kissed the escort who was fucking his mouth. I still thought the image was pretty hot, but as an adult, I preferred a single lover.

"What do you mean, 'big guy'?" H interrupted my thoughts. "They're the same height."

"No, they're not. The hustler is shorter than... " I couldn't keep thinking of him as 'the gorgeous guy from the photo'.

"Sandburg, they could pass for twins!"

"Brothers, maybe, but not twins. The shorter guy's hair is darker, and his eyes aren't as blue."

"He's not shorter! Oh, all right, have it your own way. And you saw all this in the few seconds you were close to them?"

"Hey, it's a detective thing."

"Okay, Sherlock Holmes. Anything else you want me to do?"

"You're doing a good job. Go do it more."

He grinned and nudged my shoulder with his, then crossed to a small group of men and women who were looking very uncomfortable. I glanced around in time to see that the hustler had left, and Richard Lee had joined the man from the photograph.

I sauntered to where they stood in time to hear Lee say, "This is your fault, do you realize that, Ellison?"

'Ellison'? I shook my head. That had to be a coincidence.

"Listen, the last time I saw him was Sunday, when he came to the Museum of Modern Art. He was with someone named... " He looked as if he was having a hard time remembering the name, and then he did recall it. "... Chris."

"Chris was with Randy?" Lee didn't seem too thrilled to hear that. "That means that Chris was probably the last person to see him alive! Except for his killer."

"Why didn't you tell me this, Mr. Lee?" I'd known he hadn't told me everything he could have. Why did people conceal facts from the police? Just because they didn't think it was important didn't mean it wasn't.

Before I could introduce myself, I realized Ellison was staring at me, almost in a daze.

"Hey! What's wrong? Are you all right, big guy?"

"I've never been better, Chief." His smile was the one from the photograph, and I swallowed a moan. His eyes grew hot. But... he couldn't have heard me. I hadn't made a sound.

I was a professional, dammit. And I had a job to do. I turned to Richard Lee.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what? Detective Sandburg." The fact that I was Jewish really seemed to stick in his craw.

From the corner of my eye I could see the other man's interest pique. Not that he hadn't been interested before, but... I wondered what had increased his interest, and I hoped there would be a
moment where I could ask him about it.

Mental babbling. Not cool at all. I dragged my gaze back to Lee.

"I asked you about his friends. You didn't mention this 'Chris'."

"Chris was not a friend."

"Oh?" I remembered the notation after Lee's name, in the deceased's little black book: 'Wants a threesome with J.' I wondered if as well as 'J', he'd wanted a threesome with Chris and possibly been turned down. A man like Lee wouldn't like being denied. "Then what would he be considered?"

"He was just a fling, a good time boy, a fun time on a Saturday night."

"But as I understand it, he spent more than one Saturday night with this man."

"What are you insinuating?"

"I'm not insinuating anything." I'd thrown that out to see how he would react. "What I'm saying is if I see someone a lot, that makes him more than a fling or a fun time on a Saturday night. At least to me."

"You? You're just a cop. You wouldn't know how we do things."

"Wouldn't I?" I'd serviced a few men like him, who presented a powerful, in-control facade to the world, but behind closed doors liked nothing more than being forced to their knees and getting their asses fucked. "So. What's the info on this Chris character?"

There was a tightness around his mouth. "I have no idea. Randy did not see fit to reveal his secrets to all and sundry."

"Bullshit," Ellison snapped. "He may not have spilled his guts to all and sundry, but he certainly told you everything, Richard."

"That is bull... " He caught himself. After all, men like him didn't use vulgar language. "That is to say, that is a complete and utter lie!"

"Listen to me, sunshine." I was tempted to poke him in the chest but restrained myself. Naomi had raised me well. "I've got a dead man, and no one who wants to cooperate. So either you tell me what you know, or I'll arrest you for obstructing an investigation." I had a feeling he wouldn't be too happy, thrown in a cell with someone named Leroy. Then again, I could have been wrong.

"Well, er... none of us had met this Chris person."

"That doesn't sound like Randy. He loved showing me off." Ellison flushed and licked his lips, and I wondered what he was thinking.

"Yes, well, you aren't Chris," Lee snarled. "Randy talked - had talked - about him. Vivacious and fun-loving, and a body to die for. Not like you."

"From what I can see, you've got a damned nice body," I murmured under my breath.

And then the first of a series of things happened that left me puzzled.

Ellison responded, "You think so?"
"I think so what?" Confused.

"That I've... Never mind."

He couldn't have heard me. I would barely have heard me, and I was the one saying it. How could... I snapped out of it when I realized Lee was getting aggressive, balling his fists and taking a step toward the other man. I stepped between them.

"Uh uh uh. Play nice, kiddies." Lee looked... relieved? Regretful? "So tell me, Mr. Lee. What is Chris's last name?"

He looked down his nose at me. "That is something Randy never told us."

"He isn't here, is he?" I gazed around the room at the people who were gathered in clumps and knots, stealing glances at the two black detectives, at me, at the men who stood beside me. "I mean, no one's come running over to point him out. Where does he live?"

"That is something else Randy never told us. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to pay my respects."

"Asshole," I muttered, again under my breath, and again, Ellison laughed. I started to ask him what was so funny, but he cut me off at the pass. Maybe he was just a happy guy.

"Sorry, I'd better go. I'm wearing out my welcome. It was nice meeting you, Detective."

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Ellison." I suddenly found myself wanting to keep him there with me. "Call me Jim, Chief. Please."

"Jim. And I'm Blair. Have I seen you before?" I wanted to bang my head against the wall. Talk about your inane pick-up line. Fortunately, Jim took me literally, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Maybe at Banks? I work for Simon."

"You're his newest security guard?" I laughed to myself. Megan was going to be so pleased I'd finally met him. I walked toward a back corner of the room. I could keep an eye on the occupants and have a little privacy. Taggert raised his eyebrow, then swallowed a grin and turned back to the small group of men and women who were the deceased's colleagues from Wall Street.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"You said you'd seen the man who was with," I nodded toward the front of the room. "Can you describe him?"

"Usually I'm pretty good with descriptions, but this time... All I can tell you about Chris is that he was maybe the most gorgeous man I've ever seen."

"The most gorgeous man you've ever seen? I see." There it was again. 'Very handsome.' 'Gorgeous.' How could a detective compete?

"Yeah. But he didn't do anything for me."

"He didn't?" I couldn't stop a grin from spreading across my face.

"No. There was something off about his looks."

"How do you mean 'off'?"
"I don't know. He was using... not makeup. Greasepaint? I think it smelt like greasepaint. I dated a guy once who was on Broadway."

"You were that close to him?" I figured he'd have to be right in the guy's face to see and smell that.

"The guy on Broadway? It was just a fling. Oh, you mean Chris, who was with Randy." His eyes were wide, and I realized he was teasing me. "Actually I wasn't too close, but he must have layered it on with a trowel. I had no trouble smelling it. It may have just been me, though. It didn't seem to bother Randy, and he was all over him."

"Oh?" I liked that he teased me. It had been so long since I'd had that kind of a relationship... What was I thinking? I'd just met the man!

"Chris went down on him in the men's room."

"Hmmm. What about distinguishing features?"

"You mean if he had a scar or bushy eyebrows or a really huge nose?"

"Yeah."

"No. Gorgeous, remember? Now you - you've got a sweet nose. I could never forget it."

"You think I've got a sweet nose?" I couldn't prevent myself from rubbing a finger over my nose. I'd never thought it was anything special, but he thought it was sweet?

"Yeah, I do." But he was staring at my mouth. My lips felt tingly, as if we'd already kissed. I tipped my head back and leaned toward him. We were going to kiss, and location be damned... and then I got myself under control. He looked regretful, and then he looked at his watch. "It's getting late, and I've got work in the morning. I'd better go."

"Can I call you?" Too rushed. Too... rushed. I quickly got my thoughts together. "I mean, if I have any more questions?"

"Sure. Do you have a pen?"

"Yeah." I reached into an inside pocket, then another one. "Damn, I must have left it on my desk. Hey, Taggert! Over here."

"Yeah, Blair?"

"Pen?"

"You lost another one?"

"It isn't lost. It's simply... not on my person." I'd always had a tendency to misplace pens and pencils, even before I'd gone to the Academy.

"Right. Here you go." I could depend on him. "Make sure you don't lose this one."

"Yeah, yeah." I gave it to Jim.

"Thanks." Instead of writing it on a piece of paper, he took my hand and wrote it on my palm. It was all I could do to prevent a full-body shiver.

"I'll be in touch in the morning. No, wait. You'll be at work..." I had to think more clearly. I had to
get a grip on myself. Why was I allowing myself to be swept away by this man? The touch of his hand cupping my hand... From somewhere way at the back of my mind, I thought I heard whispered, *Enqueri.*

"Yes. And I've already had a day off."

"I'll call you in the evening, then."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you. Bye, Blair." Jim smiled at me.

"Bye, Jim." I shifted so my reaction to his smile wouldn't be too obvious.

"Detective Taggert." Jim returned his pen and smiled politely. It was nothing like the smile he'd offered me, and I was tempted to give Joel a smug grin.

"Yeah, bye, Jim." Joel was aware. I cuffed his arm, and he laughed softly. He waited until Jim left the room. "So, Blair. Learn anything?"

"Yeah. He thinks I have a sweet nose." What was I saying? "I mean no. He couldn't give me a description of the man who was with the deceased."

"But you're going to question him again tomorrow."

"Why not? A good night's sleep might shake up the little gray cells."

"Keep telling yourself that. You just want to see him again."

I felt a blush rise to my eyebrows. There was something about Jim that was starting to nag at me. I'd have to think about it later. Kind of like Scarlett O'Hara. The mourners were beginning to leave, and I got back to business.

"Did you learn anything, Joel?"

"Just that some of these men didn't like the deceased. I've got names."

"Good work. Get H. We may as well..."

And then Richard Lee stalked up to me. "I would like to speak to you, Detective Sandburg." He glared at the man standing beside me. "*Alone.*"

"Joel, why don't you and Henri call it a night. It's gonna take some time to get used to the new shift. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay. 'Night, Blair. Good evening, sir." Joel at his most professional. He gave a small nod and signaled to Henri. H waved, and they left.

"Now, what did you want to talk to me about, Mr. Lee?"

"I could not help but notice that you seemed taken with Jim Ellison."

"Taken?" Shit. I usually wasn't obvious.

"Attracted to." His lip curled.

"I don't see how this is any of your business."
"As I mentioned, he lived with my friend."

"Lots of people live together. Lots of people break up," I shrugged. "So what?"

"You're not paying attention! Ellison peddled his ass on the street! Randy picked him up from the gutter and gave him everything a man like him could want - designer clothing - leather, I'll have you know!" His fingers rubbed together as if they longed to rub the leather trousers. "baubles - his wristwatch alone must have set Randy back a grand! a roof over his head - I'm sure you've seen Randy's penthouse, and Ellison had a room of his own that was spectacular!"

"So?"

"Ellison was a whore!"

"The operative word being 'was'."

"I have no doubt he's still whoring himself! He threw everything Randy gave him back into my friend's face and left him. Ellison is the most useless, worthless pieces of scum on the face of the earth."

"That's slander," I took a step toward him. "I happen to know he isn't." Although I wasn't going to tell him what Jim did for a living now. I wouldn't put it past Lee to try to get Jim fired.

"The police commissioner is a dear friend of my mother." He backed away and began fidgeting with the buttons of his overcoat. "I do not think he would be pleased to learn one of his detectives is consorting with a hustler."

"So you're gonna have your mommy run to Commissioner Hawthorne if I date Jim Ellison?"

He flushed. "Do not take that tone with me!"

"Or what? You'll challenge me to a duel at dawn? What bug is up your ass about Jim Ellison?"

He glowered at me. "I have no idea about what you're talking."

'J' - for Jim? "Don't you? I'm willing to bet you wanted Jim for a threesome, but - he wasn't willing to go along with it." I was certain of that. Why else would Lee be so rancorous, unless he hadn't gotten what he'd wanted?

"That's absurd!"

"Is it?" I made a point of looking bored, then glanced around. "Everyone seems to have gone, and I'm sure Mr. Canis would like to go home. I suggest we leave also."

"I won't forget this, Sandburg!" Lee turned on his heel, nodded goodnight to the funeral director, and stormed out of the room.

"Thank you, Detective. I need to start closing up, and it isn't good form to do that when mourners are still here."

"Are you leaving immediately?"

"No. I'll be here for another twenty minutes or so."

"May I make a phone call?"
He smiled. "Please do, and take your time. I like having company when I'm closing up."

"Thank you." I went to the phone, opened my palm, although I really didn't need to, and dialed Jim's number. 555-3310. As it rang, it dawned on me, 'E' - the missing page in the address book - And then he picked up.

"Ellison."

I forgot all about 'E' for Ellison. "Hi."

"Blair?"

"Yeah." I was pleased that he recognized my voice. Pleased? I wanted to do handsprings. "I wanted to make sure you got home okay."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I couldn't wait until tomorrow to talk to you again."

"Oh." Was he breathless?

"I hope you don't mind?" I wondered if he heard the flirty tone in my voice.

"I don't mind."

I had to be grinning like a loon, but I didn't care. I heard the flirty tone in his voice, and I made a date to have dinner with him the next evening at seven.

****

I was talking to him about sentinels, about the monograph by Sir Richard Burton that I'd found in the rare books room of the library, but his expression told me there were other things he would rather be doing, and suddenly, I wanted to be doing them too.

I slid my hand around his neck and pulled his head down to mine, and I kissed him.

His lips were lush, and the kiss was soft and chaste, until my tongue touched the seam of his lips. His mouth opened, but I didn't plunge my tongue in. He moaned as if that was what he'd expected... anticipated.

But I wanted him shaking and shivering under me, I explored his mouth delicately, and then deeply, and he accepted my tongue in his mouth as readily as he would my cock in his body.

Somehow I wound up flat on my back with him covering me like a blanket. His legs straddled my thighs, and I could feel the length of his cock nudging mine. My hips jerked involuntarily, and we both groaned.

I looked up at him, at his eyes hotter than they'd been in the photo that had been torn. He rocked against me, and I closed the fingers of one hand around his hip, urging him closer, while my other hand traced the crevice between his ass cheeks, searching for his hole. His mouth was back on mine, feeding off it. The first of his moans escaped into my mouth as I pressed a fingertip against that spot, and I swallowed the sound.

I nipped the tendon at the side of his throat, sucked on it, marked him as mine, and he buried his hands in my hair, and held on.
I could feel every inch of his body against mine. He raised his head. His lips glistened, his cheeks were flushed, and the look in his eyes told me he was close to coming.

And then I pulled his mouth down to mine and ravaged it, we both came, and I called his name...

"Enqueri!"

I woke the next morning smiling, even though it was earlier than I was used to getting up. I was going to have dinner with Jim Ellison.

For the first time in more than a year, I had breakfast at the time people normally ate the first meal of the day. And I smiled, because after work, I was going to 852 East 14th Street, apartment 3E, and I'd be having dinner with Jim.

I caught the subway to the Precinct and trotted up the stairs, smiling, because I was having dinner with someone I found fascinating, and sexy, and...

I walked into the squad room, smiling.

Monaghan looked up from his desk. "You get lucky last night, Sandman?"

"Why?"

"You're smiling."

"I don't have to get lucky to smile."

"Who's smiling?" Brown and Taggert walked in together. "Man, day shift is a pisser."

"Sandburg's smiling. He has to have gotten laid. And you only think this is a pisser because you're just coming off working nights. Hey, you were with him last night. Cap said you were going to that wake." He pulled a face. "Aw, fuck, man - that's just sick!"

"What's sick?"

"Picking up chicks at a wake!"

Joel smirked. "Trust me, Monaghan, Sandburg did not pick up a girl last night."

"Then how come..."

"Geez, what's the big deal with me smiling?"

The Captain stuck his head out of his office. "Excuse me, gentlemen. Don't you have work to do?"

"Yes, sir," we chorused.

Monaghan's phone rang, and he was called out on a case, Joel and H were following a lead on the whereabouts of Maria Hernandez, the cleaning lady, and the thing about the case that had gnawed at me the night before started gnawing at me again.

I went down to the basement where the cold case files were stored and looked for O'Neill's Valentine's Day murder.

Joseph Bishop, 35, had lived in Gramercy Park. He'd worked for a restaurant that was situated in the Theatre District. Nothing in the information O'Neill had gathered, what little there was of it, backed
his belief that the man had been queer.

One thing stood out and hit me like a sledge hammer right between the eyes, though. The body had been found on the john.

I decided to talk to his landlady.

Mrs. Flaherty was an older woman. Her stockings were rolled down around her ankles, and she wore a pink housedress that buttoned down the front. Little yellow flowers were scattered all over it. Covering the dress was a bibbed apron, navy blue, with a pattern of appliances on it - coffee pots, blenders, toasters.

"I'm Detective Sandburg, ma'am."

"Are you looking into Joseph's murder? I'm so glad it's someone else. Not to speak ill of someone who isn't here to defend himself, but I wasn't liking that other flatfoot's attitude."

"Yes, ma'am. Did you happen to hear anything on the day of the murder, Mrs. Flaherty? Or see anything?"

"No. I was at Mass. Joseph was such a good man." She touched her eyes with the corner of her apron. "The neighborhood children loved him, and he always helped with chores around the house. Lily, his fiancée, is heartbroken."

"His fiancée? You've met her then, Mrs. Flaherty?" Joseph Bishop wouldn't have been the first queer man to hide behind a non-existent wife or girlfriend.

"Why, yes. Why wouldn't I?"

"Just wondering." There had been nothing about a fiancée in O'Neill's report. Had he just looked at the doilies and made assumptions? "What can you tell me about her?"

"Lily lives just around the corner. She works in the office of St. Francis Xavier Parochial School on 23rd Street. She's very much a homebody in her spare time, always knitting and crocheting. She makes the loveliest doilies."

"Did she make them for Mr. Bishop?"

Yes. Would you like to see the ones she made for me?"

"Thank you, yes. I would." I followed her into her apartment. It was crowded and fussy, and if Bishop's had looked anything like it, it was easy to see how a homophobic jerk like O'Neill, who saw homosexuality all over the place the way Joe McCarthy had seen Communists around every corner, would jump to the conclusion the victim was queer. It was very wrong - my apartment looked nothing like that, even though Naomi lived with me - but it made a twisted kind of sense. "Did Detective O'Neill talk to her?"

"No. Now that I think on it, he didn't ask very many questions at'all."

That was sloppy, even for O'Neill. "Can you give me her phone number? I'll have one of my men get in touch with her."

"Of course. Just let me get my phone book." She went to a small table against a wall. A squat black telephone sat on top of it on a doily; she removed a long, narrow, spiral-bound book from the single drawer beneath it and thumbed through it. "Here it is."
I borrowed a pen and jotted down the number. Beneath it was her work number, and I wrote that down as well. "Did you find the body?"

"Oh, no. Lily found Joseph. They were to have dinner, and when he didn't arrive to pick her up - that was so unlike him, you see, he was always such a gentleman, not like some of the young men you see today - Where was I?"

"Mr. Bishop didn't pick up his fiancée."

"Yes, thank you. I mean, Valentine's Day. Such a very special day. So she came here."

"Was that usual? Her coming to see what was holding him up?"

"Not at all. He was never late. Never. Punctual to a fault, he was."

"May I see his apartment?"

"Oh! Oh, my. Oh, dearie me. The policeman told me there was no need... I've rented it out, you see." Dammit. "All right. Thank you, Mrs. Flaherty. May I call on you again if I have more questions?"

"Such a polite young man." She dimpled. "Please do."

****

On the way back to the Precinct, I decided to let what I'd learned simmer in the back of my mind, and daydreamed about what dinner would be like with Jim instead.

He'd insisted on cooking dinner for me, and I wondered what he had in mind. No one had ever done that for me. Even Naomi preferred not to cook if she could get away with it. When Swanson came out with frozen TV dinners, she was one happy woman, and our freezer was stocked with them.

Then I wondered what I should wear. There was plenty of time after work to shower - I ran a palm over my chin. I'd need to shave, too - and change. I'd found a very nice pair of black silk boxers in a small men's shop off 5th Avenue. That was a start. Casual slacks and a button-down shirt, no tie and the top buttons undone, and Jim undoing them further...

That was as far as I'd gotten when I walked into the squad room. Joel and H were still away from their desks, and I hoped they were having luck finding Maria Hernandez. She might not have anything to do with the case, but then again, she might.

"McGaffney, are you free?"

"No, but flowers and dinner will usually do it."

"What?" I started to laugh. "Asshole."

"What can I do you for?"

"I need a follow-up on something of O'Neill's that's gone cold. It may tie in to my case."

"Sure thing."

"Lily Monroe. Apparently she was the one who found Joseph Bishop's body." I handed him the paper. "These are both her home and work numbers."
He glanced at the clock on the wall. "She'll still be at work. I'll call her there and see if she can talk to me."

"Thanks."

In a matter of minutes, he was grabbing his coat and heading out the door.

****

The afternoon passed quickly. I was finishing up some paperwork when Taggert and Brown came back in, pissed because while the lead had panned out, Maria Hernandez hadn't been there.

"As a matter of fact, she hasn't been home since Monday."

"Y'know, it might be a good idea to pay a visit to Marc Addams. Maybe a surprise visit."

"Yeah." He and Joel began to plan the next day's strategies.

The phone on my desk rang. "15th Precinct. Detective Sandburg."

"This is Hans. Hans Schultz. Although on Valentine's Day I was Aaron Fielding." The change of accent from German to Midwestern puzzled me, but I'd gotten some strange calls in my years as a cop.

"How can I help you, Mr. Schultz?"

"I like what you say in the newspaper, Detective Sandburg, that what I do is well-planned, well-organized. Detective Sandburg. Phah. Zat is so formal. I call you Blair. When you come here, I zink you vill see zat I am up to my previous standards."

"Come where?" I listened in growing dismay to what he had to say, snapping my fingers to get someone's attention, and when that failed, throwing a pencil at Taggert. I stabbed frantically at my phone and made a dialing motion, and he picked up his phone and started the process of getting the call traced.

I was desperate to keep Schultz on the line, and I tried every trick I knew, even begging, but he seemed aware of how long it would take to locate him.

"I am smarter zan you!" he mocked. He intended to hang up just before we could make the final connection. "Auf Wiedersehen, Blair."

"Wait! Wait!" I sat with the receiver at my ear, even though all that came over was the hum of the dial tone. I looked to where Joel sat, hoping against hope. He shook his head; he hadn't been able to trace it. I swore and put the phone down, feeling cold.

The Captain stood in his doorway, staring at me. "What was that all about?"

"We may have another murder."

"May'? In my office now, Sandburg." The Captain was tense. I went into his office and shut the door. "You want to explain that to me?"

"Cap... " How could I explain it? I didn't understand it myself. "The phone call I just had... The caller identified himself as Hans Schultz."

"Who is Hans Schultz?"
"I don't know, Captain, but I have a feeling he may have killed someone earlier today. From what he said, he may be responsible for the murder I'm investigating, as well as the death of Joseph Bishop, the man killed on February 14th."

"Valentine's Day? That was O'Neill's case, wasn't it? I was afraid it would get out as The Valentine's Killer. So why did he call you?"

"Because I said his last murder was well-planned and well-executed."

"You're paying compliments to killers now, Sandburg?"

"Cap, if he's killed today, that will make three murders."

"Fuck."

I flinched. The Captain never swore.

"All right. You have the address? Go check it out."

"Yes, sir." I left his office.

Joel and H were hovering nearby. "Are you okay, Blair?"

"Sure."

"'Cause it sounded like the Captain really wasn't having a good day."

"We were just discussing how best to handle this case."

"Yeah. So what are we gonna do?"

"We?" That was right, they were my team. I picked up the paper I'd scrawled the address on. "We're gonna go here and see if whoever lives here really is dead."

****

A black and white drove us to 44th Street. The Print boys were going to meet us there.

Pounding on the door was fruitless. I crouched down to study the lock. It didn't seem to have been tampered with.

A neighbor came out of the next apartment to glower at us.

"May I help you?" She was less than pleased to see three men at her neighbor's door.

"I'm Detective Sandburg. This is Detective Taggert, Detective Brown. Have you seen the man who lives in this apartment?"

"Norbert Himmel? No. I just got home from work." She frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"That's what we're here to determine, ma'am. We don't want to break this door down. Joel, H, see if you can find the landlord." I turned to the woman who had to be in her late forties. She reminded me a little of my Aunt Rebecca. I smiled at her. "Can you tell me anything about Mr. Himmel, Mrs....?"

"Dylan. Mrs. Amelia Dylan." She broke her first name into four syllables.

"Mrs. Dylan."
"Mr. Himmel is a personable young man, very wrapped up in his work. He's a buyer for a company in the Garment District. He doesn't seem to date very much, although he occasionally will bring a friend home."

"A woman?" I took out my notebook. For a change, there was a pen clipped to it.

"Oh, no. Now that I think of it, his friends are all young men. Very muscular. One might almost say attractive, in a Marlon Brando-Streetcar Named Desire kind of way. If you understand?"

I nodded. It was starting to look to me as if Norbert Himmel were queer. Was this a factor in his being selected to be strangled, or was there something else?

"I always thought it was strange that he would have friends who were so... crude." She shuddered delicately.

"Crude in what manner, Mrs. Dylan?"

"They arrive at his door in jeans or black leather jackets, you know, the kind with chains dangling off the shoulders?"

"You think it was unusual why, ma'am?"

"Norbert is so obviously upper middle class - he's so fair and has such lovely manners, rather like yours, Detective Sandburg - and they... I assume with all the integration and bussing that was going on, well, I assume he met them in school."

I nodded again and continued jotting down notes.

"Sometimes they get a little noisy, but he's always so apologetic when I ... well, not complain exactly, but more like..."

"Advising him that they're getting a little rowdy?"

"Why, yes. Exactly." Her smile told me how pleased she was to find someone who understood.

"Thank you, Mrs. Dylan." The elevator opened, and Joel and H and the landlord stepped out. "May I talk to you again if I have more questions?"

"Of course!" She fluttered her lashes at me and gave me her number, then glared at the landlord, scurried back into her apartment, and slammed the door.

"Bitch," the landlord muttered. "Always callin' me, complainin' about the noise, wantin' me to patrol the corridors. What am I, the cops?"

"If you'll just unlock the door?"

"This apartment belongs to Norbert Himmel."

"Mrs. Dylan informed me."

"Mrs. That's a laugh. Ain't never seen no mister, unless she's got him locked up in there."

Riley strolled down the corridor, carrying his camera and the case that held fingerprint powder and other equipment. "We've gotta stop meeting like this, guys."

"Where's Stephens?" He and his partner were like Mutt and Jeff.
"Twisted his ankle in a pick-up basketball game of shirts and skins at the Y."

"Ouch."

"Yeah."

The landlord used his master key to unlock the door.

"If you'll wait outside?"

He was trying to peer around the door. He shrugged. "Mr. Himmel ain't gonna like this."

"I'll take responsibility. We'll let you know when we're done here."

He grumbled under his breath but hovered outside the door. I shut it in his face.

The odor wasn't as bad as in the penthouse apartment - the victim hadn't been dead as long - but it was there.

"I'll get started taking pictures, and then I'll dust for prints." Riley snapped shots of two long, faint heel scuffs in the linoleum, leading away from the living room.

"Okay. H, see what you can find in this room."

"Got it." He began casting around the living room like a bloodhound.

The scuff marks, no doubt the result of Norbert Himmel being dragged, led to the bathroom. This one was tiny in comparison to the one we had seen on Monday.

As that bastard Hans had told me, the young man was dead. He was on the john, a lipstick kiss drawn on his forehead. Riley was busy taking pictures.

"Fuck. Do two murders make him a serial killer?"

"Two?" I remembered that I hadn't told Joel about my suspicions about the victim in O'Neill's case. "Maybe three. I think one of O'Neill's cases may be tied in to this one."

"Fuck," he repeated. "Uh... Blair? He's wearing pajamas and slippers." The slippers looked like the leather-soled variety.

"I noticed. He could have called in sick and spent the day in bed."

"Not the whole day."

Obviously not. "Mrs. Dylan said he worked in the Garment District. We'll need to find out where and give them a call."

"I'll take care of it." He leaned forward. "Look at the bruises on his neck." The collar had been undone, and the marks were livid. "What do you think? He was attacked from behind?"

"Yeah. It looks as if Hans somehow got the deceased to trust him enough to let him into this apartment, waited until the time was right, and then made his move. Let's see if H has found anything."

We went back into the living room, the click and whir as Riley snapped his pictures a faint background noise. Soon that would be replaced with silence as he started dusting for prints.
H was bending over something, and he straightened when we entered. "This was knocked over." It was an end table, small and made of wood. "That plate must have been on it - it's shattered." There was broken China on the area rug. Pieces of cake were scattered all over the floor.

"Do you think he was sitting on the sofa?"

"Looks possible. But how could Hans persuade a grown man to allow him to get behind him?"

"I found this on the floor by the sofa, Blair." Henri was holding a photo album, using a handkerchief to avoid getting his fingerprints on it. I nodded toward the sofa, and he put it down gingerly while I patted my pockets. H started to snicker, then stopped when I found what I was looking for.

"Ta dah!" I waved the pen in front of his nose.

"You've gotta get lucky sometime." He grinned good-naturedly.

The point was retracted, and I used it to carefully turn the pages. The album contained pictures of a very young, very alive Norbert Himmel, blowing out candles on his birthday cake, playing with a puppy, gleefully opening Christmas presents, and then as an older boy, swimming at the beach, sailing, riding with a group of boys and girls.

Birthdays, holidays, special occasions. The last page held a studio portrait of him in his cap and gown, flanked by a man and a woman who had to be his parents. In front of them was a young girl, obviously his sister, trying to look serious.

"So what do you think?"

"He was lulling Norbert into a false sense of security by admiring his photographs?" I hunched a shoulder. "Unless Hans comes right out and tells us, I don't know if we'll ever find out."

"These two must have fallen out." H laid the pictures next to the album, again using his handkerchief, and I leaned forward to study them.

The first one was another graduation photo of Norbert, this time standing beside a young man his age, also in a cap and gown, who was grinning mischievously at Norbert's surprised expression. His hand was hidden behind Norbert's back. Had he goosed him?

The other picture was a Polaroid. It was a little out of focus, a little blurred, and I had the feeling it had been set up to be taken automatically.

It was summer. Norbert was lying on a window seat in what appeared to be an attic. Braced over him was the boy from the graduation photo, his fingers caught in the act of stroking a very hard nipple. They were maybe sixteen, barefooted, and wearing jeans but no shirts. The sunlight shining through the leaves of a large, old tree just visible through the window dappled them, almost focusing on the beads of sweat that clung to their hairless chests. Good-looking boys, young and healthy, and with the whole of their lives ahead of them.

"Do you think he was queer?"

I jumped. "Geez! Give a guy a heart attack, why don't you?" I hadn't realized Joel had come up behind me.

"Sorry, Blair."

I blew out a breath. "Never mind." I tapped the photo with my pen. "It could have been simply a
phase. Not all boys who experiment with their own sex as teens continue to do so as adults."

"There's something about this that's bugging me." H was chewing his lip. "My Mama and Daddy have all the pictures from when I was growing up."

"You think it's odd that he would have these pictures?"

"Back from when he was a kid? Yeah. He'd be able to see them when he went to visit his folks, but the photos he'd have now would be current. Friends, girlfriends, colleagues."

"I think he's got a point, Blair. And what if it wasn't a phase? His family wouldn't be too thrilled about it."

"No, they wouldn't." I'd seen too many kids who'd been thrown out like so much trash, and I was thankful I'd never had to deal with that. No matter what, Naomi loved me. "We still don't know how Hans got in."

"Maybe he met Hans somewhere and brought him home for sex?"

"A date gone wrong? That could explain Norbert in his pajamas, but we still have the similarity to the Central Park West murder."

Riley came in and started dusting for prints. "I hope you didn't touch anything."

We sneered at him, and he laughed.

"H, see what else you can find in here. Joel, you take the kitchen. I'll check out his bedroom."

****

The lone bedroom was down a short hall. I stood in the doorway and looked into it. The blinds were open, letting in faint light as the moon rose. I pictured our victim getting up in the morning and opening them. He'd been strangled before he could close them.

The light switch was just inside the door. I used my cuff to flip it on and observed the room. A small chest was on the dresser. Most likely it contained cufflinks and tie tacs. Some Broadway show posters were on the wall, as well as a couple of Tony Curtis, one in a slave's tunic and another of him hanging from a trapeze. No clothes were tossed carelessly on the floor or over the small desk in the corner.

I took a clean handkerchief out of my pocket and opened the drawers with it. They held copies of Physique Pictorial. There was gay pornography - The Boys in the Back Room, The Boys in the Barracks, and The Boys in the Bunkhouse. A loose-leaf binder labeled 'The Adventures of Bert and Marty' was filled with hand-written pages that were a cross between romance and fantasy. The last page read, Marty looked into Bert's green eyes. 'I love you,' he said. 'I've always loved you. I never should have let you go!'

Bert was so very happy. He put his arms around his best friend, the man he loved more than Judy Garland, Ethel Merman, and Bob Fosse all rolled into one, and kissed him. He knew they were going to live happily ever after.

I shook my head and replaced the binder.

In the center drawer was an envelope that was stained with tears. It had been crumpled and then smoothed out. It was addressed to Mr. & Mrs. Otto Himmel on Long Island. Refused was scrawled
across the front, heavily underscored.

It hadn't been unsealed.

I put it back in the drawer and turned to examine the rest of the room. On the nightstand was his wallet and keys, and a telephone.

I picked up the wallet with my handkerchief and flipped it open. Inside was an identification card and a photo of two figures, older versions of the boy and girl from the graduation picture.

The double bed was made, but the cover was wrinkled, and toward the foot was an indentation as if the heel of a shoe, weighted down by the other shoe upon it, had rested on that spot. The bedspread over the pillow was also mussed and the pillow dented, and a coal black hair lay across it.

"You're blond, Norbert. Who was lying on your bed?" I used my handkerchief to pick up the strand of hair, then folded it closed and put it in my pocket.

Riley walked into the bedroom. "Hey, Sandman." He ignored my growl. I was going to shoot Brown one of these days. "I'm done with the rest of the apartment, and I'm gonna dust here now. As soon as I'm finished, I'll head back to the Precinct and get the pictures processed, and see if the prints are in the system."

"Okay. Get some pictures of the bed, will you?"

"Sure thing."

"Thanks, Riley." I returned to the living room. "Anything, H?"

"I found some contact information. His parents live out on Long Island."

Joel walked in. "He liked to cook. There's a shelf of cookbooks in the kitchen, and half a homemade cake on the counter. Pot of coffee on the stove. It's cold."

"Hmmm. How many cups?"

"One in the sink. Washed."

"Blair? I think this may be the remains of another cup." H displayed the handle of a cup dangling from his pen. "This looks like it was nice China, too."

The door opened, and we turned, our hands going for our guns. This case was making us jumpy.

Dan Wolf walked into the room with his kit. With him were two men wheeling a gurney. "The bathroom?" At our nods, he sighed. "Okay, someone show me the way."

I led him down the short corridor. His men followed us and waited just outside the bathroom. "Dan, you did the autopsy on Joseph Bishop?"

"Who?"

"O'Neill's Valentine's victim?"

"Oh. Yes. Sorry. Sometimes they run into each other. Yes, I remember him now. O'Neill didn't do more than glance at my report. When he learned there had been no anal tearing, he lost interest. What did you need to know?"
"Is it similar in any way to our Central Park West victim?"

"No alcohol in his system. No pills or pot. Other than that, he was strangled from behind in his living room, and then placed on the john. Oh, shit. We have a serial?"

"It's starting to look like that."

Dan gazed at our newest victim and shook his head. "He appears to be the youngest."

"According to the ID in his wallet, he's twenty-five."

"Damn. Well, no sense standing here with our thumbs up our butts." He removed his overcoat, and I took it from him. Then he knelt beside the john. "Rigor has set."

"Can you give me a time of death?"

"Just from looking at him? Probably around three p.m., give or take." He opened his kit.

"Uh... I'll be inside, okay?"

"Sure thing, Blair." He chuckled as I left the room. Everyone knew I had a thing about those liver thermometers.

"You get to make the notification, Sandman." H was looking smug. So was Joel. "We flipped a coin."

"Don't try to make me feel good." I draped Dan's coat over a chair and glanced at my watch. Shit. There was no way I'd be able to keep my dinner date with Jim. "I need to make a phone call."

"There's a phone in the kitchen."

H nudged Joel. "Who's he calling? Naomi is out of town."

"He's calling his boyfriend."

"I heard that, blabbermouth. I don't have a boyfriend."

"Not yet, maybe. But I saw the way you two were looking at each other."

I flipped him off.

"You didn't tell me anything about that, Joel," H complained.

"There, there, little man."

"Supercilious asshole! And don't give me that look, Taggert."

"You go throwing around those fifty-dollar words..."

"I graduated college."

"City College."

"It's a qualified college!"

"Keep it down, guys."
I went into the kitchen, and dialed Jim's number from memory.

"Ellison."

"Hi, Jim."

"Chief! Wait until you get a taste of what I'm cooking. It's gonna knock your socks off."

"What are you cooking?"

"It's a Jewish dish - Kusneyeya Rice."

"Aw, Jim. For me?" Aunt Rebecca had made it on the occasion of Naomi's discharge from the hospital. Just like Mama used to make, isn't it Naomi? Naomi had given her a weak smile and used the excuse that she was still recuperating to leave the table. I didn't think it was bad, but considering what I'd put in my mouth in Peru, what did I know? "I can smell it from here."

"Sure you can." He laughed. He sounded so happy to be cooking for me. "So why are you calling me when you should be here in about forty-five minutes?"

I licked my lips. I had to explain why I wouldn't be there in about forty-five minutes - another murder, similar to the one of his... friend? lover? It was going to dawn on him that I was a cop, that this was my job, and why would he want to see me again? I started to ramble, something I never did. "Blair." He waited until I shut up. "We can do this another time."

"Thanks, Jim." I was surprised he was willing to have dinner with me again after I'd canceled on such short notice. I was more surprised at how relieved I felt.

"Hey, Blair!" Joel stood in the doorway.

"Hold on a sec, okay?" I said into the receiver, then covered it and turned to Joel. "What's up?"

"The M.E. wants to take the body!"

"Be right there, Joel. Jim..."

"Did Detective Taggert really have to shout, Chief? I'd have thought you'd be close enough to hear him."

"What?" Joel hadn't been shouting. What was Jim talking about?

"Blair! Tell your boyfriend goodbye. We have to move it! Dan's getting antsy!"

I covered the receiver again. "I'm coming! I have to go, Jim. Can I... can I call you when I get this done here?"

"I'd like that. You'll be careful?"

"I'll be careful. Bye, Jim."

"Bye, Chief."

I hung up the phone and turned to see Taggert and Brown standing there.

"What are you grinning about?" H wanted to know.
"He told me to be careful." I knew the grin on my face had to be sappy in the extreme. "Just now. On the phone."

"Oh boy, have you got it bad!"

Then my mind backed up and replayed what Joel had said, 'Tell your boyfriend goodbye,' and I felt myself turn cold.

Taggert must have read my expression. "Riley left. I wouldn't have teased you otherwise."

"Sorry. I just..."

"I know. I understand." He shut up as Wolf came into the room.

"My boys are getting the body ready to transport." He was looking grim. "There were no defensive wounds. It looks like he didn't even put up a fight."

"Shit. H, gather up whatever of the cup you can find. Maybe we can have it tested, see if there was anything in it that might have kept him from fighting back. Dan, you'll let me know what else you find?"

"You got it."

"I'd like to see what you have on Joseph Bishop too."

"I'll send my notes over first thing in the morning."

"Thanks. Joel, you and H finish up here." I ran a hand through my hair. It was getting long; I'd need to get a haircut soon. "I'll go notify the family. Dammit, I hate this. There's just no good way to do it. I'm taking the black and white."

"Okay. We'll see you tomorrow."

I opened the door and walked smack into Sam Samuels, the Daily News reporter. "Talk to them." I jerked a thumb over my shoulder.

"Detective Brown..."

"I'm not at liberty to divulge details, Mr. Samuels. I'm just the subordinate detective on the case."

"Detective Taggert? How about you? I'll mention your name in the paper," he wheedled.

"So weirdoes can call me like they do Sandburg? I don't think so."

And of course the reporter latched onto it like a bulldog. "Who's calling Sandburg? What weirdo?"

Son-of-a-bitch.

I turned on my heel and stalked back into the apartment. "The weirdo who read your story Tuesday morning. He said that I said the murder was well-planned, well-executed. How do I know this, you may ask? Well, I'll tell you. I know this because he called to tell me just before I was going home for the day. Then he said I should come to this address, and I would see this murder was up to his previous standard." I managed to keep that singular. I didn't know if Sam was going to print what I told him, and I'd have to clear it with the Captain before I let the public know we had a serial killer on our hands.
Sam had the grace to look appalled. "You mean..."

"I won't confirm until the medical examiner gets back to me on it, but... Look, Sam. I know you have to report this. Just do me a favor. Don't say anything about him calling me at the station?"

"How do I explain how you discovered the body?"

"It was called in?"

"By who? Anonymously? By the neighbors?" Sam had his notebook out and was scribbling furiously.

"Is not getting credit for it gonna piss Hans off?" H asked.

"Hans?"

"Aw, shit. Now we gotta worry about hurting a murderer's feelings?"

"Who's Hans?"

"Dammit. I don't have time to deal with this."

"Excuse us. Coming through!" The two men wheeled the gurney with the covered body through the room.

We stepped aside, Sam looking mildly interested, but not disturbed. He went back to writing in his notebook.

Dan followed them. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

"Night."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. G'night, Dr. Wolf. Okay, look. How about if I say that it was called in by Hans... Did he give you a last name?"

"Schultz."

He scribbled in his notebook. "Hans Schultz. Got it."

I checked my watch. "I have to go. Joel, you can handle this?"

"Are you still here? Go. Sam and I will get along fine."

"Okay. I'm gone. 'Night, guys, Sam."

"Night."

"Where's he going," Sam wanted to know.

"Notifying the family..."

The rest of what Joel said was lost as I stepped into the elevator and the doors closed. I knew he wouldn't spill all the beans. The public, bless their blood-thirsty hearts, didn't have to know all the details. Something had to be kept so we could nail the killer, or else tell him from the copycat.

The officer in the black and white looked up as I opened the passenger door and got in beside him. "Where are we going?"
"Long Island." I told him the town.

"I'll take the 59th Street Bridge."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

There's another murder. Blair makes a discovery about Jim. On the way home, he has a revelation.

Notifying a family that their child, even if he or she was an adult, had been killed was something I'd never gotten used to. This was even worse. Norbert Himmel had been sent away because of his sexual orientation.

"Mr. and Mrs. Himmel, I'm Detective Sandburg. I regret to inform you that your son is dead."

"Ve haff no son." Both his parents stared at me with stony expressions. "Norbert has been dead to us for years." And they closed the door in my face.

How could parents... Okay, granted, having a gay child might not be what every parent aspired to, but cutting Norbert out of their lives? I began to understand why he might have been willing to open his door to a stranger.

I headed down the walk toward the black and white, shaking my head.

"Officer?" A man stood by the gate. His overcoat had been thrown on and was unbuttoned. From the light cast by the streetlight, he appeared to be in his mid-twenties.

"Detective, actually. Detective Sandburg."

"Detective. I'm sorry. Edie overheard you talking to her parents and called me. Is it true? Is Bert dead?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Martin Wagner. I've lived next door all my life. Bert and I were best friends." I recognized him. He was the boy in the pictures. "Edie is his sister. My... my girlfriend."

"I'm afraid it is true."

"What happened to him? Was he hit by a car? The people who drive in Manhattan are maniacs. They... "

"He was murdered."

"Oh, dear god, no!"

"I'm sorry."

"His parents always said this would... It's because he's... he was queer, isn't it?"

"This is an ongoing case, Mr. Wagner. I can't talk about it."

His lower lip quivered. "What's going to happen? To his body, I mean?"
"If no one claims it, he'll be buried in City Cemetery on Hart Island."

"For the 'unbefriended dead'?" He gave an unhappy laugh. "I'll claim his body. What do I need to do?"

I took out one of my cards, searched my pockets for a pen, and sighed. "Do you have a pen?"

"No, sorry."

I tapped on the window. Officer Connelly leaned across the bench seat and rolled it down. "Yes, sir?"

"Pen?"

He stifled a laugh, slid one off his clipboard, and handed it to me.

"This is the number for the coroner's office. Call them tomorrow. They'll be able to tell you when his body will be released."

"Thank... thank you." He gripped my hand. His eyes widened, and for a second he held onto my hand. I pulled it free, and he took a step back. "I'd better..."

"Marty! Marty!" A young woman ran down the steps. She was dressed too lightly for this weather.

"Edie." He caught her in his arms. "You shouldn't have come out."

"Bert's gone! And my parents..."

"I'll take care of it. I'll take care of everything."

"I'm sorry for your loss, miss."

Eyes blue where her brother's had been hazel turned toward me. "Thank you."

I nodded, opened the cruiser's door, and got in. "Here's your pen. Let's go."

"Sorry for laughing, Detective," he said as he put the car in gear and drove toward the westbound exit of the Southern State Parkway.

"Forget about it, Connelly." It beat the hell out of me why I kept losing my pens.

My stomach rumbled, and I thought wistfully of the dinner Jim was going to prepare for me.

"There's a pretty nice diner just a few blocks on the other side of the 59th Street Bridge, sir."

"Thanks. I've got something in the fridge at home. Just drop me off outside my building, okay?" I gave him the address.

"Okay."

"What's this?" Traffic was backing up.

"Looks like there may be an accident up ahead." He switched on his radio, and we listened. "A pileup on Exit 32 South. As soon as I can get to the next exit, I'll try another route."

"Do you know your way around Long Island?"
"Sure. It'll be a snap!"

It took us three quarters of an hour to get off the Parkway. Who would have thought so many people would be out on a Thursday night?

I lost myself in thoughts of what the dinner I'd missed would have been like. Was Jim a good cook? It didn't matter. I'd have complimented whatever he'd served. And afterwards... what would we have had for dessert? Maybe him?

"Detective Sandburg? Detective Sandburg!" A hand was on my shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"We're here." It had taken almost another two hours to get back into Manhattan.

"Oh. Sorry." My internal clock was still screwed up from switching from nights to days. I scrubbed my hand over my face. "Thanks very much, Officer Connelly. Goodnight."

"'Night, sir."

I took the elevator up to the seventh floor. Naomi and I had moved into this building on East 53rd as soon as I could afford it. It had two nice-sized bedrooms with bathrooms off each one, a living room, dining room, and kitchen. It was the largest apartment we'd ever lived in, and I figured whoever watched over dancers and their queer sons was looking out for us the day I found 7E.

It was after midnight, I was starving, and I needed a shower, but I'd promised to call Jim. I turned on the oven, and not even bothering with preheating, put a Swanson TV dinner in.

I'd take the shower after I spoke to Jim. I dialed his number.

"Chief?"

"Yeah, Jim. How'd you know it was me?"

"Lucky guess."

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I was up." He had waited up for my call? I liked that. I tucked the phone under my chin, leaned against the wall, and folded my arms across my chest. "How was the rice?"

"It was good. It would have been better if you'd been here to share it with me."

"I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you." I'd much rather have had dinner with him than tell a family that couldn't care less their son was dead. "Jim, would you do me a favor?" I'd had a thought on the way up in the elevator.

"Yes."

I blinked. He'd agreed so readily. I couldn't stop myself from wondering what else he'd agree to. I pushed that out of my mind for the time being.

"Come down to the station tomorrow and talk to our sketch artist? If we can find Chris, maybe we'll have some idea of who killed your friend and who killed Himmel."

"Himmel?"
"Our latest victim."

"Uh huh. Well, sure, Chief. But if he was using greasepaint, I don't think it will be much use."

I hadn't even thought of that. I was punchy from the long day and then the ride out to Long Island. "I'd still like you to give it a try." I really wanted to see him.

"Okay. What time do you want me there?"

"About eleven?" Then we could have lunch together. I couldn't take him to Rosie's, there were always cops there, but...

"I can't, Chief, I'm sorry. I have work."

"Damn. I forgot." I was punchier than I'd realized. "Well, how about after work? You get off at four, right? Okay, then, how does four thirty sound? 15th Precinct." It probably could have waited until the weekend, but suddenly it was imperative that I see him sooner. "I appreciate it, Jim."

"Whatever I can do for our fair city."

"And maybe when you're done... maybe we could go for dinner?" I thought briefly of bringing him here, but the fridge was pretty bare, and I wouldn't have time to go grocery shopping. "I know this place..." It was a small diner tucked away on 48th Street. I went there at least once a week, sometimes more frequently when Naomi was away.

"I'd like that." There was something in his voice that told me he really would like to have dinner with me. "Chief, can you talk about what happened tonight?"

"Sure. Why not? You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow anyway - no, it will be this morning, won't it?" Sam the reporter would bust a gut seeing he made his deadline. "Norbert Himmel. Age twenty-five. Blond, hazel eyes. Homosexual. The body was half-on, half-off the john. There was a set of lips drawn on his forehead in bright red lipstick. And those bruises around his throat."

"How are you, Chief?" He sounded concerned. I liked that.

"I'm okay. Just really tired." I couldn't prevent a yawn. "Sorry. I'd better go. I wanted to hear your voice before I called it a night, though."

"I'm glad. I like hearing your voice too. It's... it's soothing."

"Thanks. I think." Something about my voice being soothing to him was like an itch at the back of my brain, trying to remind me of something, but then it was gone. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"'Night, Chief."

"G'night, Jim." I hung up the phone and glanced at the timer. I'd have about fifteen minutes. I went to take a quick shower.

I'd changed into flannel pajamas and was just coming into the kitchen when the timer went off just, a really annoying buzzing sound. I shut it off, took a potholder from its hook, and took the aluminum tray from the oven.

I removed the foil covering, and steam rose to warm my face. As I let it cool, I thought of all the ways Jim Ellison could say 'yes' to me. Yes, I'll suck your cock. Yes, I'll let you fuck me. Yes, I want you in my life forever...
I put a forkful of the TV dinner in my mouth, then spit it out and stared down at it in dismay. Salisbury steak? This was one of the TV dinners that Naomi preferred. What had I been thinking? No longer hungry, and in spite of the children who were starving in India or China, I dumped it into the garbage.

Then I turned off the kitchen light and went to bed.

****

I woke up with a fizzy feeling in my stomach, and it wasn't because I was starving. Something wonderful was going to happen today.

I was having dinner with Jim Ellison. Of course, he was coming down to the Precinct first, and I had no doubt the sketch artist would be able to come up with something.

I had two bowls of Frosted Flakes, thinking about him. I was hard.

I had time for another shower, and I jerked off under the warm spray. Was he cut, like me? Would he be hot and tight, squeezing my cock as I slowly fucked him?

I turned my face up to the spray and quickened my strokes. What would his skin taste like, his come?

I gasped and came harder than I had in a long while.

As I caught my breath and rinsed off, I realized that I hadn't sucked anyone since Toby in Peru. I wondered idly how he was and if he'd gotten his doctorate in anthropology. There was regret that I hadn't been able to continue that route myself, but it was very mild.

A glance at the clock told me that if I didn't step on it I was going to be late, so, in spite of feeling sated, I stepped on it.

I arrived at the One Five just as Joel and H were entering the elevator. They held it for me.

"What's up for today?"

"H, I want you to talk to the doorman who works days. Then see if Marc Addams is home. Maybe he can tell us where Maria Hernandez is. Joel..."

"Norbert's address book? I'm on top of it. I'll see if I can learn what company he works for and maybe stop there."

"Good idea." We split up. I sent the hair to be analyzed, then picked up my phone and called Riley.

"Sandman! I was just going to stop by to see you."

"What've you got?"

"A gorgeous print. Perfect in every way."

"Except?" I could tell from his tone of voice there was an 'except."

"It's not on file."

"Fuck it!"

"Yeah. My precise thought. Well, I'm going home. I've been here since noon yesterday, and I'm
beat."

"These murders always happen in the afternoon. Thanks, Riley."

"Don't mention it."

We hung up.

It would have been nice if the print had at least matched one lifted at the other crime scenes. This guy was too fucking smart.

Before the morning was out, I had Dan Wolf's autopsy notes on Joseph Bishop. I scanned them, shook my head, and went to see the Captain. His face darkened as I informed him of what I had found.

"Goddamn it! Sloppy. Slipshod. It's a good thing O'Neill is retiring. I'd have him riding a desk the rest of his time in the Department otherwise. All right. I'm pulling your team off all your other cases. See what else you can learn about this. I want this case solved before... "

"Yes, sir. I sent Brown to the building on Central Park West. He'll question the day doorman. Then I've asked him to talk to Marc Addams to see what he can learn about the cleaning lady."

"Taggert?"

"He has Norbert Himmel's address book, and he's talking to the people in it. McGaffney hasn't come in yet. He was supposed to see Lily Monroe yesterday... "

"McGaffney is not one of your men."

"No, sir, but Brown and Taggert were out trying to track down Maria Hernandez."

"Who? Oh, the cleaning lady. Yes. All right."

"Just one other thing, Cap? All three men are blond, although only the first two had blue eyes."

"So we've got a pattern here. Similar coloring, killed in a similar manner, and all three appear to be homosexual. All right." He ran his hand over his hair. "Keep me posted."

"Yes, sir." I went back into the squad room, letting out a relieved breath.

"Hey, Sandman! Phone call!"

My first thought was that it was Jim, calling because he couldn't wait until four thirty to talk to me, and I couldn't stop grinning.

"Detective Sandburg."

"Bon jour, mon ami! Oh, from your tone of voice you are glad to hear from me! Comment ça va?"

"Excuse me?"

"C'est moi. 'Ow do you like my accent? My Maurice Chevalier - c'est si bon, n'est-ce pas?"

"I'm sorry. I don't understand French," I lied. Monaghan was staring at me, and I gave him the high sign that this call needed to be traced.
"Oh, I am disappointed, Blair."

"Hans?" Was he calling to inform me he'd strangled someone else?

"Oui, but I am feeling... pah! 'Ow do you say... " He was playing with me. "I am feeling verry French today. Excusez-moi." He covered the phone, but I could hear him ordering brunch. I listened as hard as I could, hoping the man he was speaking to would say his name. No such luck. "Mon cher Blair, are you still there?"

"I'm still here. What do you want, Hans? Or should I call you Jacques?"

"Eh, but of course!"

"Or you could tell me your real name."

He laughed. "Non, mon ami. Non, et non, et non."

"Okay. It was worth a shot."

"You are tres mignon! How sad that we cannot meet in person."

"Yeah." I was cute? Was he flirting with me? I felt sick. "Suppose you tell me why you're calling today?" Please, not that someone else was dead. I felt sicker.

"I wanted to thank you for what you say about me in today's newspaper. This Sam Samuels, he is a good friend of yours, no?"

"No. Sam is just a reporter."

"Well, he say nice things about you. And he say nice things about me too. Ha - ha - ha."

"Does that mean you're going to call him from now on?" A glance at Monaghan let me know he was getting close.

"Jealous, mon cher detective? There is no need. Je suis toujours fidele de ma mode, cheri."

He was always true to me in his fashion? The son of a bitch was quoting Cole Porter to me? I ground my teeth.

"Anyway, I just called to tell you 'merci,' and to wish you a weekend of the most pleasant kind. I will be going away for a few days, and I promise to be a good boy."

"Wait a second!"

"Oui?"

"Uh... can you talk to me a little more? I really like hearing you talk. French accents have always turned me to mush. " Jesus, what was I saying? "Uh... Where are you going?"

"Mais non. If I talk longer you will... 'ow do you say?... trace this call. I think not. Au revoir, mon cher Blair." He hung up.

"Monaghan?"

"No."
"Goddammit!"

"'French accents have always turned me to mush?"' He snickered.

"I was desperate to keep him on the line." I dropped the phone into its cradle.

He shook his head, and returned to his desk. "I'm glad my perps don't call me on the phone."

"I'm just so lucky." And my phone rang again. He was calling back to rub it in some more? "Listen to me, you..."

"Detective Sandburg?" The voice was hesitant. "You may not remember me. I talked to you last night. I'm..."

"Mr. Wagner. Yes." I took a couple of breaths and regained my cool. "What can I do for you?"

"You recognized my voice." He sounded pleased. "Might I... I'm in the City. I'd like to see you if you have some free time?"

"I can't tell you when your friend's body will be released."

"No. I already spoke to someone in the coroner's office, and it won't be for another few days. It's just... I need to talk to someone about Bert."

"What about his sister?"

"No. She has no idea... Please."

"Why me?"

"Last night, I couldn't help but notice that you were... you had sympathetic eyes."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Grand Central Station."

"Okay." It was almost noon. "There's a Nedick's just past the shoeshine stand." I had a soft spot for Nedick's. The hotdog stands were all over the city, even in the boondocks of Queens. Naomi would sometimes treat me to them when I was little and she didn't have to work that night. The drinks were sweet enough to make our teeth ache, and it wasn't until Naomi had bought me an orange for Chanukah one year that I realized they didn't really taste orange, but that was what I ordered every time. "I'll meet you there in twenty minutes. We can grab lunch, and you can tell me what's on your mind."

"Twenty minutes. Okay. Thanks." He hung up.

McGaffney opened the door just as I reached for the knob. He looked tired.

"Are you okay?"

"O'Neill is a fucking idiot!"

"You won't get an argument about that from me, but why?"

"Bishop wasn't queer. At least not according to his fiancée. And what are you grinning at?"
"Our strangler made a mistake, Mac. He thought Bishop was queer, but it seems he was wrong. If he made one mistake, he's bound to make more."

"I'm so happy for you."

"What's up with you?"

"When they warn you about comforting the grieving widow, Jesus, they weren't kidding!"

"Huh?"

"Lily Monroe. Fiancées are just as bad!"

"You had sex with her? But she works in a Catholic school."

"No matter, man. The woman was insatiable!"

"I'm sorry I asked you to... "

"Are you kidding? I'm seeing her again tonight!"

****

I had a funny feeling about Martin Wagner, but there was no way I could cancel my meeting with him. I caught a bus to 42nd and Park and found him waiting in Grand Central Station by the Nedick's stand. It was crowded with people trying to get a quick lunch.

"Sorry I'm late."

"I was afraid you weren't going to make it. Have you... uh... learned anything?"

"As I told you, I can't talk about the case, Mr. Wagner. Would you like a hotdog? They're very good."

"Oh. Uh... just one, please."

I ordered one dog with mustard and sauerkraut for each of us, and two orange drinks as well. A couple left a tall table toward the end of the counter, and I led the way to it before anyone else could claim it. I put my drink down and took a bite of the hot dog. The mustard was yellow, not as good as the hot mustard the Jewish delis usually had, but it was part of Nedick's ambience.

For a few minutes he concentrated on eating. He took small, neat bites, and chewed as if he were counting each one.

"So," I wiped my mouth with a paper napkin, "what's on your mind?"

He met my eyes. "Are you going to find Bert's killer?"

"I'll do my damnedest."

"You won't let the fact that he's... "

"What? Homosexual?"

"You knew? How?"

"I'm a detective. It's my job to find out things like that."
He took a sip of his drink and grimaced. "That's sweet!" He put the cup down and began to pick at the hotdog bun. "How did you know?"

The Tony Curtis posters were a dead giveaway, even before I'd seen the porn in his desk. "His parents were awfully fast to disown him."

"Mine would have done the same." This time he looked away. "We... when we were in high school..."

"That picture of the two of you in the attic."

"He kept that? He told me he'd torn it up. Would... when this case is solved, would you give that back to me?"

"If you're claiming the body, I don't see why you shouldn't have that."

"Thank you." He took another sip and grimaced again.

"You want me to order you a root beer?"

"Excuse me? Oh, no. This is... " He couldn't lie and say it was fine. Instead, he pushed it away and licked his lips. "I broke it off, you know. He went away to college, Farleigh Dickinson, and when he came home for the Christmas break, he was so excited. All that freedom... He wanted me to come back with him, to live with him. I told him we had to stop."

"Did you tell him why?"

"No." His voice was low, and I had to lean forward to hear him. "How could I tell him I was a chicken shit? You see, someone we'd gone to school with... He was captain of the football team! Who would have thought? He was arrested for... well, you know. His family moved away in the middle of the night. I overheard my parents talking about it, about how unnatural it was, and disgusting, and... and how they'd never permit a child of theirs... I told Bert I didn't love him anymore."

"I understand."

"You do?"

"It's not easy when you don't have the support of your family." It wasn't easy even if you did.

"You talk as if you know."

I wasn't about to discuss my sexuality with a stranger. "I'm a cop. I come across things like this - kids so heartbroken and alone they do anything for a little human warmth. A lot of times they wind up dead."

"I see." Maybe he did, but somehow I really didn't think so. "I... I guess... It was my fault. If I'd been stronger..."

"What happened?"

"He was so... unhappy. He went back to college after the break, and that was the last time he came home. He fell in with a crowd... They were older, wilder... He wrote me about in, in detail. Told me if I didn't want him, there were plenty..." He blinked rapidly. "His grades started slipping, and his parents drove down to the Metropolitan Campus to see what was going on. They learned he wasn't
living in the dorm anymore and managed to track him down. They never talked about it - I don't
know where they found him, and he never told me what happened. All I know is that there was a
confrontation, and they left. It sobered him. This time when he wrote me, he begged me to talk to
them. I tried. Maybe if I'd tried harder... " He crumbled the remainder of his hotdog and looked
around for a trash can.

I took it from him. "He sent a letter to them that was returned, apparently without ever being read.
They cut off all contact with him?"

"Yes. Edie's parents told her she didn't have a brother any longer; I had just started dating her, and
they told me if I ever brought up his name again, they would forbid her to see me. They packed up
everything of his and left it on the curb." His laugh was bitter. "If they'd given it a moment's thought
- what the neighbors would think was always a big concern of theirs - I don't think they would have
gone quite so far, but maybe not. Edie and I brought everything into my parents' garage, and I was
the one who sent it to the college."

"He had a picture of the two of you - Edie and you - in his wallet."

His breath caught. "Edie sent it to him. I wasn't sure he got it. I hoped he hadn't. He'd dropped out of
college around that time." I reached for a napkin, and he rested his hand on mine and rubbed his
thumb over my knuckles. "Maybe if I had... "

"There were a number of things you could have done but didn't. What you did do was call me." I
freed my hand. "Why?"

"I wanted... " He flushed.

"Did you think you could... " We were surrounded by the lunchtime crowd, and I bit back my
words. Did he think he could make a pass at me, and I wouldn't knock his block off?

"Last night you were so empathetic. You just looked so... "

My looks and height. I'd had to be twice as aggressive at the Academy and in my first few months at
the One Five. The teasing had been malicious, but after I'd challenged a few cops to a couple of
rounds in the ring in the gym and mopped the mat with them, it eased off.

"You've got a girlfriend."

"She's as close to Bert as I could acceptably get. He had hazel eyes, but they changed color
depending on what he wore. When he wore blue... Edie's eyes are the same shade." He bit his lip
and looked away. "You don't think much of me, do you, Detective Sandburg? I just... I'm so lonely."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"You're so... " He glanced around, cleared his throat, and changed what he'd been going to say. "I
apologize. I wanted to know... How was he living? Who were his friends? Was he happy?"

"He had a nice apartment, and I was told he worked in the Garment District. As for his friends - We
have his address book, and one of my men is looking into that."

"But was he happy?"

I shrugged. He was lonely enough to open his door to a total stranger.

"What will happen to the contents of Bert's apartment?"
"That depends on whether he had a will."

"What twenty-five-year-old has a will?"

"In that case, I think it would go to his next of kin. Since his parents have shown no interest in him," and probably had even less interest in his things, "that would be his sister, but I'm not a lawyer, and I'd suggest consulting one."

"All right." He sighed. "I guess... I just need to know that Bert won't be written off again."

"I'll find the man who did this, and I'll make sure he goes to jail for it." I shoved my cuff back and checked my watch. "I have to get back to work. Look. It's not my place to give advice, but... don't hurt Norbert's sister. It's not her fault that she isn't him."

"I know."

"I hope you find the answers to your questions, Mr. Wagner."

"So do I." He looked at me wistfully. "Thank you for lunch."

"You're welcome." I disposed of the trash and left.

****

The bottom drawer of my desk was my home away from home. In it were things I kept in case I needed to work a double shift or go to court at a moment's notice - a spare shirt in the plastic wrapper from the dry cleaners, an electric shaver, a travel-size toothbrush and toothpaste.

At 4:05 I clocked out and went to the men's room to freshen up. I pulled off my shirt and undershirt and dropped them over the radiator. I ran the electric shaver over my cheeks and jaws, thought about slapping on some aftershave, but for some reason it didn't seem like a good idea and I decided not to, then I brushed my teeth. I blew into my palm and inhaled.

Minty-fresh.

I did a quick wash, wet a comb and slicked it through my hair in an attempt to tame the curls, removed the shirt from the wrapper, and put it on.

Lieutenant Dawson, who worked nights, pushed open the door and walked in. He looked me over. "Getting ready for a date, Sandman?" He went to the urinal and unzipped his fly.

I fastened the cuffs. "I've got a possible potential witness coming in to talk to George." I buttoned the front of my shirt, freed my tie from the other shirt, and threaded it through my collar.

"Possible potential?"

"Yeah. He saw someone with my murder victim. If he can give George a description, we may be able to track this guy down and get a new lead."

"And that's why you're getting all spiffed up?" Dawson zipped himself up, flushed, and went to wash his hands.

"I'm just taking him to Nana's Kitchen. As a form of 'thank you' from the NYPD."

"And that's why you shaved and put on a clean shirt?" Dawson was grinning. He knew that by the end of shift I usually sported a pretty heavy five o'clock shadow.
"Can't have Major Crimes presenting a sloppy image."

"Nana's Kitchen, hmmm? Not Rosie's?"

"Rosie tends to spice her foods a bit too much."

"Huh?"

_Huh_? I couldn't explain where that came from. I changed the subject. "Thanks for going down to Maryland. Notifying the family is one of the worst parts of this job."

"Don't mention it. Those poor people. I felt sorry for them. They couldn't understand how something like that could have happened to their son. Well, I've got a drug bust to see about. Good luck getting that sketch."

"Good luck yourself."

We left the men's room together. He headed for the elevator that would take him to the lobby and out, and I returned to the squad room to stuff my things into my bottom drawer. I'd take the shirt and undershirt home some night when I didn't have a date.

****

It was 4:29, and I was pacing the lobby of the Precinct. The Captain came out of the elevator and glanced at the clock on the wall.

"You're still here, Sandburg?"

"I'm waiting for a possible witness to show up."

_Possible_?"

"Well, he saw someone with my first victim." It did sound pretty thin. I shrugged. "We have a first name, but that's all. He's going to talk to George. Maybe we'll get a likeness. If we do, and if I can find him, we might have a lead."

"Okay, okay. You're not getting paid overtime for this, though. Bookkeeping is unhappy enough I okayed it the other night."

"No, sir." I could see a tux beneath his overcoat. "Are you going to that event at City Center?"

"Yeah," he growled. "If my wife wasn't on the same committee as the Commissioner's wife..."

"Enjoy the food, sir."

"Not likely. Good luck, Sandburg."

"Thank you, sir."

He left. And then the door swung open, and Jim walked in. He was wearing an overcoat. March had been bouncing back and forth between spring and winter, and it paid to be prepared. He was also wearing black jeans that clung to his lower legs.

His face lit up when he saw me. "Hi, Chief. I'm not late, am I?"

"Jim. Hi." I lost myself in his eyes. He had such beautiful eyes, burning with the promise of passion.
We were together on a mat in some jungle hut - the sweat beading on our bodies caused not only by the humidity of the rainforest but by the bout of lovemaking that had been so intense we'd been on the verge of passing out...

"Chief?"

I shook myself out of my daze. "No, you're not late."

"Good." He smiled, and took off his overcoat. I couldn't prevent a low wolf whistle. I lost myself again.

He was crouched above my supine body, rising and falling, fucking himself on my cock...

I swallowed. Damn. I had to stop doing that.

"Chief?" His eyes were hot, burning hot, as if he knew... But that was impossible. He couldn't know how turned on I was. "Who do I need to see?"

"George. He's our sketch artist." I swallowed. Jim was looking a little flushed, but I didn't think to wonder about that just then. "His office is right this way."

I took his arm, and he smiled as if his fondest wish was being granted.

****

"I'm sorry that I couldn't help your sketch artist, Chief. Not to say 'I told you so,' but..."

"I know. You did say something along those lines." We had left the Precinct and were walking through the rush hour crowd. "Well, George was able to sketch in some details. We've got a rough idea of the shape of his face, the distance between his eyes, where his ears are placed on his head...

'He was called 'Randy Beautiful', you know,' he'd told me of the man at whose funeral we'd met, as we entered George's tiny office. 'Beautiful face, beautiful hair, beautiful body...'

I'd wanted to kill a dead man.

'.... and a soul to rival Dorian Gray's."

And I'd still wanted to kill him.

"Do you think finding Chris will give you some idea of who the murderer is?"

"I hope. Maybe Chris saw our killer in the hallway. In the elevator. Coming into the building as he left." I felt as if I were clutching at straws.

We'd checked with both the night doorman, who told H that the deceased had a habit of bringing men up to his apartment, and the day man, who had seen no one except the cleaning lady go up to that floor.

Where was the cleaning lady?

H hadn't been able to question Addams about her - the doorman had reluctantly told H he'd left for Palm Beach earlier that morning. He'd tried Maria Hernandez's apartment once more, but the people there suddenly couldn't understand his Spanish.

"Randy always came home after Gene left for the day."
"That would explain why he couldn't describe any of your friend's... boyfriends."

"I guess." Jim stopped suddenly, looking around. He rubbed the back of his neck, and his expression was tense.

"Jim? Is something wrong?"

"No. Uh... no." But it took a minute or so for him to relax. "So what does this tell us, Chief?"

"Maybe Chris looks like you?"

"I didn't think so, and I saw him, remember."

"Hmmm. Oh, we're here." Nana's Kitchen. No one knew her real name, but she looked like everyone's grandmother, and she cooked the way they were supposed to. We entered the diner, and I led him to my usual booth situated at the back. I hoped he'd like the food here. I was thinking of bringing him back again and again.

It crossed my mind that I was unusually relaxed with him. I'd never met anyone I'd connected with so quickly. Sure, there were the guys I'd had sex with, but I'd never considered taking them home, making love to them in my bed. Having Naomi meet them.

*Guiding them...*

I nearly tripped over my own feet.

"Are you okay, Chief?"

"Uh... yeah. Sure." I took off my overcoat and hung it up on the hook on my side of the booth.

Jim did the same, and I started salivating. He was wearing black jeans and a turtleneck that seemed to caress the muscles of his torso. He wasn't wearing an undershirt, and his nipples were visible.

It wasn't cold in Nana's. That meant he was aroused. My cock twitched.

Nancy, the waitress who always served me, came over, and we ordered two beers. I was pleased when Jim, unknowing, ordered the same brand of beer that I drank.

I waited until she left to pick up the thread of our conversation. I wanted to get it out of the way so I could concentrate on him.

"There could have been a resemblance that wasn't apparent to you, Jim. From the back? The side? At a distance?"

For a second I thought he was going to argue with me, but then he blinked. "You might have a valid point, Chief. Jeff said Randy had hired him a few times."

"Jeff?"

"I was talking to him at the wake before I got cornered by the Dick Man. Richard Lee. Anyway, Jeff and I look a little alike."

"I noticed." I'd had the impression after watching them at the wake the other night that they were friends, but nothing more. "He's good-looking. Just not as good-looking as you."

"Oh. Thank you." He sounded surprised. Didn't he realize how attractive he was?
"You're welcome." I grinned at him and reached across the table to cover the back of his hand. Jim turned his hand over, and we were palm to palm. I curled my fingertips against the lightly calloused skin, and he shivered.

"So... um... what do you do now?"

"We need to fill in the time between when the doorman saw them enter the building and when his neighbor..." I suddenly wondered if he knew the neighbor.

"Marc."

"Right." How well did he know him? "We need to find out how much time passed until Marc called us."

He didn't ask me why we needed to know this. He just sat waiting patiently.

"The thing is, the bastard who did this took his time, Jim."

He turned pale, and I felt my gut clench. Did he still care for the dead man? Then I realized how what I'd said must have sounded.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I don't mean he took a long time killing him. He... Your friend was killed in the living room, then dragged into the bathroom and posed."

He looked relieved. "Thanks, Chief."

"Norbert Himmel was posed the same way. I want to talk to this Chris. The odds are he wasn't there when the murderer came knocking on the door, but I want to talk to him anyway."

Nancy returned and placed the beers on the table. "Would you like to order?"

"Oh..." We'd been so wrapped up in the conversation he hadn't had a chance to look at the menu.

"Jim? If you trust me, I'll order." I gave him what I hoped was my most winning smile.

"I trust you, Chief." He touched his tongue to his upper lip and smiled at me from under his lashes.

I was suddenly hard, and I shifted. It was a good thing the angle of the table concealed my lap. His smile broadened as if he knew. But how could he know?

Nancy was tapping her pencil against her pad.

"We'll have two turkey dinners." That was the special tonight, but it was good any night, and it wasn't excessively spicy. I blinked. Why was I worrying about the amount of spices in Jim's food? "Uh... Baked potato, Jim?" He nodded. "And house salad with French dressing."

"I'll have a Caesar salad."

"I'll put this in and have your salads in just a few."

"Thanks, Nancy. Caesar salad, Jim?" I hoped Nana left out the anchovies. I raised my glass, thinking maybe I'd like to propose a toast to us, then thinking maybe that was silly, and I took a sip.

"Just because I let you order everything else - I don't want you thinking I'm easy."

The thought of him being easy... I swallowed wrong, choked and gasped, and the beer went up my
nose.

"Sorry, Chief."

"Never mind." I pulled out a handkerchief, mopped my eyes, and blew my nose. He looked so rueful I wanted to pull him over the table and kiss him silly.

While I was catching my breath, he said, "Y'know, there's something that's been bothering me. If Chris had left, if Randy was alone, he wouldn't have let anyone he didn't know into the penthouse."

"What? That's..."

"Cautious?" He knew as well as I that living in New York could tend to make a person cautious. "That was just the way he was."

"You knew him pretty well, didn't you?" I wanted to know more about Jim. Was I being too obvious? The only person I'd ever known well, aside from Naomi, had been Butch, and that had been a long time ago.

"Well enough." He looked away.

I wasn't going to push him. We really hadn't known each other too long, and I didn't want to come across as - well, pushy.

When I didn't comment, he said in a rush, "We lived together for about six months. I left him last August."

"I guess it wasn't love then." That pleased me. He wouldn't be on the rebound when he came to my bed.

"No. I thought... No." He looked so lost, and I wanted to comfort him, but Nancy arrived with a basket of rolls cradled on an arm and our salads in her hands.

"Thanks, Nance."

"Welcome." She grinned.

"Oh, waitress!"

"Yes, ma'am?" She winked at me and hurried off.

"So, the man who killed him could have been someone he knew?"

"Maybe. I know a lot of people weren't fond of Randy, but that doesn't mean they'd kill him."

"Why not?" I forced myself to stop watching his mouth and forked up a bite of salad.

"His crowd wasn't likely to get physical. Not like that. Well, you saw Richard Lee."

"He looked like he was all set to knock you down." And jump all over him. Was Jim unaware of how much Lee wanted him?

"Nah. As soon as he saw I was ready to face him, he'd have backed down." He was so confident. I was sorry now I had stepped between them. I would have liked to see Jim pop him one. I tuned back in to what he was saying. "And the people Randy hung with... they'd throw a glass of red wine over his favorite suit, they'd say something derogatory about the art he collected, but they wouldn't resort
to physical violence. And none of them would strangle him."

"You don't think?"

"No. Sorry." Again that rueful smile that made me want to have my wicked way with him.

Nancy returned. "Are you finished?" I was surprised to see my salad was gone. "Your dinners will be right out."

"Thank you." I selected a roll and started buttering it. "Anyway, we'll keep looking for Chris." I looked up to find his eyes fastened on my hands. I felt a flush cover my body.

His lips were parted, and he looked as if he couldn't catch his breath. Was he imaging how my hands would feel on his body? What we could do with butter?

I put the roll down and reached for my beer. What had I been saying? It took me a second to regain my train of thought. I cleared my throat and told him about Joseph Bishop, the man O'Neill had written off and whose case he'd let grow cold.

"You think this man may have been one of the killer's victims?"

"Yeah. Even without the lipstick kiss on his forehead, the murders are too similar. And he was killed on Valentine's Day."

"Maybe the killer was practicing?"

"That would be just peachy." I growled under my breath but didn't say anything aloud. If he was practicing, how long would it take for him to get it right? How many more men would die?

Jim looked up sharply. I raised an eyebrow, and he smiled, but there was no mirth in it - it was just a twitch of his cheek muscles. I was about to ask him what was wrong, but our dinners arrived, and we began to eat.

****

It was a nice dinner. Jim ate slowly at first, but once he tasted Nana's tender tom turkey, he tucked into it with enthusiasm. In between bites he told me about growing up in Washington State.

"My father didn't want me once he realized I was queer. He sent me to a military academy to have it drilled out of me. It didn't work." He smiled, but I could see the regret in his eyes. "After I graduated, I came East."

If he had brought up the topic of being a hustler, I would have told him about the time I'd spent as an escort. But he didn't, so I didn't either.

I told him about growing up in Manhattan, about opening johnny pumps on hot summer days and cooling in the blast of water, of spending afternoons on 'tar beach,' the roofs of the buildings we lived in. And in the winters, sliding down the huge mounds of snow the plows would clear off the streets and leave piled on the corners.

"I wish I'd known you then, Chief. We could have... " He flushed and licked his lips.

"Yeah. We could have." I leaned my elbow on the table. Nancy had removed our dinner plates and brought out dessert, and now I moved a blueberry around on the plate while I smiled at him. The way he was looking at me had me at a simmer that was threatening to switch to a rolling boil in a
split second.

"You've got ice cream at the corner of your mouth, Chief."

"Yeah?" I licked at it, making a production of it. I wanted to kiss him. I knew that under the table his legs were spread. We'd been playing footsie throughout dessert. The toe of his shoe had edged up under the leg of my trousers. I couldn't reach that far, but I could rub the side of my foot up and down his leg.

Jim's smile told me he wouldn't object if I decided to lean over this table and kiss him. I thought it might be a better idea to get him out of there.

Maybe I should ask him if he wanted to pay a visit to the men's room. That was something chicks usually did, although not because they wanted to make out, but if it got me somewhere private with him, I didn't much care.

I was about to call Nancy for the check when she rushed to our booth.

"Blair, you're wanted on the phone. It's Lieutenant Dawson."

"I'll be right back, Jim." I edged out of the booth.

"No rush, Chief." He was still smiling.

I grinned and sauntered to the front of the diner, knowing he'd be watching my ass, and took the phone.

"Sandburg." I leaned against the counter and gazed back at Jim. God, the man was a pleasure to look at.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner, Blair."

"What's going on?"

"We've got a problem. A phone call came in from the doorman of that building on 74th."

I straightened and turned away. "Not another body?"

"Unfortunately. In the same penthouse apartment, strangled. You mentioned going to Nana's Kitchen, so I gave it a shot that you'd still be there."

"How the... " I lowered my voice and gave the woman behind the register an apologetic smile. I was in a public place. "How could that happen? Who was assigned to watch that apartment?"

"No one. The Cap had to pull everyone off after Himmel was murdered."

"Why?"

"Someone in the management company knows someone in the Commissioner's office. The official word is that it wasn't necessary, that our resources were spread too thin, but the truth of the matter is they didn't want cops hanging around. It wouldn't look good."

"So the result is that someone else is killed. Do we know who?"

"Not yet. I've called in Taggert and Brown and sent them to the scene. There are some uniformed officers also in case things get more strange."
"More strange?"

"Oh, yeah. This has been a night... About twenty minutes before the doorman called, a really weird phone call came into Major Crimes. It was for you."

My stomach began to churn, and I regretted that last forkful of blueberry pie. "A weird phone call? For me?" I felt like an echo. "Who was it? Hans? Jacques?"

"Who? No, the caller identified herself as Mrs. Roosevelt. She wanted to talk to you, and believe me, she was royally pissed off that I was the only one available. Then she apologized. Said she'd promised you she was going to be good, but she's broken her word and been a bad girl. I thought she was a nut job, you know?"

"Oh, man, this is not good!"

"She said when you found out what she'd done, you were to note that her latest handiwork was up to her previous standards."

"This is really not good. Okay. I'll get right over there."

"I'd better track down the Cap."

"I saw him earlier. He and Mrs. Haines are at a function at City Center."

"Thanks. Listen, call us as soon as you know anything. If this is more work of your Strangler..."

"If the body is on the john and has a kiss on his forehead... I'll let you know as soon as I know, Lieutenant."

We hung up, and I went back to the booth. Nancy was standing there, smiling at Jim.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I have to go." I took the check from her and gave her some bills for her tip.

"Thanks, Blair." She tucked them away in her apron pocket.

"You're welcome."

I went back to the front of the restaurant and handed the check to the woman behind the counter.

"How was everything?"

"Great. As usual. Tell Nana, okay?"

The woman beamed. "She'll be so happy to hear that."

"Chief?" Jim was holding my coat. I hadn't even remembered it. He wouldn't let me take it, just held it by the shoulders. I'd seen Uncle Asher do that for Aunt Rebecca. Naomi had never kept company with anyone classy like that. I felt myself blush.

"Thanks, Jim."

"Was there another murder?"

"Yeah. Another strangulation." I told him where, and his eyes narrowed.

"Can I go with you?"
"Just don't touch anything," I ordered, but I was thinking of something else.

'Your strangler,' Dawson had called him. I had to find this guy and stop him.

****

We dodged the press and got into the building. Four officers were scattered around the lobby. They nodded, and I returned their greeting.

Jim and I crossed the lobby to the express elevator that would go to the 50th floor. I took the key from the officer standing there, and we entered the car.

Alone at last. Jim's expression was hungry, and I licked my lips and took a step toward him. The trip to 50 would be long enough for me to finally kiss him. Before I could get close enough to put an arm around him and bring his head down for our first kiss, he frowned.

"Shit!"

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"There's a smell in this elevator... " His brow furrowed in concentration.

"What is it?" I couldn't smell anything.

"It's a man's cologne. Men's cologne," he corrected. "I've smelled them both recently. One under the other. I just can't... "

Something nagged at the back of my mind, and it seemed closer than it ever had been, but again it was gone. I took the opportunity to get my hands on him. The muscles of his back were tense under my hands, and I stroked them, trying to get them to loosen up.

"Don't concentrate on trying to identify them, Jim. Relax. Maybe that will help it come to you."

"Chief... "

The elevator arrived on 50, and the door slid open.

"We'll talk about it later, Jim. Will you be okay going in?" I'd seen cops collapse and coroners upchuck at a scene, and they hadn't been involved personally with the victim. I made myself let him go, even though I didn't want to.

"Why wouldn't I be?" He stepped out of the elevator, taking some breaths.

"This was a former... boyfriend's... apartment, he was killed in it, and you haven't been here since last August." After what happened in the elevator, I was a little worried about him.

"Ah, Chief. I'll be fine."

"Let me know if it's a problem."

He gave me a sweet smile. "I will."

"Damn right you will." This was turning out to be one hell of a first date. "Come on, let's get this show on the road." I crossed the foyer with Jim beside me and grinned. "Officer Dolan."

"Detective Sandburg. It's good to see you again."
"Same here."

We exchanged pleasantries for a minute or so, and then as he opened the door for us he said, "By the way, how's Mrs. Sandburg?"

"She's doing better, thanks." I glanced at Jim in time to see all expression wipe off his face. What...? "The new medication seems to be helping. She's gone out to San Francisco to visit my cousin Franklin."

"Give her my best the next time you talk to her."

"Thanks, I will."

We entered the penthouse and I opened my mouth to ask what was wrong. Jim slammed the door shut and scowled at me.

"Are you married, Chief?"

"Married? Me?" I started to laugh - I'd never looked at a girl, not even when I'd worked at the Starlight Lounge - until I saw he was serious. "No! How could you think that?"

"Officer Dolan, who wants to know how Mrs. Sandburg is?" Jim really seemed upset, and he was winding up a good head of steam. "You've been flirting with me, and..."

"Mrs. Sandburg is my mother."

"She is?"

"Yes. All the guys know about Naomi and kid me about Mrs. Sandburg, because I'm twenty-eight and not married. Listen, Jim. I've done some things... well, we can talk about that another time. But I'd never marry a woman, knowing I prefer men."

He looked embarrassed, but under it, relieved. "I'm sorry, Chief. I've been involved with men who swore they were single but turned out to be married."

I had also when I'd worked as an escort. It hadn't mattered because neither my heart nor my emotions had been at risk, but...

"I wouldn't do that to anyone I wanted to date. Most especially, I wouldn't do that to someone I want a relationship with, Jim."

"You..." He looked as if he couldn't catch his breath. Finally he said, "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. I can understand if you've been burned before. Now, come on. Joel and H are going to think I stopped to have my wicked way with you." And God knew they'd have a ball teasing me about it.

"H?"

"Henri Brown. He's the other detective who's working with me on this case." I realized he wasn't behind me. "Jim?" The grin I had been aiming at him disappeared as I saw him double over. I grabbed him before he could collapse and eased him down to his knees, petting his neck and shoulders. "Jim! What's wrong?"

"The smell, Chief!"
"Try to relax, Jim." Again I smelled nothing out of the ordinary. The only thing I could think of was the odor of death, and we weren't close enough to the bathroom to pick up on it. Right then I needed to have Jim get his sense of smell under control. "Let it wash over you."

He closed his eyes and clapped his hand over his mouth, and I could feel his shoulders heave.

"Okay, that's not working." Suddenly, from out of nowhere, I had an idea. I made him look at me. "Try this. Picture the dial on a television. You're on Channel 13. Gradually change the channels, 11, 9, keep going down toward 2."

I held him and stroked his cheeks, his hair, his shoulders, his neck, and I could feel him calming down, getting himself under control once more.

"How are you doing?"

"Better. Thanks, Chief." He kept leaning against me, and I kept petting him. Megan was right. His hair was soft, and I liked the way it felt against my palm. "That helped; you have no idea how that helped."

"Jim? What happened?"

"The smell was overpowering. It's British Sterling, Chief. That's the cologne Richard always wore - wore. He called it his signature scent."

"He's here? What's he doing here?"

"What was he doing here. He's dead, Chief."

"What? But how... " I felt my jaw drop. "You could smell it!" I started to get excited. Could this mean...

"We'd better get to our feet."

"All right, but why? I like holding you like this."

"I like it too, but we're going to have company."

We were? I released him, and we had no sooner risen to our feet then Joel walked in. There had to be a reason Jim knew this. I pushed it out of my mind for the time being.

"Blair. I thought I heard voices. I'm glad you got here." For a second he seemed surprised to see Jim, and then he grinned broadly. "Hi, Mr. Ellison."

"Detective Taggert."

"H is still talking to the doorman, Blair. He's seen the victim before, but he never got the name."

"Have you ID'd the victim?"

"Yeah. Wallet in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. Richard Lee. Age thirty-three."

I stared at Jim. "You knew."

He nodded. He was turning pale again. I grabbed his hand and stroked his forearm, and after a few seconds, he seemed better. He squeezed my hand and relaxed, and I let him go. Reluctantly.
Joel watched with his jaw hanging. He met my eyes, shook his head, and said, "The thing is, we've got a victim with the wrong coloring." He gave me the ID card.

I scanned the information. "Fuck! Fuck, fuck, **fuck**!" There went our beautiful theory right out the window.

"Yeah. That's what we said when we saw him."

Jim looked from Joel back to me. "What am I missing, Chief?"

"We thought our boy was going for light-eyed blonds"

"But Richard... oh, yes. I see. Richard has red hair and dark brown eyes."

Joel frowned. "Yeah. Wait'll the Cap hears about this."

I rubbed my hand over my face. "So. Has our killer changed his MO? Do we have another killer, a copycat? And did anyone call the coroner?"

"H did, Blair. Dan Wolf is working tonight. He's on his way."

"He always seems to get these bodies. Okay. I've got to assess the scene, Jim. Stay here."

"No problem, Chief." He smiled at me. This had to be one of the strangest first dates he'd ever had, but he smiled at me anyway.

I smiled back at him, then turned to follow Joel.

****

"This is a shitty situation, Joel."

"Tell me about it. It's one step forward, two steps back."

"What've we got?" We walked down the corridor.

"Someone called the doorman around seven p.m. and told him to check out this apartment."

"Dawson didn't tell me that."

"I'm not sure that he knew. The doorman was still pretty shook up when we got here. According to him, the caller spoke with an English accent." He lowered his voice. "I'm thinking it was your 'friend'."

H was standing outside the bedroom. Beside him was the reason for Joel's discretion - a lanky man whose uniform made him look like something out of an operetta: royal blue jacket and trousers, gold epaulettes on the shoulders, gold buttons down the front and along the cuffs, and thick gold braid everywhere else.

"Blair, this is Mr. Barat. He's the night doorman."

"Mr. Barat."

"Detective." He looked pale, and his eyes kept darting around, avoiding the bedroom door and what lay in the bathroom beyond it.
"I appreciate you staying. Detective Brown has your statement, but we may need to speak to you again."

"Yes, sir. I'm here every night during the week, and the detective has my home address and phone number. Do you need me for anything else?"

"That phone log you told me about?" H reminded him. He'd learned when he'd first spoken to the doormen that the management company insisted that every phone call made to the building be logged in a book kept at the doorman's kiosk.

"I'll have it ready for you when you come down, Detective Brown."

"Thank you, Mr. Barat. You can go now."

****

We went through the bedroom. Riley was dusting for prints again, and he looked irritated in a major way.

"How's Stephens doing?"

"You don't see him here, do you?" he snapped.

"Okay." I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. He'd been working double shifts since Monday, and with his partner out, he'd been on his own. "Have you found anything?"

"Only that this goddamned drawer was open. The problem is - whoever opened it wore some kind of gloves." He turned back to his work, and we walked into the bathroom.

I could barely recognize Richard Lee. His looks were marred by the violence of death. He was posed on the john, and his arms hung limply at his sides. On his forehead was a vivid red kiss. I felt my stomach knot.

"We'll need Dan to give us the exact time, but I'm guessing he hasn't been dead long. Lieutenant Dawson said the Cap had to pull our men off after Norbert was killed."

"So it had to be sometime between then and when the doorman got that phone call."

I crouched beside the body. "It doesn't look as if rigor has set yet, so that narrows the window quite a bit. Does... did he work? Did the doorman see him come up here? Did the other tenants on this floor run into him in the elevator?" And what the fuck was he doing here?

"The odor isn't as bad as on Monday." H was writing my questions in his notebook. "And it seems less than last night."

Joel touched my shoulder. "How long do you think our strangler would give himself to get away before he called?"

I straightened and shrugged. "Depends if he was feeling cocky or not. He could have left just before he made that call. Or just after. Riley!"

"You taking my name in vain?" He poked his head in the door.

"I want the phones in this place dusted for prints. The bastard may have called from here."

"Don't teach your grandma how to suck eggs. I'd planned on doing that, and the bedroom is already
done. This is gonna be fun. There are phones in every goddamn room except the bathrooms!"

"I wouldn't bet on that!" H opened what had appeared to be an abstract piece of art beside the john to reveal a cubby hole, and pulled out a shelf. On it was a gold-colored telephone.

Riley went back into the bedroom to get his equipment, swearing under his breath. When he returned, he snarled, "Out."

We left him to it.

"I'll see if I can find anything in that drawer that might give us some idea why it was left open."

"Good idea, H. Joel." I nodded toward the bedroom door, and he followed me. "What I want to know is why the fuck no one was watching this apartment? The scene wasn't released."

"No. And the Management not wanting cops in their building - that's bullshit."

"Yeah. Someone wanted to be able to enter this apartment without us being aware of it."

"Blair, you got another call from your 'friend'. You think it might be him?"

"I dunno. One thing. He's smart. But not as smart as he likes to think he is."

We entered the living room.

The doorman was standing next to Jim. "I'd better get back to work. It was good seeing you again, Mr. Ellison."

"Same here, Dave. Take it easy." Jim was staring at me.

"Detectives." The doorman left.

Joel nudged my shoulder. "What about our killer, Blair?"

"This bastard likes to use accents." Jim was watching my mouth. He touched his tongue to his lip, and I wanted to touch my tongue to his lip. "That... uh... that German one - I almost expected him to say, 'I know nothing!' If no one knew that Richard Lee was dead, he would be in that bathroom, decomposing for more than a week, because according to the doorman, no one is coming here until next week. Our boy wouldn't get any acknowledgment, and that's what he wants."

"So he calls the doorman, and this time he imitates Cary Grant." Joel was impatient. "Dave the doorman comes up and finds Mr. Lee propped on the john; we get the call, and his work is duly noted."

"I'd be surprised if he doesn't expect a front page headline and page 2 and 3 as well."

"What I don't get is why The Strangler came back here? And why was Mr. Lee here?"

That was the $64,000 question. "Jim, can you shed any light on that?"

"No. Sorry. I don't know what's happened since I left." He appeared edgy.

"What about before you left?"

"Someone's coming."
It seemed like a non sequitur until we heard the front door open.

Dan Wolf walked in, and Joel looked at Jim as if he'd never seen him before. "How'd you know that?"

Jim shifted uncomfortably and hunched a shoulder, but said nothing.

"Sorry to call you out, Dan."

"The night shifts are murder. No pun intended. He's in the bathroom?" He sighed and shook his head. "You don't have to show me; I know the way." He went down the corridor.

Jim looked puzzled.

"He was the coroner for your friend," I told him. "Joel, see if he needs any help? I'll be right with you." I couldn't wait to get him out of the room. I really needed to talk to Jim.

"Henri's there. He can help."

"Yeah, well, you can help too." I felt as if I were mentally pushing him out of the room.

Joel looked from me to Jim and back again, and left, muttering something under his breath. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what he was saying.

"I'd better go, Chief." Jim's face was flushed, and I had the feeling he was stressed. "You're going to be busy."

"That's an understatement. But I want to talk to you for a second. Sit down, okay?"

"Chief, there really isn't anything I can tell you about Randy's life after I left him." He sat on the couch and picked at the seam of his jeans. "And before... He got tired of hearing me complain about... about stuff."

"Stuff?" I sat beside him. "Jim, you were able to identify the odor of Richard Lee's cologne."

"Well, not until I got in here."

"Yeah, but you knew you'd smelled it before when we were in the elevator. Was that some of the stuff that was bothering you?"

He looked away.

"There's something else I've been noticing, Jim - you respond to things that no one else seems to be aware of. You knew Joel was coming from the master bedroom, that Dan was here before he walked into the apartment. Have you found that any of your other senses are becoming overactive?"

"No." He rose and walked away, then abruptly returned to me, defeat in every line of his body. "Chief... Do you know how hard it is to find clothes that don't feel like sandpaper against my skin?" He was so distressed it almost broke my heart. "I've had to search all over the Tri-State area! I saw a bank robber in a shadowed doorway load his gun and tuck it into his belt before crossing the street to enter the bank. I hardly ever eat in restaurants anymore because I worry about everything I put into my mouth. Once the chef... " He shuddered. "I can't even stand to think about it!"

"But tonight... ?"

"Blair, I wanted to go out with you so badly, and I... I trusted you not to take me someplace that
would have my taste buds going up in flames. Don't ask me why. It just made sense...

_He is the one!_

"Jim!" It was as if a door that had been locked in my mind was slowly cracking open. I jumped up and did a little pacing of my own. "This could mean..."

Jim looked anxious. He probably thought I was losing my mind. I took his hand and stroked my fingertips over his wrist and palm, somehow knowing this would center both of us.

"Have you ever heard of Richard Burton?"

"Who hasn't?" For a second I was afraid he would pull free, but then he tightened his hold on my hand, and I was relieved. "I saw him last year in _The Taming of the Shrew_. Liz was pretty good in it too. A little plump, but that might have been the costume."

"No, I'm talking about Richard Burton the explorer."

"What about him?"

"I found a monograph of his in the library on 42nd Street. It was over seventy-five years old, and I practically had to promise my first born in order to get a look at it."

"Why were you looking at monographs in the public library?"

"Oh, see, I was an anthropology major when I was in college. Anyway, that Richard Burton postulated that primitive tribes had what he termed sentinels, watchmen who were chosen because of a genetic advantage - they had enhanced senses. They kept a look-out for game, listened for the approach of enemies, felt the change in the weather. The survival of the tribe depended on these people, Jim."

"So what are you saying?"

"Jim, I think you're a sentinel!"

"Why? Because I recognized the Dick Man's British Sterling?"

"Among other things." I thought of the times he'd looked at me as if he'd known I was aroused, and I shivered.

"A lot of men wear that cologne. And as Dave told you, Randy brought a lot of men up to his apartment. It didn't have to be Richard."

"Don't bust my hump, Jim. You were positive it was him, and you knew he was dead. Face it. You hear things. Your skin is hyper-sensitive. Your taste buds are acting up. You see things..."

"So what if I do? What good does this do me?" Why was he being so stubborn?

"Nothing right now, but maybe - maybe, Jim - together we can find a way to explore this thing with your senses!" Didn't he realize what an amazing thing this could be?

"Blair! Holy mother of God!" Joel sounded... I'd never heard him so taken aback. "Get your ass in here!"

"Promise me you'll think about it," I begged him.
"Sandburg!"

"You'd better go see what has Taggert in a tizzy. He's muttering about coming in here and getting you."

"Dammit."

"I'll think about the sentinel thing. I promise." He got to his feet, and I rose as well.

"I'll call you if I don't get home too late."

"Call anyway, Chief. I'll be waiting." He ran his fingers up and down my arm. I liked him touching me, where when Martin Wagner had put his hand on mine it had been all I could do not to snarl at him to get his paws off me. "Are you tender, Blair?"

"What... " The expression on his face was so... No one had ever looked at me like that, and if it turned out that he wasn't a sentinel, that all he was was Jim Ellison, former hustler, current security guard, it wouldn't have mattered to me at all.

"You can have me if you say 'yes.'"

"Yes." I didn't hesitate. "Yes." I wanted to kiss him so badly. I brought my hand up to touch his hair. "Go on home, Jim. I have cop stuff to do."

"Be careful, Chief."

I nodded, and turned to go back to the other end of the house. "You be careful too, Jim," I murmured under my breath.

****

"It's about time." H's eyebrow was raised as I entered the bathroom.

If this had been under other circumstances, if the coroner hadn't been there, he would have teased me. 'Are you sure we aren't interrupting your love life?'

And I'd have responded, 'Actually, you are, but I'm feeling so good, I'll forgive you.'

Instead, I asked, "What's going on?"

"Look at this!" Dan had Richard Lee's head tilted back. Encircling his throat were not bruises caused by two deadly hands, but a deep line caused by something that had dug into the flesh and left behind a pattern.

"What do you make of it?"

"I'll need to do an autopsy, but it looks like something with unusually-shaped links. A woman's necklace, most likely."

"Does this mean our strangler is changing his MO?"

"I'll leave that for you to discover. I'll make an impression of it and get it to you."

"Okay... "

"There's more. His fingernails are torn and bloody."
"He fought back?"

"He struggled. That's all I can tell you right now. I'll have to see if I can find anything under what's left of his nails."

"Thanks, Dan."

Riley wandered in. "That's it for me."

"Okay. Let's get this wrapped up and call it a night."

Dan's men came in and prepared to remove the body.

I did a quick tour of the penthouse. There was one room that was locked. Was this Bluebeard's Chamber? I flipped through the keys on the deceased's key ring and found one that opened the door.

The light from the hallway spilled into the room. All that was in it was a leather recliner facing a wall. On the wall was an oil portrait of Jim, in the same pose as the photograph.

Had his former lover had the painting made from the photograph? Would he come sit in this room and contemplate the man he'd lost?

I closed the door but didn't lock it, and went back into the living room, just as Dan and his men were leaving with the body. The elevator wasn't large enough to accommodate all of us, so they would go down first.

I turned out the lights and followed H and Joel out of the apartment, and pulled the door shut behind me. Riley was leaning against a wall. He looked wiped out.

I paused by Officer Dolan.

"I'll send someone up to keep watch with you."

"Thanks."

The elevator arrived, and the four of us got in. "Damn, this has been a long week." Riley's eyelids were drooping.

"That's right, tomorrow's Saturday. I'm glad we have the weekend off."

"That's one good thing about being switched to days."

"We just have to keep our fingers crossed our man doesn't decide to strangle someone else."

"Bite your tongue, boy."

Riley raised an eyelid at the bantering but didn't join in.

"You marching in the Parade on Sunday, Blair?"

"Yeah. I hope it doesn't rain. I hate marching in the rain." I'd learned to beat the big bass drum and twirl the mallets my first year as a cop, and the only time I'd missed a parade had been when Naomi was in the hospital. "You two?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Say, you remember the year it snowed, and... "
"Please, don't remind me!"

"What about you, Riley?"

"I'm gonna sleep the whole weekend."

"I hear that!"

The elevator came to a gentle stop, and the doors opened on the lobby floor.

One of the officers raised a hand in greeting as he approached us. "We've managed to get rid of the reporters, sir."

"Thanks. The last thing we need is to confront them again."

"No, sir."

"G'night, H. Joel. 'Night, Riley."

"G'night."

"Night, Sandman." H's smile was weary. "'Sandman.' Oh, man, I'm looking forward to a visit from him!" he mumbled, and they headed for the front door.

I turned to the officer who was still standing nearby. "Keogh, do me a favor and stand guard with Dolan?"

"Yes, sir." His grin was hard. "Doesn't matter what that management company wants. The Cap said this place is gonna be locked up tight tonight." He stepped into the elevator, hefted his gun, making sure it slid out of its holster easily, and nodded. The doors shut, and the dial above them began to swing from left to right, marking off the passing floors.

I checked my watch. I had about ten minutes to make my train before mass transit started running every hour on the hour only. I left the building and jogged toward the 72nd Street station. I reached the platform just as the train was pulling in.

It was one of the newer trains with plastic seats that seemed molded to the passenger's ass. I took a seat by the doors in the center of the car. The car rocked back and forth as it clattered over the tracks - cha CHUNG-a chung, cha CHUNG-a chung - the movement and sound almost mesmerizing, and I found myself drifting...

I was racing through the jungle, naked. The wind blew through my hair, carrying with it the scents of the rainforest - the recent rain, the rich earth, the lush plantlife. Behind me I heard a coughing grunt, and a glance over my shoulder revealed a black jaguar bounding after me.

I laughed, unafraid, and the big cat's jaws lolled open as if he were laughing with me. He pounced, and we were rolling over the jungle floor. I leaned up on an elbow. He offered me his belly, and I stroked the soft fur. The pink tip of his cock emerged from its sheath, and fascinated, I touched it. A deep purr rumbled through him, and a glance over my shoulder revealed a black jaguar bounding after me.

Abruptly the cat rose, and his raspy tongue licked over my torso, up my throat, and dipped into my ear. He turned and lowered himself to the forest floor, presenting himself to me. His tail thrashed impatiently, revealing and then concealing his puckered hole.

I recognized a nearby plant and snapped off a leaf, and broke it in two. I coated my cock with the gel
that oozed from it, then spread some across his hole and gently worked a finger into him. More purrs rumbled through his big chest.

My mouth was dry, and I shivered with need as I dropped to my knees behind him. I petted his back and flanks, and pressed my cock into him. He backed toward me and raised his hips, and I sank deep into him. He was hot and tight, and the soft fur of his hind end caressed my balls.

I reached under him and stroked his belly, then reached lower, to find his cock had slid out of its sheath. I ran my thumb over the tip, then licked it, tasting his essence, before returning to tease him to greater sexual excitement. He humped backwards against me.

I buried a hand in the thick black fur of his ruff and flexed my fingers, while my other hand continue to pleasure his long, slender cock. My hips rocked back and forth, and he turned his head and looked over his shoulder. His ice-blue eyes were slitted in pleasure. I smiled into them, and then gasped as his long, muscular tail stroked over the crevice between my ass cheeks, teased my hole, caressed my balls.

'Do you wish for Enqueri to continue?' The words were a soft touch in my mind, but somehow I knew it was not the jaguar that was asking this of me.

'Yes!'

The jaguar clamped down with strong internal muscles, holding me imprisoned, and his tail began to penetrate me. He milked me rhythmically, and I squeezed my fingers around his cock and did the same to him.

Growls spilled from both our throats; they quickly escalated to howls as we both came.

When I regained my senses, my head was cushioned on the jaguar's side. It was rising and falling gently to the rhythm of his breathing.

I opened my eyes to see Incacha, the Chopec shaman, squatting before us. He smiled, touched my forehead, touched the jaguar's forehead. 'It is time, young Shaman. It is time, Enqueri. Remember!'

I was about to ask what it was I should remember when...

The subway car took a curve with a little more speed than it should have, and I went sliding off the plastic seat to land on my ass in the middle of the floor.

"Shit." I'd ridden the subway all my life. What the fuck had just happened?

I shook my head and glanced around. Fortunately, I was alone in the car. Also fortunate was the fact that I wore an overcoat. I may have climaxed in the - dream? vision? fantasy? - but the front of my trousers was tented with my arousal, and I ached.

I grabbed a pole and pulled myself to my feet, swaying in an effort to keep my balance.

The train pulled into the 23rd Street station. How could I have missed my stop? I was about to exit and go across to the uptown tracks, when, Stay.

"What?"

The hooker who had just entered the car turned around and exited, and hurried down the platform to the car in front of this one.
The doors slid shut, and the train began to move again. The next stop would be 14th Street.

Jim lived on 14th Street. Sure, it was a bit of a walk from where the train would let me off, but...

When the train pulled into the station, I stepped out onto the platform. Against one of the steel pillars that supported the weight of the street above the tunnel was a square gum dispenser.

I remembered the first time Naomi had given me two pennies and lifted me up so I could get a box of Chiclets. That had been a long time ago, and like everything else, the cost had gone up. I fished a coin out of my pocket and fed it into the machine.

I pulled the metal lever and a small box tumbled out. Cinnamon, although it was called something else. I put the gum in my mouth and started chewing, and headed for street level.

The night air was chill, but it felt good. I started walking east. Before I'd gone more than five steps, I was running.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Blair and Jim realize how many times they almost met.
They spend the St. Patrick's Day weekend together.
No one is murdered.

Brooklyn wasn't the only place in New York City where trees grew.

I stood in front of 852 East 14th Street, the three-story brownstone where Jim lived. The tree that grew in front hadn't started to bud yet. It was early in the season, but in a couple of weeks it would begin to leaf out.

I looked up and thought I saw a shadow on the window of what was no doubt the third floor hallway.

The shadow vanished.

I looked at the front door. It was probably locked. This time of night, I was crazy to even climb the steps and try it.

I climbed the steps. My hand was on the doorknob... turning it...

The door opened, and Jim stood there.

****

"Chief!" His left hand grabbed the front of my coat and yanked me in. The door was closed, and then I found myself pressed back against it, and his body was flush against mine. "I've been wanting to kiss you since ..."

"Then shut up and kiss me!"

His mouth slammed onto mine. There was no finesse in the kiss, just want and desperate need. I tasted copper as a lip split and began to bleed slightly from the roughness of the kiss. I didn't know if it was my lip or his. I didn't care.

He pulled back for a second, took the gum that had gotten transferred from my mouth to his in the heat of passion, laughed, and stuck it on the doorframe, and we went back to kissing.

His hands were all over me - inside my coat, yanking my shirt free, stroking the hair that covered my chest. Mine were buried in his hair, trying to hold his head still so I could plunder his mouth.

"Not long enough," I panted into his mouth as the short strands escaped my fingers, and he laughed hoarsely.

"I'm due for a haircut. I'll skip it." He took my hands from his hair and put them on his ass.

I slid my knee between his thighs, squeezed the firm cheeks, and urged him to ride me.
Jim moaned and leaned his forehead against mine. His breath was warm on my mouth. "We can't stay here. This is a public place."

"Haven't you ever done it in public?" I meant it to be teasing, but Jim froze. His erection deflated. He dropped his arms and straightened away from me. "Jim..."

"I did whatever I was paid to do."

"Jim..."

He backed another step, his eyes skittering off mine. "I'm sorry. I should have told you before... before I let it go so far. I used to..."

"Jim," I cupped his cheek, bringing his face around so I could look into his eyes, "I know."

"You know? How? Oh, what am I thinking? The Dick Man." He threw my hand away. "What else did he tell you?"

"Jim..."

"Did he tell you he liked... liked to fuck without using lubricant, just ram it in? He tore one of the boys so badly... He has... had to go out of state to find someone unaware of his tastes! He... he wanted Randy to share me with him, and Randy..." His breath hitched.

"Jim. It doesn't matter."

His expression became bitter. "Why? You want to have a taste of experience? That was what Randy wanted, only it turned out it wasn't what he wanted." His eyes narrowed. "Or is it because you think I'm a sentinel?"

"It doesn't matter because it doesn't matter. I swear to you, Jim..." I ran my fingertips over his cheeks and took a breath, about to tell him I'd been in the same business. "It doesn't matter because..."

Jim didn't give me a chance to say it. "Fuck it, I don't care!"

"Neither the fuck do I!"

You must stay! The voice was too late; I wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm not letting you go." I grabbed for Jim at the same time he yanked me against him, and we kissed again. He was hard, again. I would have laughed with relief, but my mouth was full.

"Come on." He dragged me after him into the central hallway, then pulled up short. "Uh... Hi, Richie."

"Hi, Jim. I was just lockin' up." The little, rotund man was swathed in a plaid bathrobe.

"Oh. Okay. Chief, this is Richie, my landlord." I noticed that Jim's nose twitched. "This is Blair."

"Hi, Blair."

"Hi."

"It's nice to see Jim with a friend."

"Uh... thanks."
"Well, I won't keep you. G'night."

"'Night." We made it to the third floor in silence. Jim sighed as he led me down the hallway. "Well, that killed the mood. I'm sorry, Chief."

The door to his apartment was standing wide open, and I looked at him curiously.

"I... uh... I heard you. I went to the front window," he pointed toward the end of the hall, "and saw you standing down on the street, and... "

"I wasn't sure if the front door was unlocked. I was sizing up that tree to see if I could climb it to the third floor."

"You were going to climb it? My own Douglas Fairbanks. Ah, Chief. That's so romantic. Come in. Please." For a second I wondered if he was going to scoop me up and carry me across the threshold, but he placed his palm on my lower back and urged me forward.

His apartment was small and spotlessly clean - a place for everything, and everything in its place - and lit by the flickering glow of scentless candles.

"This is romantic."

"I was hoping you'd come."

I took off my overcoat and then my suit jacket, and when Jim extended his hand, handed them to him. My tie was unknotted and buttons had been torn off my shirt.

I shivered in arousal. No one... no one... had ever wanted me that badly.

"Can I... uh... Can I get you anything, Chief?"

"Just you, Jim."

****

I didn't bother with buttons, although by the time I pulled my shirt off over my head the remaining few had popped off. I toed off my shoes and skinned out of my trousers and shorts.

Jim was already lying naked on his bed.

His chest was smooth and almost hairless, his pectoral muscles were beautifully defined, and his nipples were a dark beige. One was pierced, and a silver ring with a single bead was threaded through it. His legs were spread, his cock was hard and glistening with precome, and in his hand was a jar of KY jelly.

I walked toward him and knelt on the bed. "Nice sheets." They were cool and silky.

He grinned. "They cost me a week's pay." He ran a hand over them. "They're worth it."

I stroked my fingertips over his chest, caught the nipple ring with a finger, and tugged gently, watching his eyes. There was nothing but trust in them.

"I put it in for you. Randy never knew I had the ring; usually I just wore a barbell." He licked his lips. "How do you want me, Chief?"

"Just the way you are, Jim."
"I mean..."

"I know what you mean." I took the jar from him - there was a fine tremor in his hand - and I unscrewed the top.

He hooked his arms under his knees and pulled them back, exposing his puckered opening. For a second I pictured the black jaguar. I smiled at the fanciful notion and took a dollop of KY on my finger. As I smeared it over his hole, I leaned forward and mouthed his balls.

"Chief?"

I slid a finger into him and licked his cock.

"Chief!"

I pulled my finger out, added more lubricant, and eased two fingers into him while I blew across the tip of his cock. Then I swallowed as much of it as I could.

"Chief!"

Diverted by the finger-fucking and the blow job I was giving him, he was unaware when I removed my fingers and lined up my slicked cock with his hole.

I ran my palms up the backs of his thighs, then pressed his legs back, and we both groaned as my cock slid past the tight ring of muscle and sank deep inside him.

"Move, Chief! Please!" He gripped my hips in an effort to get me to set up a pounding rhythm.

"Who's... who's on top?"

"No, Who's on first."

"Wise guy." I reached down and pinched his ass, and he growled.

He locked his ankles behind my back and bucked up. I twined my fingers with his and brought his arms over his head, then started a slow, undulating movement that had me constantly assaulting his sweet spot.

"Chief! Chief!" It was a litany on his lips.

I ran my teeth up and down his neck, then drew in a patch of skin and began to suck in earnest.

"That's... that's gonna leave a mark."

"You're mine. I want the world to know it!" I released my hold on his fingers, cupped his face with both palms, and took his mouth in a bruising kiss. "You're mine!"

He opened his eyes. The sight of them, unfocused, clouded with passion, drove me wild. I braced my weight on my knees, slid my arms around him, and levered him up until he sat impaled on my cock.

"Fuck yourself on me, baby." I stroked my palm over his torso and tweaked a nipple, thrusting up with shallow, contained movements.

He made a small sound deep in his throat and began to raise and lower himself on me. His cock was trapped between our bodies, and I leaned back far enough to free it. "No!" he whimpered.
I wrapped my hand around it and jerked him off.

"I wish I were limber enough to suck you as I fuck you, Jim."

His eyes widened, his cock quivered, and he came, shooting hot, milky streamers of fluid over his chest.

I licked my palm clean, eased him down onto his back, and drove into him twice more. I could feel my balls tighten and draw up, and then, his eyes on mine, he ran a finger through the come on his chest and painted my lips with it. Before I could lick it off, he arched up and kissed it from my mouth, and I groaned and came.

****

Jim's head was pillowed on my chest and a leg was thrown over both of mine. He traced designs in the hair that covered my chest, followed it down to my groin, circled the base of my flaccid cock.

"Can you stay, Blair?"

"I have to go home on Sunday..."

His arms tightened around me, and I could feel his body shaking.

"Jim?"

"I'm sorry. I thought... I guess I'm used to most guys leaving as soon as they got their rocks off."

"Jim, I'm not most guys." I ran my hand over his hair. "I'm not gonna leave twenty bucks on the dresser as I let myself out."

"Actually, fifty would have been more like it."

"Yeah? That's a pretty high-scale clientele. I... uh... I always got that myself." I held my breath, waiting to see how he would react to the fact that I'd been in the same business as he.

He leaned back and met my eyes. "Chief? What are you telling me?"

"I worked as an escort. For a time. Are you... are you disappointed, Jim?"

"Why did you do it?" He didn't sound accusatory, just curious.

"I needed the money for a field trip."

"A field trip? What, like to the Bronx Zoo?"

"Asshole. No. This was in college."

"That's right. You... you went to college."

"Jim?"

"My grades weren't good enough for a scholarship."

And he'd told me his father refused to pay the tuition. I stroked his hair. "Y'know something, Jim? You've got a brilliant mind."

"I do?"
"Mmm hmm."

"And you got hung up on me because of my mind?"

"Yes. And you know something else? You work as a security guard, and according to Simon, you're good at what you do. That's what's important."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, I really think so."

"Did you like it?"

"College? Yeah, I did, but then..."

"Now who's being an asshole? Hustling. Did you like it?"

"Jim, I was 17. There were all these guys who paid me to fuck them. I loved it. Of course, I only did it for six months."

"Did someone hurt you?" There was anger in his voice.

"No. Why would you think... Jim, were you hurt?"

"It can be a hazard of the trade."

But he hadn't answered me. "Jim."

"What happened after six months?"

"I went to Peru. Jim..."

"You were in Peru?"

"Yeah. Back in '57. Jim..."

"I was there a year or so before that with a friend. He went into the rainforest, and I never saw him again."

"At least I don't think I did."

I went very still. "What was your friend's name?"

"Jack Pendergrast."

I stared into Jim's eyes. In my mind, I heard shouts of triumph. "Jim, does the name Enqueri mean anything to you?"

"Nnn... yes! Now that you mention it, the name does sounds familiar. I think... I know I went looking for Jack, and I seem to remember him calling me that before I..."

"He sighed and shook his head. "I have a tattoo of a jaguar on my shoulder and no real memory of what happened. What about you?"

"I got lost in the rainforest. I don't know what happened in the time between then and when I regained consciousness? became aware of my surroundings again? All I remember is coming to in a Chopec hut with the world's worst headache. Jim, Jack Pendergrast was there. He offered me something that cured my headache, and before I left, he told me that when I found you... " 
"And you did find me." He smiled.

"... I was to tell you that he was well and thinks fondly of you."

"Of me?"

"Well, of Enqueri, and since I'm assuming you're Enqueri, you."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I think that just gave me Excedrin headache number 273."

"Let me kiss it and make it better."

"That'll work for me, Chief."

And whether it was the kiss or the lovemaking that followed, afterwards, the headache seemed to have vanished.

****

I limped out of the bathroom and bumped into Jim, who was making an omelet on the small stove. "Sorry."

"You okay, Chief?"

"I think I pulled something."

He grinned. "Was it worth it?"

"Hell, yes!" I kissed him. "What can I do to help."

"Pour the coffee, sit down, and talk to me more."

"What do you want me to tell you about now?" Since he had both hands full, I raised his cup to his mouth so he could take a sip, then set it aside, took my own cup, and got out of his way.

"How about that wolf on your left shoulder?"

"Okay. How about it?"

"You don't strike me as a tattoo kind of guy. How long have you had it?"

"A little more than ten years."

"Then you got it when you were in Peru?"

"Yes."

"Chief, are you gonna make me drag every detail out of you?"

"Yes." I grinned at him.

"Okay, Sandburg. Talk!" He got me in a headlock and rubbed his knuckles against my head.

"Kidding, babe! I'm just kidding!"

He smoothed my hair, tipped up my chin for a kiss, then went back to rescue the omelet before it burned.
"Kind of like you, I came out of the jungle with that tattoo and no memory of how I got it."

He brought breakfast to the table, and while we ate, I told him the whole story of the field trip to Peru, even about Toby.

"Toby was a fool. If you had been my first, nothing could have made me let you go."

"Yeah, but you know teenagers, Jim."

"Nothing!"

I blushed.

"Professor Stoddard seems to have been awfully casual about the fact that you were gone for so long. I don't think I like him."

"The whole thing was weird, now that I think of it, but at the time it seemed to make sense." I finished my last bite of toast. "You're a good cook, Jim."

"Thanks. You're an appreciative cook-ee. For a second there I was afraid you were going to scrape the pattern off the plate." He winked, gathered the plates, and went to the sink. "Do you think we were meant to find each other, Chief?"

In talking, we'd learned of how many times we'd come 'thisclose' to meeting. There was more than one occasion at Banks, as well as parades up 5th Avenue when I'd been pounding the drum and he'd been standing right at the curb. The visor of my hat had disguised my features, and my concentration on swinging the mallets and keeping the beat had kept me from paying more than cursory attention to the crowd.

'That was you, Chief?'

'Yeah.'

'You do have a way with those sticks.'

'Mallets, Jim! Mallets!'

'Mallets,' he'd corrected, the corner of his mouth kicked up in a grin. 'Still, it would have been nice if you were in the bagpipe band and wore kilts.'

'Couldn't have been in that band, Jim. I'm not Irish. I wouldn't have been accepted, not even if I'd promised to change my name to O'Sandburg.'

'Well, I think it's too bad.' He'd looked pensive. 'You do have cute legs.'

I'd kissed him.

Then there had been New Year's Eve.

'I was in Times Square that night, Jim.'

'I thought I caught your scent, but when I tried to find you, you were gone.'

'Gunshots. Once a cop, always a cop, even on my night off. I went to check it out. False alarm,' I'd assured him. 'So I went home.'
And it had been him across the subway tracks.

'What would have happened, Chief?' he'd asked when I'd told him I'd been about to call across to him. 'If my train hadn't come? If we'd seen each other?'

'I'd have crossed the tracks to get to you, Jim - I'd have been too afraid to lose you and wouldn't have taken the chance of running upstairs and over to the Downtown side. I'd have stood there with my hand on your arm, looking into your eyes and probably grinning like a dope, and when the train finally came, I'd have gone home with you, and we would have rung in the New Year making love.'

'Um... Technically, the New Year had already been rung in.'

'You are a romantic, aren't you?' I'd laughed, then sobered. It scared me that except for this murder, we could have missed each other one more time.

"We've found each other now, Jim."

"You're right. We have." He poured himself another cup of coffee. "Do you really have to go home tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah. I'm marching in the Parade."

"I wish I could see you. I've got work though."

"Well, there's always next year."

He put his cup down, pulled me onto his lap, and kissed me.

"Uh... Jim?" When I finally caught my breath.

His arms were a band around me, and his cheek was damp against mine. "You're thinking of the future."

****

"What's in your wallet, Chief?"

"Oh... you know. The usual. Library card, gun permit, PBA membership card, some singles."

"Any pictures?"

"A couple."

"Can I see?"

"Sure. But I want to see yours too."

"There's nothing... "

"Come on, Jim. Fair's fair."

For a minute I thought he was going to refuse. Then, "Okay." He got up to get his wallet.

"Mine's in my right front pocket." I gave him a winning smile. "Since you're already up."

He leaned down and kissed me.
I settled myself against the wall - Jim's bed had no headboard - my legs splayed, and my lover comfortably between them.

Jim carried a gun permit and ID, but the only photo in his wallet was of a young man in a cap and gown, who bore a slight resemblance to him.

"Is this your brother, Jim?"

"Yeah." He didn't even bother turning to see. Well, it was the only picture in there.

"I always wanted a brother. I guess you must miss him."

"Family is highly overrated."

I eased the picture out and turned it over.

*Thank you for the graduation gift. James. Your brother, Steven*

It wasn't much of a thank-you, and on the back of a photograph to boot.

"Is this Mrs. Sandburg?" I was glad to hear the smile in his voice.

"Yes."

"She's very pretty."

"Thanks, Jim. I love that picture." We'd been in Macy's one Christmas, and in a moment of whimsy, we'd posed on Santa's lap, each turning to kiss his cheek.

"Who's this, Chief?" He angled back to show me the picture he had found.

"That's Butch. He was my best friend when I was younger." It was from one of those booths in the 5 & 10.

"Oh? How much younger?" There was a bite to his voice.

"The last time I saw Butch was... We must have been about 15."

"You sound sad." He ran his palm along my thigh.

"He and his mother just left one day. He left a note, promised to be in touch, but he never kept that promise."

"Did you care about him?"

"Yes, I did. He was the first boy I..."

*Loved?"

"I was going to say kissed, but..." He started to pull away from me, but I yanked him back. "Are you jealous, Jim?"

"No. Of course not."

"You are!" I hugged him. "You don't have to be, babe. It was a long time ago." I took the wallet from him and dropped both of them over the side of the bed. "And I have you now."
I slid out from behind him, so he fell backward onto the bed, and proceeded to show him exactly how I had him.

****

We were sprawled - which consisted of a lot of close-body contact, considering how small it was - on Jim's bed

"Want to go do something?" He caressed my ass.

I peeled open an eye. "We just did something."

"Something that involves getting out of bed and getting dressed."

"Is the building on fire?" I grinned into the pillow. "Is there a holdup in the Bronx? Has Brooklyn broken out in fights?"

"No." The caress turned to a gentle whack. "And there isn't a traffic jam in Harlem that's backed up to Jackson Heights. I just thought you might want to go out."

"What time is it?"

"Almost four."

"In the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Everything's closed. Take a nap."

"Chief... " He nuzzled the spot under my ear that turned me to putty.

"I don't want to share you yet, Jim. Next week, I promise."

"Okay, Chief." And he fell asleep with his nose pressed to where my arm and torso joined.

His warm breath tickled the hairs of my underarm. My cock twitched, but I was too sated to do anything but smile and fall asleep too.

****

Jim stood in front of what he had told me was his pantry, naked. He looked over his shoulder, caught me ogling his ass, and grinned. "Looks like the cupboard is bare, Chief. I missed my weekly shopping."

"I'm sorry, Jim. That was my fault."

"Yes, it was."

"Hey, you didn't have to agree so quickly."

"I didn't, did I? So tell me, how do you figure it was your fault I'm out of food?"

"Well, you said something about Friday being your usual day to go grocery shopping. I asked you to come down to the Precinct, and then we had a date... "

"In that case, it is your fault. You gonna make it up to me?"
"I'd ask you to come over so I could cook dinner for you, but I'm out of groceries too..."

"What night, Chief?"

"... and with this maniac running around loose, I have no idea what time I'll be getting home." I leaned against his back and held him, stroking his torso. "I'd want you to come to dinner every night, Jim."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade.

"Cool!" He turned around to face me, and we stood in a loose embrace.

"I was hoping you'd think so."

He tightened the embrace and ran his cheek along the side of my neck to my hair, inhaling deeply. His cock nudged mine, and I hummed in pleasure.

There was a tap on the door. I looked at Jim, but he shrugged. "Just a second," he called and let me go. He pulled on his jeans and tee shirt.

"Get dressed. Chief. I don't want you hiding in the bathroom." He waited while I hurriedly pulled on my clothes. Then he went to open the door. "Albie. Hi."

"Hi, Jim. I'm sorry to bother you. Richie made lasagna, and you know him, he went all Italian and there's an awful lot of it. Would you and your friend like to come down and join us?"

Jim looked at me, and this time I was the one to shrug.

"Sure. Give us a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay, Jim. I'll tell Richie. Don't be too long, or he'll come up and get you himself." He grinned and left.

"Jim, are you going to have a problem because I spent the night?"

"I don't think so." But he worried his lip. "You'll like them, Chief. You met Richie, and Albie is his friend. They're good together. Albie was with him last night; I could smell him on Richie." So that was why his nose had twitched. "Let's have a quick wash and we can get going."

"Uh..."

"What is it?"

I held out my arms and my shirt fell open. "No buttons." I could get away with it for a few minutes, but not for a dinner.

"No problem. You can borrow one of my sweaters."

"It's not gonna swim on me?"

"It'll look cute on you. Trust me, Chief."

"Okay, but if anyone says anything, I'm gonna give you such a hit."
"You'll see." He grinned.

We washed up, and he dug a black sweater out of a tiny dresser. I pulled it on over my head.

"Sexy." He licked his lips. "Makes you look like a cat burglar."

I felt myself blush. Cops weren't supposed to look like cat burglars, but I couldn't object. He also thought I looked sexy.

We hurried down to the first floor. Jim had a bottle of red wine with him. "One of the customers at the bank gave it to me for Christmas."

"Handy."

"Yeah." He knocked on his landlord's door, and the young man who'd come up earlier answered.

"Hi, Jim! Hello," he said to me. "We weren't introduced before. I'm Albie."

"I'm Blair." I shook his hand.

"Come on in."

The apartment was much larger than Jim's. Through an arched doorway I could see a living room almost the size of Jim's studio. On the wall was a framed, embroidered depiction of St. Francis of Assisi with all the little animals around him, birds sitting on a nearby tree, a black panther leaning against his leg, and a wolf curled at his feet.

"Oh, Jim, wine! This is great. Thank you!"

We followed Albie into the dining room. The table was set for four, although it could probably seat six.

There was a china cabinet in a corner, and a buffet against a wall. Above it was a large copy of The Last Supper.

"Richie, look! Jim brought wine!"

"I never say 'no' to wine." He looked me up and down. "I met you last night."

"Yes, sir. You have a wonderful apartment, Mr... I'm sorry, I don't know your last name."

"Delvecchio. Thanks."

"It's so Italian!"

"Excuse me?"

Jim quickly changed a laugh into a cough, and I gave him a reproachful look, which hid my own amusement. Behave! I mouthed, knowing he would hear me. "Oh, yeah." I smiled at Richie. "My mother and I lived for a while in Little Italy, and I'd go over my friends' houses all the time. They had all these religious statues, you know, St. Anthony of Padua, The Infant of Prague, St. Therese, the Little Flower..."

"The Pieta?"

"No. At least, not in my friends' homes. That didn't really become popular until the World's Fair in
'64. Now you... You've got one of the most beautiful things I've seen. I noticed the embroidered St. Francis in your living room."

"You know St. Francis? Are you Italian?"

"On my father's side. He was killed in the War."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said in Italian.

"I always regretted I never knew him." I answered in the same language.

"What about his people?" He resumed the conversation in English.

"No. They didn't approve when he married Naomi, my mother. And after he was killed, she was too proud to go to them."

"I understand." He patted my hand. "Family can be a blessing, and it can be... " He gazed at Albie sadly, and I wondered what had happened. "Have you known Jim long?"

"No. But I've been looking for him all my life."

"Jim is very special."

"Yes, he is, Signore Delvecchio." I turned my head to smile at Jim.

"Listen," the landlord said, "call me 'Richie'."

"Thank you, Richie."

"Sit, sit." He pointed out the seats we were to take. "Your friend has a good head on his shoulders, Jim."

"I think so." Jim flushed, and I had a feeling he was thinking about when I'd slid to my knees in the bathroom and given him head.

A casserole dish with the lasagna was in the center of the table. At one end was a bowl filled with meatballs, sausages, and gravy meat. Beside it was a gravy boat filled with rich, chunky sauce. On the other end was the salad, a basket filled with sliced Italian bread, and grated cheese.

Richie spooned up a huge portion of lasagna and waited until Jim put his plate under it. He served me, then Albie, then helped himself.

"Okay, everybody. Mangia. Mangia."

I waited for a few seconds. Most of the nationalities I'd grown up with said some form of grace. None was said in this house. I glanced at Jim.

His mouth tightened, and he gave a small shake of his head.

I picked up my fork and started eating.

"So. Blair. What do you do for a living?" Richie asked.

"I'm a detective."

"What, like Mike Hammer?"
"No, more like Joe Friday."

"Oh, you're a cop."

"Richie, pass the meatballs, please." It seemed to me that Albie was a little nervous, but that was the way some people reacted to meeting a cop, and I didn't think anything of it.

"Okay, but make sure you take a sausage an' a bracciole too, Albie. He's just gettin' over a bad cold."

"It's been a rough winter. I had to send my mother out to San Francisco to stay with my cousin. Her health isn't good, you see - I nearly lost her when I was 17."

"You live with your mama?"

"She took care of me while I was growing up, so it's only fair I take care of her now."

"You're a good boy. Have some wine. Jim, you ready for a little more?"

"No, Richie. Thanks. I'm good."

"Yeah, you are. Jim, you know what I said when you first moved in? About no overnight guests?"

"Uh... Yeah." We both held our breaths to see if this was going to be a problem.

"If I recall correctly, I said no guests of the opposite sex."

"Yes."

Richie nodded. "Seein' as how your friend ain't of the opposite sex, I got no beef."

"I'm glad." Jim relaxed and smiled. "Pass me the bread, Chief?"

****

By the time dinner was over and we'd had dessert - espresso coffee and anisette toast - we were stuffed.

Albie was lying on the sofa watching The Carol Burnett Show.

"He's gotta take it easy still. You understand?"

"I understand. I'll help with the dishes," I told Richie. I pushed up the sleeves of Jim's sweater.

Richie filled the sink with soapy water. I washed, Jim dried, and Richie put the dishes away. Between the three of us, it didn't take long.

"I know that fridge of yours don't hold much, Jim. You run out, you come on down, an' I give you more. Gravy meat makes a good sandwich."

"Thanks, Richie." Jim had enough leftovers to carry him through a few days.

"So, what're you two doin' tomorrow?"

"I'll be marching in the Parade."

"And I've got work, so I can't see him."
"Albie an' I can go, if it ain't too cold for him. I know a good spot on 86th an' 3rd."

"That would be great. I hope you can make it. I'll look for you."

"We'd better go, Chief."

"Okay, Jim."

We said goodnight and went back up to Jim's apartment. Between kisses, the leftovers were stored in the fridge, and once that was done, we stripped off our clothes and tumbled onto the bed.

It really was small, and if Jim hadn't reached out and grabbed me, I would have rolled off.

I wondered how Naomi would feel if I moved Jim in with me.

****

Sunday morning came too soon. Jim had to go to work, and I had to get home, change into my dress uniform, and head for 44th and 5th, where the Parade would start.

We rode the subway up to 50th Street and walked to 53rd. "I'll try to meet you as soon as the Parade is over."

"Okay, Chief. The Museum closes at 5:30."

"Okay." I lowered my voice, knowing only he would be able to hear me. "I want to kiss you. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," he said softly. "Me too."

I pursed my lips together in an almost motionless kiss. Unless someone was looking for it, it would have gone unseen.

Jim was looking for it. He squeezed my arm.

"I'll see you later." We smiled at each other and went our separate ways.

In the time I was home, my phone didn't ring, and I breathed out a sigh of relief that no one had been strangled. I folded Jim's sweater and tucked it in a bottom drawer.

Richie and Albie were standing where he'd said they'd be, and when I saw them, I swung the mallet above my head and pointed it at them. Albie grinned and gave a little bounce. Once the parade was over, I dropped off my bass drum and caught a bus to The Museum of Modern Art, and watched Jim at work. He stood very alert and erect.

He wasn't the only thing that was erect. I knew he could tell. I'd stroll past him, and his nostrils would flare and his cheeks would flush.

When his shift was over, we returned to his place. He stripped out of his uniform, and I undid my fly and took him up against the wall, sucking on the mark I'd put on his collarbone the day before, making it darker.

Afterwards, I worried about irritating his skin, but his expression was happily sated. He grabbed some clean clothes and went into the bathroom. While I waited for him to change, I looked around for my shirt, but I couldn't find it.
And then Jim came out of the bathroom, wearing a fisherman knit sweater that molded across his torso, and I forgot all about it.

We went out to an Irish bar.

Jim hesitated in the doorway, and I went back for him.

"Are you okay, big guy?"

"Yeah. I am!" He seemed surprised. "It's been a long time since I've been able to set foot in a bar."

We had corned beef on rye and green beer. We listened to a trio of pipers play until the free drinks they were plied with started affecting them.

"C'mon, Jim. You may be able to dial down your hearing so these sour notes don't split your eardrums, but I can't."

He laughed and slung an arm over my shoulders - no one paid any attention because it was St. Patrick’s Day, and we were probably drunk - and we left. I walked him up to his door, kissed him thoroughly, and then headed home.

I wasn't able to sleep until I got Jim's sweater out of the drawer, stuffed a pillow into it, and held it in my arms.

****

My alarm went off on Monday morning, and I padded into the kitchen to start the coffee. I felt wonderful.

I turned on the radio, and the song that was playing was Monday, Monday. It was unusual - the station rarely played songs more than six months old - but I didn't give it any thought. I should have.

It must have been a fucking omen.
Christopher Gill has been a naughty boy. Not one but two murders.

Mother's locket was gone. The last time I remembered seeing it was on Sunday. Randolph must have torn it free.

Goddamn you, Randolph! Goddamn your miserable, black, homosexual soul to the deepest pit of hell!

I rubbed the back of my neck. There was the roughness of a long, thin scab there.

I could not return to his penthouse, not yet. The police were swarming all over it.

No matter. They would not know to whom it belonged. In a few days it would be safer. I nodded to myself. I would return then.

But perhaps a diversion would encourage them to leave sooner.

****

"Oh, Mother, you were so very wrong when you said I could not act," I murmured, using the same German accent as when I had spoken to Detective Sandburg.

I was at home, indulging in a warm bath, a glass of champagne beside the tub.

Norbert Himmel had been so easy.

I lounged at his door, a negligent hand on my hip. "I have to pound," I told him, "so you get hot vater."

"Oh!" His eyes - they were the wrong color, but wearing those blue pajamas, they were close enough. They ran over my body, took in the tool chest at my feet, and rose to my face. He flushed. "Oh, yes!"

And he had let me in. He had been sent away because he liked men, most especially men who did manual labor, not that he told me that. Mostly he spoke of how much he missed his family.

I spoke of guggle hoops and obsttorte, and how I had not had any since I left my home in the old country. "My mama, she vas a goot cook."

"I'm a good cook too," he announced. "My grandmother taught me, and she was the best cook I know. Would you like a cup of coffee and a piece of my Black Forest Cake?"

"Schwarzwaelder Kirschtorte? Ya, I would like zat very much."

"I apologize for wearing pajamas." He went into the kitchen and prepared a pot of coffee. "I called in sick this morning. This flu that's going around."
I shied away. The last thing I needed was to catch something from him. "Perhaps it be better I come back some other time, ya?"

"Oh, no, please!" He was so pathetically eager. "I'm not really sick. It's just a little tickle at the back of my throat."

He came out carrying a wooden tray. On it were two steaming cups of coffee, a creamer and sugar bowl filled with cubes of sugar instead of the granulated kind, and two large slices of cake. He set the tray down on a small table.

"Ah, zis looks goot!" I gave him my most charming smile.

"Danke." He flushed. "I know a little German, you see. Sit here, please?"

I angled the table so it was between us. We drank coffee and ate cake, and he flirted gently with me. I almost regretted what I had to do.

"Hans, would you... would you like to see pictures of my family?"

"Sure. You sit here on the sofa, and I look over your shoulder."

He looked puzzled, but as well as being a young plumber, I was a voice that reminded him of home.

"All right." He sat and turned the pages of the album he had brought to Manhattan with him. I leaned over the back of his sofa and trailed my fingers up the side of his neck. He blushed, but leaned into my touch.

Afterwards, with young Herr Himmel on the toilet and a kiss upon his brow, I made myself comfortable on his bed, picked up the phone on his nightstand and dialed the police station, and for the first time, spoke to Detective Sandburg.

"This is Hans. Hans Schultz," I informed him, then made my accent flat and Midwestern, "although on Valentine's Day I was Aaron Fielding." I wasn't going to tell him the name I had used for Randolph. I was pleased with what he had said to the reporter, but I did not want to hand him all the information easily. "I like what you say in ze newspaper, Detective Sandburg, zat what I do is vell-planned, vell-organized. Detective Sandburg. Phah. Zat is so formal. I call you Blair. Vhen you come here, I zink you vill see zat I am up to my previous standards." I gave him the address, and when he tried to keep me on the phone longer, I scoffed. "I am smarter than you!" I knew he wanted time for the police to get there. "Auf Wiedersehen, Blair." I hung up, rose and stretched, paused in the bathroom doorway to blow a kiss to Norbert, and went home.

The next day, the policemen who had been assigned to Randolph's apartment were ordered elsewhere.

And the story of the unfortunate Norbert Himmel took up the entire page 3 of The Daily News. I called ce cher Detective Sandburg, complimenting him on his words, using my best Maurice Chevalier impersonation.

"I wish you a weekend of the most pleasant kind. I will be going away for a few days, and I promise to be a good boy."

****

I stepped off the bus, slightly disturbed by the man I had seen walking through the rush hour crowd with Detective Sandburg. Surely the handsome detective was not one of those who liked men?
I needed to retrieve Mother's locket, so I dismissed it and strode to the theater. It was dark that night, having been closed to observe the anniversary of Mother's passing, and I entered through an alley door and made my way to Mother's dressing room.

She had received excellent reviews as the female lead in *Sunrise at Campobello*.

A matronly woman left the same way, dressed in an ankle-length dress that was only slightly out of date, gray kid gloves and a fur coat against the March chill, and sedate jewelry, pearl earrings, which were clip-on, a rope of pearls, and a broach watch pinned to her - my - breast.

The shoes, however, were killing my feet, and I hobbled along.

"Ma'am!" It was the doorman of a theater at the end of the street. "Let me call you a cab."

"Thank you, young man." I had passed him time out of mind, and yet he did not recognize me. * Unable to act, Mother?*

A cab appeared, and I got in.

My entrance into the lobby of Randolph's apartment building was timed perfectly. It was empty, no tenants, and the doormen were changing shifts, although neither would have recognized me - the day man because Randolph preferred to bring me to his apartment in the evening hours, and the night man because my disguise was that good.

I rode the elevator to the penthouse floor, walked in a stately manner across the foyer, and let myself into Randolph's apartment. Only then did I step out of character and out of those shoes.

Mother's locket should be in the informal living room. I went there straightaway and searched diligently, to no avail.

Before I could panic, I took myself in hand, sat down, and began to piece the puzzle together.

The body had been discovered too late on Monday for the item to be given adequate coverage for the next morning's edition of the newspaper.

The person who found the body could not have been Marc Addams, as had been printed in *The Daily News*. He tended to spend the weekends in Palm Beach and returned to Manhattan late on Monday afternoon.

That left Randolph's cleaning lady. I had no idea why she had not notified the authorities, but that was immaterial. She was a very thorough employee, despite Randolph's distain of her. More than once I had heard him mock her accent. If she found the locket, she would return it to where she thought it most likely belonged - the jewelry tray in Randolph's dresser.

I hurried into his bedroom, ostentatious beyond belief, and, barely restraining a shudder, I pushed away memories of what he had done to me in that room. He had never known, my ability as an actor had been so great.

I went to the dresser and opened it. As I had deduced, Mother's locket was lying on top of rings, cuff buttons, and tie clips.

But, oh! The chain was broken! I stared at it with tears in my eyes. Mother's lovely...

"Excuse me." The voice was harsh. "Who are you? What are you doing in Randy's apartment?"
I stiffened. How could I have let my guard down so? But then again, how could I know anyone would come into Randolph's apartment? I had locked the door; to unlock it, he must also have a key. I turned to face him.

"I am Mrs. Roosevelt. Randolph and my boy, Skippy, were such good chums. And you are?"

"I'm Richard Lee." He was a tall man, rather attractive if one appreciated that sort of flamboyant looks. "Randy was my best friend."

Of course.

"Skippy?"

"Ah, the names young boys give each other." I gave an indulgent laugh. "Skippy preferred that to his real name, Elliot."

"That doesn't surprise me."

I bristled on behalf of the imaginary Skippy but continued my performance as his mother. "My boy is out of the country and could not pay his respects. He is quite devastated, of course."

"But... but what are you doing here?"

"He asked me to retrieve a tie tack he had loaned Randolph."

He didn't seem to hear my excuse, however. "God, I miss him." He took a handkerchief from a pocket and blew his nose. "This has come as such an awful shock to everyone."

"Indeed."

"Just a second." His eyes narrowed. "That isn't a tie tack in your hand!"

The broken chain dangled from my hand, and I cursed myself for not having slipped it into the purse I carried as soon as I had removed it from Randolph's dresser. "This is mine," I said in all truthfulness.

"Oh. Sorry. That is a woman's necklace. This has just shaken me so much. I cared for Randy, more than any of his... I got rid of the whore he brought home. Oh, he was so proud of himself. 'Rich,' he said, 'think of all his experience! And it's mine!' Only when I tried to get Randy to share, the bastard didn't want to!"

"Dear, dear, Richard. It is not proper to speak ill of the dead."

"Not Randy. Randy would have loved to share his toy with me. We would have had such an unbelievable time." His face was flushed. "It was Jim Ellison who didn't want to."

Imagine that.

"Tsk, tsk. Such ingratitude."

"You said it. Oh, Jesus! I'm so sorry, Mrs. Roosevelt! I forgot you're a lady! I never would have... " He dropped into a chair in the sitting area of Randolph's bedroom, his head in his hands.

"There, there. That is quite all right. You look so unhappy. Skippy always felt better when I rubbed his shoulders. Perhaps you would like a massage?"
"Thanks. I could use one."

I set down the purse and stood behind him. I dug my fingers into the muscles of his shoulders and worked them. He hummed with relief, and I stroked the sides of his neck.

"Wait a second!" He stiffened. "The last I heard, Skippy's real name was Errol!" Well, I knew it began with the same letter. "And his mother is taking the waters in Wiesbaden!"

"Is she? Oh, dear." That was what came of improvising. "My mistake." I wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled.

He scrabbled at my hands, but they were covered by the kid gloves.

When he was dead, I put Mother's locket in the purse, then positioned him on the toilet and drew a kiss on his forehead. "Give my regards to Randolph when you see him. I have no doubt you will both be in hell."

Horrid man, attempting to ruin my perfect plans.

I glanced around, but everything seemed to be in order. I settled the coat around my shoulders, locked the door behind me, and took the elevator to the lobby.

A block or so away, I found an isolated telephone booth and called the 15th Precinct.

"Good evening," I caroled in a falsetto. "I would like to speak with Detective Sandburg, if you please." He should have returned from dinner by this time.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. His shift ended at 4 p.m. Can I switch you to someone else in Major Crimes?"

"Yes, please. Perhaps Detective Taggart?"

"Sorry. He's gone home too."

"Detective Brown?"

"No, ma'am."

"Does no one on the New York Police Department work after 4 p.m.?"

"I believe Lieutenant Dawson is here. I'll connect you with him." His voice was sober, but I could picture his amusement, and I frowned at the telephone.

There were a few seconds of silence, then, "This is Dawson."

"Lieutenant. How kind of you to take the time to speak with me," I said icily, knowing my displeasure would get through to him, "although I would have much preferred Detective Sandburg."

"He's off for the evening, ma'am."

"Yes, I am aware of that. Perhaps you know how to get in touch with him?"

"Well, of course, ma'am. We can contact all our men at any time, day or night."

"Splendid. Tell him that Mrs. Roosevelt called. I have been a very naughty... girl. I regret to say I have broken my promise to him, for which I deeply apologize. It was not my fault!" My voice was becoming strident, and I took a breath to bring myself under control. "I was going to tell him the
location of my latest performance, but since he is not there..."

"Ma'am, I told you, he's off-shift."

"That is not my concern, I am afraid." I sniffed haughtily. "However, I want him to note that this is
up to my previous standards. I believe he will be quite impressed. I do believe he will. Thank you,
Lieutenant."

"Wait! Wait a second! Who is this? What did you do?"

"I told you. Mrs. Roosevelt. As for what I did, you will just have to discover that on your own." Wretched man. I disconnected the call, put another coin in the slot, and got the operator. "I would
like the phone number of a building on 74th Street, please." I gave her the address of Randolph's
building.

She found it and rattled it off. "Would you like me to connect you now?"

"Please."

The phone rang a number of times, and then the doorman answered, breathless. "Good evening."

"I say, old chap, I do believe there's a dead chap in the flat of that bloke what was found dead in his
loo. Beastly thing, what? Better go have a look-see."

"What? What are you talking about? How do you know this? Who is this?"

"I also suggest you inform the authorities. Cheery-bye." I hung up and smoothed a hand over the
mink. The back of the gray glove was mottled with specks of blood. Something jagged was stuck in
the material. Richard Lee must have torn a fingernail and bled all over the gloves. I would need to
dispose of them.

I stripped the gloves off my hands, tucked them into my purse beside the tube of Jungle Red lipstick,
and stepped to the curb to hail a cab.

****

I was not pleased that I had broken my promise to Detective Sandburg. I would call him when I
returned from out-of-town to apologize. After all, I did not want him to think I was the sort who
valued his word lightly.

I had changed into my own clothes and left Mother's dressing room, making sure it was tidy.

I was feeling a trifle peckish and decided supper at Sardi's would be a perfect way to end this
evening.

"Mr. Gill." The doorman at the end of the block nodded politely to me. He gave no indication that he
recognized me from earlier. "May I call you a cab, sir?"

"No, thank you." Sardi's, on West 44th Street, was within walking distance. It was a chilly night, but
perfect for walking. I smiled at him and went on my way.

There was a line waiting for a table, but when James, the maitre'd saw me, his face lit up. "Ah, Mr.
Gill! What a pleasure to see you! Come, come, come! Your table is free."

He ignored the irritated grumbles, touched my elbow, and led me to the table that had first been
Mother's and now was mine.
"What is good tonight, James?"

He recited the specials.

"They all sound delicious. Perhaps you would be so kind as to make the selections?"

He flushed, proud that I would trust him. "And the wine?"

"You may select that as well."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Gill?"

"No. Thank you."

He gave a short bow from the waist, snapped his fingers to get the attention of Vincente, who would be my waiter, and hurried off to place the order. James had excellent taste, and I had little doubt that I would regret that I had let him choose.

While I waited for my wine to be brought, I gave some consideration to taking a vacation. It had been quite some time...

A couple strolled past my table, both male. The younger of the two, blond, and with innocent blue eyes, was bubbling with excitement. The older man, also fair, smiled at him indulgently. They took a table just across from me. The older one noticed me and gave a knowing smile. He leaned toward his companion and said something, and they both stared. How rude.

I felt myself flush, and I looked away. When I looked back, they were involved in their own conversation.

The wine steward brought me a flute of champagne and waited until I gave my approval.

Vincente brought the appetizer, smoked salmon with garniture, and I nodded and smiled and praised it, but afterwards, I ate absently, unable to prevent myself from stealing glances at that pair.

The young man would be better dead than to live the life to which he was about to be introduced.

I decided to cancel my plans to go out-of-town.

****

I had had a marvelous night's sleep in spite of the scratches on my leg. Abominable animals, cats. Why would anyone want to keep them?

I pushed the slight hurt out of my mind.

As for the damage to the trousers - that was inconsequential. They were cheap work pants purchased from a Woolworth's in a less than prosperous neighborhood, and they had already been disposed of.

After I had my breakfast, I decided, I would call Blair and tell him that although I had been a bad boy once again, I was going away on a vacation. Perhaps I would tease him, ask him to promise to be good until I got back.

Where should I go? The wine country of France, perhaps? Or possibly Wiesbaden, to take the waters as Skippy's mother had.

I laughed to myself and walked into the breakfast room.
I had always loved this room.

Fresh flowers scented it, and the bright morning sun shone through the windows. A classical FM radio station was playing Borodin.

_The Times_ had already been folded beside my place. My latest accomplishment would not be on the front page of that prestigious paper, but surely it would be on page 2 or 3. I would wait until Mrs. FitzHerbert, my housekeeper, brought my breakfast before I looked. Delayed gratification was good for the soul.

I frowned. Father was the one who always said that. I reached for the paper.

"Good morning, sir." Mrs. Fitz arrived with a rolling cart. She placed a fruit cup, two poached eggs, lightly buttered toast, and Brazilian coffee, sweetened and with a splash of cream before me.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fitz. Thank you."

Her smile beaming - it always paid to be courteous to the help - she left the room. I raised the coffee cup to my lips and took a sip. Almost trembling with excitement, I opened the newspaper.

In large, bold print it read, _Fifth Strangler Victim, Killer a Sexual Pervert!_

My hands began to tremble in earnest, and the cup dropped to the floor.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

_Monday, Monday, can't trust that day...

I walked into the squadroom whistling the song I'd heard on the radio. I hadn't been able to get it out of my mind.

"Someone's in a good mood." Monaghan grinned at H and Joel. "You can't tell me he hasn't got laid this time!"

"Someone's awfully interested in my love life. Let's leave it out of this, shall we? It's time to get to work." I hung up my overcoat and went to my desk. "Any word on that black hair?"

"It's human, but don't get your girdle in a bunch. It was traced to a company that manufactures wigs for theatrical productions."

"Of course. Why should it make our lives easier?" There was an envelope on my desk, and I slit it open and took out a typewritten page. "Joel, I want you to see if you can find out which theater ordered it."

"You know how many theaters there are in this city? On- and off- Broadway?"

H opened his mouth, and Joel scowled.

"No, man. Don't even try guessing."

"I won't, big guy. What've you got, Blair?"

I was scanning the paper. "This is from Dan. It's even better than the impression he thought he could lift off our victim's neck!" I tipped the envelope, and a short segment of links slid out.

"Wow. It takes some powerful hate to strangle someone so hard you break a necklace and leave parts of it behind." Joel's lip was curled in distaste.

"Yeah. Dan says Lee's nails were too badly damaged for him to find anything, but there were some gray fibers caught in the links. He's having them analyzed." I found a pen and poked gently at the links with it. "I know someone... " I pulled my phone to me and dialed a number.

"Hammerstein's."

"Is Mr. Hammerstein there?"

"Yes, he is. May I ask who's calling?"

"Blair Sandburg."

"One moment, please."

Within seconds, he was on the phone. "Blair, my boy! How are you?"
"Well, thank you. And you?"

"I'm doing well for an old man, but you didn't call to hear about my aches and pains. What can I do for you?"

"I have a segment of a necklace, and I need to know who made it."

"Of course. Do you want me to come to the Precinct?"

"No, I'll come down to see you, if that's okay?"

"Of course."

"I'm on my way."

"I look forward to seeing you, my boy."

"Thanks, Mr. Hammerstein. Bye." I hung up and looked at my men. "If anyone can tell us about this necklace, Herschel Hammerstein can. Joel..."

"I'll get right on that wig company."

"And I'll pay Marc Addams a visit." H checked his watch. "The doorman gave me a call last night to let me know he's back from Palm Beach."

"He's early, isn't he?"

"Yeah. Beats me why, but I'll see what I can get him to tell me."

"Okay, get going. I'll talk to you later. Hopefully one of us will catch some kind of break."

****

Hammerstein's was a small jeweler's shop tucked away in the Diamond District. It had been opened by Yaakov Hammerstein in the late 1880s, and was now run by his sole surviving son.

Hershel Hammerstein had been the rabbi who taught me to read Hebrew. He'd also had a discreet crush on Naomi.

He hmm'd and stroked his chin, then took out a jeweler's loupe and looked at the short segment of interlocking links through it.

"I believe this is the work of a craftsman whose peak period was the early 1920's. Sabatini. He was something of a romantic." He used a long, thin instrument to ease the links apart. "You notice the slender, elongated hearts?"

"That's what they are?"

He smiled and patted my shoulder. "That's what they are. If I recall correctly, there was something of a revival of his style a few years back."

"Who would sell these, Mr. Hammerstein?"

"Oh, I would say Tiffany's, my boy. Unless I miss my mark - and I never do - this is 24 carat gold. Definitely Tiffany's."
"Thanks, Mr. Hammerstein. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help." I put the links back in the small brown envelope and tucked it into a pocket.

"You're quite welcome. Tell me. How is your dear mother?"

"This winter was rough on her lungs. She's out in San Francisco visiting my cousin Franklin."

"Ah yes. Franklin. The lung surgeon who earns thousands in just a morning?"

"He's the one."

"Well, give her my best when you talk to her."

"I will. Thank you again."

He was gazing off into space, though, and his smile was tender. I had no doubt he was thinking of my mother.

I left his little shop and caught a bus up to 57th Street.

The clock above the door was just pointing to 10, and a woman dressed with quiet elegance was unlocking the doors.

She smiled at me. "Good morning, sir. You're here bright and early. May I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to the manager, please? My name is Sandburg."

"Of course. If you'll come in, Mr. Sandburg? I'll just be a moment."

While I waited, I browsed along the counter containing earrings. There was one pair, gold hoops inset with diamonds, that I thought were interesting. What would one look like in Jim's nipple?

A man in his early thirties approached and offered me a slight smile. "May I help you, sir?"

"I'm just looking."

"Of course." His gaze ran over me, and his smile broadened without showing his teeth. "Let me show you these earrings. They're one of a kind, something just created. The end unscrews, is threaded through the earlobe, and then screwed closed." He took the tray out of the display case. "A lovely choice, if I may say so. Your lady would be quite pleased. 18 carat gold, round diamonds whose total carat weight is .38. They're a steal at two thousand dollars."

"Uh..."

"Of course, if you don't think she's worth it..."

"Mr. Sandburg?" It was the woman who'd opened the doors. "Mr. Williams will see you."

"Thank you."

"Shall I set these aside for you, sir?"

"No. I'm sorry. We just started dating, you see, and I'm not quite sure of..."

"I understand." His voice was chill, and I figured he'd realized he wasn't going to make a sale with me. He replaced the tray, and his eyes darted from me to the woman, and then to the back of the
store. "I wish you good luck."

"Thanks." I followed the woman through the store, through a long, narrow corridor, to an office in the rear.

"Mr. Williams? Mr. Sandburg." She closed the door as she left.

"Blair? Oh, I had hoped it was you!" He engulfed me in a hug.

"Excuse me?" I eased myself out of his embrace.

"You don't remember me? Well, of course. I must have been just one of hundreds."

"Harry?"

"Oh, you do remember!" He hugged me again. "You were so kind to me!" His lips grazed over the side of my neck and began to nibble.

"Hey! Stop!" I tried to push him away, but he had my arms trapped against my body. I didn't remember him being this persistent.

"But you always let me..." He went back to nibbling on my neck.

"Dammit, Harry, that's gonna leave a mark!"

"You never minded before."

"Harry, don't make me..." I didn't want to hurt him. I eased out of his grip and stepped away.

"I tried to find you. You made my first time so wonderful... But no one could tell me where you had gone."

"I left the business."

It was as if he hadn't heard me. "But now you're here, just when... What are you doing tonight? I'd love to take you to dinner! And maybe afterwards..." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Harry. I told you. I don't do that anymore."

"Oh, but surely? For me?"

"No. I'm a cop now..."

"Are you going to arrest me?" He flirted his lashes and reached for me. "Are you going to use your big night stick to make me behave?"

"Harry, sit down." I took out my badge and placed it on his desk. He turned pale and sank down into the client's chair. All playfulness left him.

"You really are a cop? Are you going to arrest me?"

"For what? Being glad to see me? No. Just don't jump all over me again." I raised him up and put him in his seat, then took the one he'd vacated.

"I'm sorry," he said in a small voice. "I was just so glad to see you."

"I could tell." I'd felt his erection against my hip. "I'm here on business." I removed the envelope
with the segment of links. "I was told that Tiffany's might have handled something like this."

All business now, he reached for his jeweler's loupe and studied the links, then gently separated them. He drew in a hissed breath. "This is by Sabatini!"

"That's what I was told also."

"He had quite a following in the 20s, but then he fell out of favor. The fickleness of the buying public, plus the Depression... Even his smallest pieces - or perhaps I should say, especially his smallest pieces - were expensive. The exquisite attention to detail, you see. However, his son attempted to revive the style a number of years ago. The previous manager knew the elder Sabatini, and took a few of the son's necklaces on consignment, as a favor. If I recall correctly, we finally had to return them last year."

"None were sold?"

"I'd have to look into our records to ascertain... "

"I'm not going anywhere."

"If you're sure. I'll just... "

His door burst open. "Ah hah!" It was the salesman who had shown me the earrings. "I caught you, you cheater!"

"Excuse me?" I turned in the chair. For a second it felt like déjà vu, a repeat of my date with Gabe.

"You... You're not... " The salesman's face was bright red.

"What are you doing in here, Walter?"

"I... I thought... "

"You thought what?" Harry's words were icy.

I watched in surprise. I'd only been with Harry a few times, and he'd never taken that kind of attitude with me. Although this could just have been his 'manager' persona.

"That you would be... I'm sorry, sir. Obviously I misread the situation." He started to back out.

"Never mind. Since you're here, you can run an errand for me. I need the inventory file for... " He tugged on his lower lip, and the other man's eyes narrowed. "... 1965 will do for a start. We'll work forward from there."

"Yes, sir"

"And close the door, please."

He sniffed and yanked the door shut.

"I'm sorry, Blair. He can be so possessive sometimes."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Actually, my... er... husband."
"And you were going to cheat on him? Shame on you, Harry."

"Well, he was just so impossible this morning. Sometimes I need to... " He waved his hands, trying to find the right word.

"You need to be kind."

There was a tap on the door this time, and a woman entered, carrying a large cardboard box. "Mr. Travis has a customer."

I jumped up and took it from her, and put it on Harry's desk.

"Thank you, Mona. That will be all." Harry dismissed her with a smile and opened the box. "I think I remember... Yes, here it is." He took out a ledger labeled 'Necklaces, Gold,' and began to thumb through it. "Hmm." He paused a few times, "Very interesting," and finally he stopped. "One was sold."

"All right." Now we were getting somewhere. "Who bought it?"

"I'll need to find the receipts. Why don't I give you a call... ?"

"Sure." I fished a business card out of my pocket. "May I borrow a pen?"

"Of course." His smile was anticipatory.

"This is my extension. It will get you straight through to me."

"Your... your extension?"

"At the Precinct."

"Oh. But I thought... "

"Harry, you've got someone. So do I. Don't screw it up." I rubbed the side of my neck, then slid my card across the desk, and handed him his pen back. "I need this information as soon as possible, okay?"

He sighed. "Okay." He put the segment of links back into the envelope, and I took it from him and left.

****

It was almost noon by the time I got back to the squadroom. H was practically dancing with excitement.

"You were right, Sandman. Addams was stonewalling because of a woman. Maria Hernandez!"

"The cleaning woman? You found her? Did you talk to her?"

"No to both; he got her out of town."

"Dammit. We need her back."

"I told him that. It turns out she's in this country illegally, and he refused to tell me her whereabouts. And yeah, I mentioned that fact he could go to jail for obstructing the investigation."
I ran a hand through my hair. "And?"

"He said he would cooperate in every way he could - act as a go-between, whatever - but he won't tell us where she is."

"Okay. What did he tell you?"

"She found the body. Not right away. She did her job, cleaning the apartment. The master suite was done last. It always was; she never knew what she might find in there, right down to the latest playmate handcuffed to the bed. She noticed the smell coming from the master bath, and when she went to see about it, she found her employer. According to Addams, she crossed herself and picked up the phone to call the police."

"But she didn't."

"No. She's a wetback - the money she makes here supports her entire family back in Mexico - and she knew she'd be sent home. Instead she went running across the foyer to Addams' penthouse, told him, and brought him back. It only took one look for Addams to know the man was dead. He made her gather up her cleaning supplies and told her to stay in his apartment, and then he called us."

"And gave us that cock-and-bull story about being concerned himself and finding the body. Okay. What did she touch?"

"Everything."

"No wonder why Riley couldn't lift any prints. Dammit! I really need to question her."

"You think we can talk to Immigration, maybe work something out with them?"

"Good idea. I'll bring it up with the Captain and let him do it. That's what he gets paid the big bucks for."

"Oh, and Addams said next time, if there is a next time, he'll have his lawyer present."

"Damn right there'll be a next time," I grumbled. "Y'know, instead of taking classes in anthropology, maybe I should go to law school instead."

"We'd have to hang you then."

"Don't get all Shakespeare on me, H. Okay, Joel, what've you got?"

"That type of wig is pretty popular." He took a notebook out of his jacket pocket and flipped it open. "Henry Miller, St. James, Amanda Gill, Imperial, Shubert, and Majestic - they've all had recent orders. And I'm gonna check with the theater managers of each one."

"Good man." My phone rang, and the room fell silent. We were not only trying to trace all calls that came to me, we were tape recording them as well. Joel waited until I pressed the key on the recorder and picked up the phone, then started the trace. "15th Precinct, Detective Sandburg."

"Detective, I saw your name in the newspaper. You're in charge of The Strangler Murders. The woman’s tone capitalized the words.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"You have to make them stop this!"
"Stop what, ma'am?"

"Their cats! I've complained to the management, but they ignore me! I'm at my wits' end!"

"That's really not my department, ma'am. You might want to call the ASPCA."

"Do you think I haven't? They just tell me those two aren't breaking any law, that the cats are well-taken care of. There's no smell, so the Department of Health won't do anything either!"

"Ma'am, I don't see..."

"Today was the last straw. I warned them I was going to call the authorities, and now I have."

"Yes, ma'am. What happened?"

"Those cats! They were howling! And on top of that the noise, the banging and... It was awful - it sounded like World War III was starting! I was terrified out of my wits!"

"All right, ma'am. Give me your address, and I'll have a patrolman come over and speak to them."

"You don't understand!" Her voice was shrill. "He saw me, Detective! He knows where I live!"

"Who saw you?"

"Haven't you been paying attention? It's The Strangler, I'm sure of it! After it had quieted down, I stuck my head out of the door just as this man came out of Mr. Richmond's apartment. It wasn't Mr. Richmond!"

"All right, ma'am. Try to calm down. Let me have your name and address." I wrote it down.

"And you'll come? Right away? I can describe him! I tell you, Detective, I'm so frightened."

"Yes, ma'am, out of your wits." I looked toward Joel. His smile was grim, and he nodded. "I'm on my way." I hung up.

"We've got the son-of-a-bitch!" He handed me the slip of paper with the address written on it.

"We do if his name is Pearl Menzel. This is the same address that she gave me. Let's go check it out."

****

Once again we had to track down the landlord to let us in. "Who lives in this apartment?"

"John Richmond and his younger brother, Paul. The kid goes to high school."

Joel, H, and I exchanged glances. We walked into the living room, and came to a dead halt.

The fireplace screen was leaning at an angle. Chairs were overturned, a lamp was broken, and the sofa was toppled. Rag rugs were bunched and scattered all over the wooden floor, and we could hear the claws of the cats as they skittered over it, hiding from us.

It was obvious the living room had again been the scene of the murder.

It didn't take too long to find the bathroom and Paul Richmond.

He had been strangled and posed, with a red kiss on his forehead. He was blond. His eyes hadn't
clouded over yet, and it was easy to see they were a vivid blue. He had a pimple just above the darkening bruises on his neck.

Stephens was back at work. He finished dusting for prints and limped out of the bathroom, stone-faced.

Riley took the last pictures. "I'm done here." His mouth was in a tight line. "You want me to send in the coroner?" Dan was waiting out in the corridor.

"Yeah."

Dan walked in and looked at the boy. I'd never seen his expression so sad. "I'll need some room, gentlemen."

"Okay."

We left the bathroom. This was a bachelor's apartment, but aside from the wreck of the living room, it was a nice place, homey and well-kept. There were no dirty dishes in the sink, the table in the dining room was set with two places for the evening meal, the bed in the larger of the two bedrooms was made, and no clothes were lying around. On the dresser was a framed photograph of a young couple in wedding attire. I could tell by the style of their clothing and hair that this must be his parents' wedding photo.

I met H in the hall as he left our newest victim's bedroom. His normally dark complexion was almost gray. "Goddammit. He has an old set of Hardy Boys Mysteries in his bookshelf. There's a poster of Raquel Welsh in that fur bikini on the wall. He's got albums stacked around his record player - The Beach Boys, The Righteous Brothers, The Small Faces. Fuck it. I found this in his schoolbag." He handed me his ID. "He's practically a baby, Blair!"

"Yeah."

Paul Richmond had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday.

We went into the living room. This time it looked as if our Strangler hadn't had an easy time of it.

"Good for you, Paul." Maybe Dan would find something more than threads under his fingernails.

The cats were calming down and regaining their natural curiosity. One sat on the fireplace mantel watching us. Another sat in the fireplace itself, fastidiously grooming its front paw. A third was on its back batting something.

"What have you got, puss?" I approached him carefully, crouching down and extending my hand, calling, "Psss psss psss."

"What is it, Blair?"

"Looks like a hairpiece. Black." I rescued it from the cat. It was wet and bedraggled.

"Is that blood?"

"No, cat spit."

"Ugh."

"I want this tested."
"You think the black hair you found at Norbert Himmel's was from this?"

"Maybe. We'll have to see."

A scuffle erupted in the corridor outside the front door.

"Wait! No! You can't go in there, sir!"

"Get out of my way!" A fair man burst into the room. He was big, tall and well-muscled. His suit jacket was buttoned haphazardly, as if he'd been in a rush. He glared at us. "Who are you? What are you doing in my apartment?" He looked around at his living room, and he turned white. "What's happened here? I'm calling the police!"

"We are the police. I'm Detective Sandburg." I took my badge from my inner pocket. "These are my colleagues, Detectives Taggert and Brown. Who are you?"

The wind seemed to be knocked from him. "I'm... I'm John Richmond. I live here. Where's Paul? Where's my baby brother?"

Involuntarily, we looked in the direction of the bathroom. He started toward it, and I stepped in front of him.

"I don't think you want to go in there, Mr. Richmond."

"Fuck you! Paul! Paulie!" He shoved me aside, and I found myself on my ass.

Joel reached down, took my hand, and pulled me back to my feet.

"We're not gonna charge him with assaulting a police officer, are we?"

A howl of anguish came from the bathroom.

"No."

"Paul." Richmond was crumpled beside his brother's body, rocking him in his arms. "Paulie," he sobbed.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Mr. Richmond." I took his arm. "Come inside. Let Dr. Wolf do his job." I helped him up, and he let me lead him into the living room.

****

"Why?" His eyes were blind. "Why would anyone do this to Paul? He's just a boy." Sobs shook his big body.

"What made you come home, Mr. Richmond?"

"What?" He scrubbed at his eyes. "Oh. Father Dugan, the principal of Paul's high school, called me at work. He told me Paul hadn't come to school. That's... Paulie doesn't do that. He loves school. It's his springboard to what he wants to do. He's going to be an actor... Oh, god!" He clapped a hand over his mouth, looked around in panic, then ran to the kitchen and threw up in the sink.

"Sorry." He accepted the hand towel I held out to him and wiped his face, then ran the faucet to wash out the sink.

"He wasn't in the habit of skipping class?"
"No. I told you. Paulie loves... loved school."

"Did you usually leave before he did in the morning?"

"Only on Mondays and Wednesdays. This term, Paulie's first classes don't start until 10 o'clock."

"Are you sure he's been going to class on those days?"

"Of course... Oh, no! Don't you try to make my brother out to be one of those no-good kids who... He goes to Catholic school! It's the school's policy to call the parents... guardians... if the kids don't show up. Paul... I was never called!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Richmond. I have to ask these questions. Was there anything different about today?"

He shook his head. "I left for work my usual time, about eight."

"Where do you work, Mr. Richmond?"

"I'm a CPA. I work for Braun and Carter and Associates, the accounting firm on 45th Street and Lexington. We handle the bookkeeping for a number of theaters."

"I see. What time would your brother leave for school?"

"On Monday and Wednesday, Paulie leaves about 9:40. He's a responsible boy. He gets up with me, has breakfast with me. He doesn't... " He covered his eyes with his hand, and his shoulders shook. "... didn't have to be in class until 10 - it's just a ten-minute walk but he gives himself a little extra time. He cleans up his room, sorts the laundry, washes the breakfast dishes... I told him he didn't have to, that all I was concerned about was him keeping up his grades, but he said it was the least... " His voice cracked.

"Why did it take so long for you to be notified?" I looked at my watch. It was almost two.

"Attendance is taken during homeroom. That's just after lunch. Father Dugan called as soon as... "

"All right, Mr. Richmond. I'm sorry I have to ask these questions," I repeated, "but we want to find the man who did this. When you left this morning, did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Was there someone in the elevator, in the lobby, outside the building, who drew your attention?"

"No. No one. I told you. It was just a regular Monday." He looked into my eyes. "What am I going to do? Paul is all that's left of the family. Our parents died when he was eight. I'm ten years older, so I took care of him. We had to move... "

"Why?"

"I couldn't afford to keep the house. Paulie had to leave behind his school and all his friends... I dropped out of college and got a job at Braun and Carter."

"That was very good of you. Not many eighteen-year-olds would be willing to take on that responsibility."

He waved it away. "Do you know, Paul never gave me a moment's worry? You'd think after losing our parents - But he was a good boy. He never got into trouble. He loved acting and was in every play and musical in every grade since he started school. He was talking about getting into the Drama Division of Julliard. Brother Anselm was so proud of him... "

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Richmond."
"Why did this happen? He's not supposed to... He just turned sixteen, for godssake! There's a piece of birthday cake in the refrigerator! I took him out to Sardi's for his birthday on Friday evening."

"That's rather an expensive dinner, isn't it?"

"I know, but one of his friends had gone there with his parents after seeing a play, and he kept talking about it. It was hard for a while, but things are pretty good now. I thought it would make a great surprise for him, and it was. He was so happy. The best birthday, he told me. It was even more so when I spotted Christopher Gill dining just across the room."

"Who?"

"He runs the Amanda Gill Theatre, one of the theaters we do the books for. Of course, he didn't have any idea who I was, so he didn't acknowledge me when I smiled at him. I didn't mind, he's an important... "

H came in and showed me a small swatch of cloth. There was blood on it. "I found it in the fireplace with that cat."

"Thanks, H. Get a small bag for it?"

"I'm on it." He walked out.

"I'm sorry." But the bereaved man scarcely noticed. "You have a number of cats, Mr. Richmond."

"What? Oh, yes. Paulie always loved cats. After we lost our parents, that was the only thing that helped him to sleep." A small white cat with startlingly blue eyes wandered in and wound around his legs. Richmond stooped and lifted the cat into his arms. He stroked the long hair.

"I didn't see this cat before."

"Blackie was probably under Paul's bed."

"Blackie?"

"Blackout." His smile was soft, as if the memory calmed him. "Paulie named him. He found him the day after the Big Blackout in '65. He begged me to let him keep the kitten. We already had Brigadoon, Bali H'ai, and Carousel, and the last thing we needed was another cat. I made him put up posters, and he used his own money from his job as a box boy in the local grocery to put an ad in The News. Blackie's a Persian, they're worth a little, let me tell you. But no one ever claimed him, so he became part of the family. The other cats look out for him. He's deaf, you see."

"I didn't realize."

"Yes. White, blue-eyed Persians usually are." His calm vanished abruptly. "Has that witch across the hall been complaining again? Our cats are well-fed and well-cared-for, and this apartment doesn't smell... "

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Richmond. I found a cat playing with this." I held up the wig.

"What is it?" He put the white cat down.

"A man's wig." I studied his hair.

"It was here? What was it doing here?"
"I was hoping you could tell me. Since you mentioned that your brother was interested in acting, and since this type of wig is used in theater productions, what are the odds he brought it home?"

"No. Costumes are not permitted to leave the school grounds."

"He couldn't have slipped it out in his schoolbag?"

"My brother would never do something like that."

"Then that leaves you."

"Excuse me?"

"Do you wear wigs, Mr. Richmond?"

"No." He ran a hand over his hair. It was very thick; there would be no reason for him to need a toupee, and he said as much.

"Maybe to please a lady friend? To add a certain fillip to the relationship?"

"No. My... my friend likes me just the way I am. We don't need anything to... That isn't mine! And it isn't his! I... I mean..."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Richmond. How did your brother feel about your... friend?"

"Paulie didn't know. I was always very..."

"So your friend might be resentful of this? Maybe he thought with your judgmental brother out of the way, you'd be able to spend more time together?"

"NO! My brother isn't judgmental! How dare you..." He flushed darkly, and his hands curled into fists.

"Take it easy, Mr. Richmond. I have to ask."

He took a deep breath, nodded, and the color in his face faded. "I was going to tell Paul. Now that he was sixteen, I felt he was old enough to understand. Reggie was supposed to meet us after dinner, but his show ran into encores. He called me to apologize. We were going to do it next weekend."

There was a touch on my arm. "Yes, Joel?"

"Dan's ready to take the..." He glanced at the distraught man, who had sunk onto a kitchen chair and buried his face in his hands. "He's ready to go."

"Tell him just a second, okay?"

"Got it."

"Thanks. Mr. Richmond, do you have someone you can stay with? Maybe your friend?"

He raised his head. "I can't stay here?" His eyes were wet and red.

"I'm afraid not. This is an active crime scene."

"Can I pack some clothes?" He rose.

"Of course." We left the kitchen. "H, would you go along with Mr. Richmond and make sure he
"Sure thing, Blair." He caught my eye and patted his pocket so I would know he had the piece of 
blood-stained material. The cats followed them.

While Mr. Richmond was packing, Dan's men wheeled the body out of the apartment. Dan was right 
behind them, his tread heavy.

"I want to know whatever you find, Dan."

"I'm making this a high priority." He shook his head. "That poor, poor boy." He left.

"We've got to stop this bastard!"

"Yeah. Joel, would you check with the managers of the theaters you mentioned and see if any of 
them is missing a wig?"

He took it gingerly between thumb and forefinger. "Do we have anything we can put this in?"

"Maybe Riley or Stephens have something in their cases." They were still dusting and 
photographing.

"I'll check with them."

"Excuse me!" A woman was standing stiffly in the doorway. She was dressed in a woolen suit 
comprised of a plain gray skirt and a jacket of yellow, pink, and orange flowers on a gray 
background. A pillbox hat with a matching pattern sat slightly askew on her head.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't be in here."

"I don't see why not! I'm the one who called you, after all! Why hasn't anyone come to talk to me? 
I'm sure I'm in very grave danger! This is the work of The Strangler, isn't it? I was certain of it!"

"Mrs. Menzel..."

"Ohhh! Look at all the damage done!" She was looking around avidly.

"Why don't we go to your apartment, and you can explain the whole thing to me." I exchanged looks 
with Joel, took her arm, and turned her around.

"I'll have to go under police protection, won't I?" There was a whiff of alcohol on her breath.

I urged her toward the door. "I'm pretty sure you'll need to, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, that will be wonder-! Er... that is to say, I'm a very conscientious citizen, so for my safety's 
sake, it will be a good thing."

I was stunned to see reporters waiting in the corridor. Sam took one look at my face and backed off. 
Mrs. Menzel preened and wanted to give a statement.

"Well, you see, there was this..."

I tightened my grip on her arm. "No comment," I ground out as I urged her toward her door.

A reporter I didn't recognize grabbed me. "What about this killer, Detective?"
I wheeled to face him, jerking my arm free, and a light flashed in my eyes. The photographer who was with him grinned, his jaws working a wad of chewing gum. I took a step toward him, and he backed away quickly.

"Detective?"

"What about this sick bastard?" I growled at the reporter. "He's a pervert!"

I caught Mrs. Menzel's arm, whirled her around, and got her into her apartment before any pictures could be taken of her.

"Vultures," I spat under my breath.

"I wanted to talk to the nice gentlemen," she said, reproach in her words. "It would have been so nice to be in the newspapers. I could have sent clippings to my family. We could have had our picture taken together." She fluttered her lashes at me.

"When this is over, you can give all the interviews you want. For now, my priority is keeping you safe." As I'd hopped, that appealed to her sense of vanity. "All right, Mrs. Menzel. Perhaps you'll tell me what happened?"

"Of course. Sit down. Now, may I get you a cup of tea? Something stronger, perhaps?"

"No, ma'am. It's against regulations to drink on duty. Just tell me what happened."

"Oh, no, no! What kind of hostess would I be?"

"Tea will be fine, ma'am." I surrendered and took out my note pad. This was going to be a long interview. "Er... do you have a pen?"

****

We were finally done. "Pack only what you'll need for a few days, Mrs. Menzel. I'll wait out in the hall." I was going to chase off the reporters if I had to do it with my gun.

Fortunately, they were gone.

Riley and Stephens passed as they left. "Man, you look like shit."

"Up yours."

"You wish. Listen, we'll have whatever we find on your desk ASAP, Sandman."

"Okay. Thanks, guys."

H came out of the Richmond apartment and fastened yellow crime scene tape across the door. "Waiting for me?"

"In your dreams. Has Joel left?"

"Yeah, a little while ago. The manager of the Shubert was the only one still at his theater when Joel called, so he's going there to talk to him."

I checked my watch and nodded. We were putting in a lot of overtime. "Where's Mr. Richmond?"

"He called a friend, who came right over. I have his address. It's on the other side of town. I sent
them with a black and white."

"Good idea. What about the cats?"

"They've taken them too."

"So we don't need to worry about them."

"No. What are you up to?"

"Yoo hoo! Detective!" Mrs. Menzel had locked her door and was waiting by the elevator with a very large, very orange suitcase.

"I've arranged for Mrs. Menzel to go into protective custody. I'm bringing her down to the Precinct first to talk to George. Maybe we'll be lucky, and between her description and Jim's, we'll have something concrete to go on."

The three of us went down in the elevator, and the woman chattered nonstop. "Mr. Menzel only wanted me to have the best," referring to the suitcase at her feet. "I feel so safe with such a big, strong detective beside me!" She was talking about me. I gave a weak smile. "Are you married? No? I have a niece who would be perfect for you!"

H's expression became more and more wooden as he struggled to keep from bursting into laughter. As the doors opened, he leaned close.

"Better you than me, Sandman."

I curled my lip at him. He knew I couldn't flip him off because there was a woman present.

****

Mrs. Menzel was very proud of herself. She was certain the information she had provided would see the arrest of The Strangler and the end of his murderous spree, and she was busy assuring everyone she passed of this.

A policewoman ushered her out of George's office. She would accompany Mrs. Menzel to a house on the Queens-Nassau line where she would be safe.

George made approving sounds. He didn't tell Mrs. Menzel that going by her description we could have arrested Lyndon Johnson, John Wayne, or King Kong.

H looked me over carefully. "Look, it's getting late, and we're done. Why don't you go home? Have a drink, maybe?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." I wouldn't go home though. There was no one there. I glanced at my watch. Jim should be home from work by now. We didn't have a date, but I didn't think he would mind too much if I turned up on his doorstep. I took a page from my note pad and wrote down his number. "If anything comes up and you can't reach me at home, try this number."

"All right. Go, Sandman!"

I cuffed his arm. "What about you?"

"I've got some paperwork that needs to be cleared up. Get out of here. We'll see you in the morning."

"Right. See ya."
Half an hour later, I entered 852 East 14th and climbed the stairs to Jim's apartment on the third floor.

I knocked on the door and waited, nervously smoothing my hair and then running a hand over my cheek and chin. I should have taken the time to shave.

"Richie? I have plenty of... " And there he stood. He was wearing the black jeans and turtleneck from Friday night, and I nearly swallowed my tongue.

"Hi, Jim." I smiled at him, feeling better for the first time since I'd looked down into the face of the dead teenager. "I know I should have called... "

The rest of what I would have said was cut off as he grabbed the front of my coat and dragged me into his apartment.

"Chief!" His eyes were bright, blue and very alive, and then I couldn't see anything because he was kissing me and my eyes were closed. "God, I... " He inhaled. I loved when he got all Sentinel on me and breathed in my scent. He'd done that after the first time we'd made love, almost purring like a big cat, and I'd just lain there and wallowed in it.

Abruptly he shoved me away.

"What... ?"

He turned my head, hooked a finger in my shirt collar, and yanked it down. "A hickey?"

"No, I... " I remembered Harry nibbling on my neck this morning.

"You've got a hickey! Don't lie to me! It's unmistakable!"

I thought I had stopped him before he could leave a mark.

"I didn't mark you, Chief, because I didn't want you to be embarrassed when you went in to work today."

"No, Jim. You don't understand!"

"Don't I? I'm the one with Sentinel senses, remember? I can smell another man all over you!"

"Jim, will you let me explain?"

"There are some things that don't need an explanation!"

Somewhere in my mind I heard a frustrated howl. Jim's eyes widened, but then he shook his head and narrowed his eyes.

"Jim, please... "

"Because I used to peddle my ass, it's not supposed to matter when my lover comes to me stinking of another man?"

"Jim, I... Now, just a second! I do not stink!"

"You do, Ch... Sandburg. Get out." He opened the door and started crowding me back.

"No, Jim. Please... " I reached for him.
"Get out!"

I wasn't expecting him to hit me. Even if I had been, his move was so lightning-fast I wouldn't have been able to block it. I went staggering back into the hall and crashed into the opposite wall. My legs flew out from under me, and I landed on my ass. The jolt to my tailbone caused my teeth to snap down on my tongue, and my mouth flooded with the taste of copper.

For a second I thought he looked horrified by what he had done, but my bruised eye was swelling shut, and I must have been deceived.

He slammed the door shut. I didn't need Sentinel senses to hear the lock twist shut with a finality that told me this was the end.

I sat there, stunned by the turn of events. How could Jim throw away what we had, just like that? I could hear Naomi telling me, 'Butch is your friend... He can be so easily hurt. Don't hurt him.'

Only I'd been the one hurt then, and I was the one who was hurt now.

Between the murder of that boy and what had just happened, I felt older than Methuselah. I pulled myself to my feet.

A door opened, and a gray-haired lady poked her head out. "Do you belong here, young man?"

"No, ma'am. I guess I don't."

****

I drew cautious, curious glances on the way back home, and I didn't want to imagine what I must look like. My swollen eye had settled in to a dull ache, and the skin over my cheekbones felt tight...

When I finally got home and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, I winced. My eye was going to be a Technicolor beaut in the morning. While I was at it, I undid my collar and studied the hickey on my neck.

"Goddammit!" It was barely visible. I would have to fall... My shoulders slumped. There was no point in denying it. I was in love with Jim Ellison. For all the good it did me.

I stripped off my clothes and took a shower, then crushed some ice, filled a towel, and held it to my eye. I didn't have much of an appetite, but, I'll be damned if I pine over you, Jim Ellison!

All that was in the fridge was a six-pack of beer, three eggs, half a carton of milk, and a small chunk of Romano cheese.

I found a church key, removed the cap of a bottle of beer, and took a healthy swig. Then I set about making an omelet. As I cracked the eggs into a bowl, added some milk, and grated cheese into it, I thought of the omelet Jim had made for us Saturday morning. "Damn you!"

I wiped the moisture from my face with the back of my hand. It must have been from the impromptu icepack. I needed to buy a real one.

I pushed thoughts of my... former... lover out of my mind and poured the beaten mixture into the frying pan. While I waited for it to set, I put a Lettermen album on the record player.

I took another bottle of beer from the fridge.

When the omelet was done to a golden turn, I sat down to eat it. I had the hollow pleasure of
knowing that my omelet was better than his.

Afterwards, I dumped everything into the sink, found the bottle of Dewars at the back of a cabinet, and had a few drinks. Well, more than a few. The level went down considerably.

I stretched out on the sofa and decided that once I finished this last drink, I’d go to bed.

_When I fall In love, it will be forever..._ The Lettermen crooned.

My last conscious thought was that really wasn't much better than _Monday, Monday_.

The half-filled glass of Scotch slipped from lax fingers, and I fell asleep on the sofa.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Blair has been taken off the job.

Now he's been reinstated... kind of.

The sound of ringing woke me up. At first I thought it was coming from within my head, a hangover the likes of which I hadn't had since I was a dumb teenager.

Then I realized it was the telephone.

I staggered into the kitchen. "'Lo?" I rubbed my face and flinched at the soreness of my eye.

"Sandburg? Where the fuck are you?"

"Obviously I'm home."

"Don't get cute with me, boy! Why aren't you here?"

"Joel?" I ran a hand through my hair and yawned. "What time is it?"

"It's 10 o'clock."

"Fuck." I looked down at myself, trying to figure how I came to have fallen asleep in my clothes.

"Look, my alarm didn't go off." It wasn't really a fib. It hadn't gone off, because I hadn't set it. "I'll be in as soon as I can."

"Okay, but you might want to..."

"As soon as I can." I hung up. I never did this, turned up late for work without even calling, so I hoped that I'd get away with it.

I made my way to my bathroom on the other side of the apartment. The sight of my eye made me want to crawl into bed. Instead, I gulped down a handful of Excedrin, took another shower, shaved, finished the last of the box of Frosted Flakes, and dressed for work.

I was almost three hours late when I walked into the squadroom. H and Joel were the only ones there. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

There was a long, low whistle, and self-consciously I ducked my chin into the collar of my shirt and glared at H, but he was staring at my face. "What happened to your eye?"

"I walked into a door," I snapped.

He held up his palms and let it go. "Uh... I tried to reach you last night. At the number you gave me? You weren't there."

"No. And tear it up. I won't be going back there." I hung up my overcoat and went to my desk.
"Shit. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Someone called Major Crimes; I was the only one still here."

I felt cold. "Was it... ?"

"No. It was someone named Harry. He sounded disappointed. Another boyfriend?"

"Fuck you. He's the manager of Tiffany's. What did he have?"

"He wouldn't tell me. I'm just passing on the message to you. Call him." He handed me a slip of paper with a number on it.

"Dammit." The last thing I needed was to get involved with Harry. "Okay." I pulled my phone toward me.

"Blair. Have you seen today's newspaper?"

"No."

"I think you'd better. Cap's not happy. He's in his office with the department shrink." He put The Post on my desk. The headline screamed, Fifth Strangler Victim, Killer a Sexual Pervert!

There was the picture of me, my eyes narrowed and my mouth in a hard line.

I blew out a breath. "That bastard."

"Who - The Strangler or the reporter?"

"Either. Both. Fuck it, let's get to work. Have we come up with any connections between our victims?"

"Tenuous," H said. Joel didn't grin and tease him about his fifty dollar words, but I didn't wonder about it. There was lost time to be made up for.

"I've learned that when Norbert Himmel wore blue, his eyes became blue, so except for Richard Lee, they're all blond and have blue eyes."

"So what do we make of the fact that Lee was killed in the same manner?"

"Not quite the same manner," I interrupted, "although he was posed, and a kiss was placed on his forehead. According to Dan Wolf, we know that Lee was strangled with a necklace. It was purchased from Tiffany's. Harry - the manager - said he would call as soon as he found the store's copy of the receipt."

"Then that's why he called yesterday?"

"I hope."

"Hadn't you better call him now, then?"

"I guess." I dialed the number on the paper. "This is Detective Sandburg. I'm returning Mr. Williams' phone call."
"Just a second, sir. I've had instructions to put you right through."

"Blair, darling! Where were you last night? I had hoped... Never mind. I found the receipt. A Sabatini necklace was purchased for cash. There's something else... I'd like to come in and talk to you, if I may?"

"Harry, can't you..."

"Oh, no. I'll leave right now and be there before you can blink your gorgeous blue eyes."

"Harry..."

"Bye, sweets."

"Dammit!" I slammed down the receiver.

"Must be nice to be so irresistible."

"Shut up. What else have we got?"

"This thing with the necklace... It got me to thinking, Blair. That drawer in the master bedroom..."

"The one that Riley found open?"

"Yeah. It held a tray with tie clips, cufflinks, rings, gold, silver, and platinum chains and medallions. I called Addams earlier, and he confirmed that Maria Hernandez had found a woman's necklace with a locket in the... uh... I think it's called the informal living room. She thought it was strange, seeing the deceased's persuasion was what it was, but he could be a nasty son-of-a-bitch, and she'd leaned not to ask questions. She just put it in the drawer."

"So what are you thinking?"

H was getting excited. "Maybe it was another mistake? Didn't The Strangler say he was going to be good? Why would he lie? Maybe he went to that apartment just to retrieve the necklace."

"Why?" Joel wanted to know.

"It was a lucky charm? A souvenir? We'd have to ask him, Joel." H scowled at him. "I have no clue. Anyway. He goes there, only to find Richard Lee there."

"Why was Lee there?"

"He was treated as the bereaved at the funeral." The excitement was leaving him, but he still tried. "Maybe he wanted to say goodbye in his own way? Or maybe he wanted to take the opportunity of retrieving something he'd left behind."

"Some of those toys?" I tried to think if Jim had told me anything about Lee other than that he was into rough sex. The thought of Jim made my eye throb, and I pushed him out of my mind. It took a little doing, but I knew from my experience with Butch that eventually I'd succeed. I took a bottle of aspirin from my desk, swallowed two, and went to the water cooler in the corner of the squadroom.

The door opened, and I was surprised to see Lieutenant Dawson walk in. He looked rumpled, as if he'd just got out of bed, and it felt like a flashback of last Monday, when the Cap had called me in early.

"Lieutenant?"
He just nodded and removed his overcoat. "What happened to your eye?"

"I walked into a door."

"Hmmm." He tapped on the Captain's door and went in.

I turned back to my men. "Okay, so let's get our ducks all in a row. What've we got on the victims?"

"Number One worked as a maitre'd in a restaurant in the Theatre District." H scribbled it down. "He liked girls. Mistake number one."

"Yeah. We'll have to see what other mistakes he's made."

"Numbers Two and Four knew each other. They had money. They were queer." H gave me an apologetic glance. I waved it away. "And Four, because of his coloring, might have also been a mistake."

"Number Three was queer also. He worked for a company that manufacturers costumes for shows - on- and off- Broadway."

"And a hair from a wig used in Broadway shows was found on his pillow."

"Right." H wrote that down.

"Number Five was sixteen years old. Did he even know if he was homosexual or not?"

"Y'know, I heard the brother tell you he works for an accounting firm that handles the books of some Broadway theaters, Blair."

"That might be the connection between One, Three, and Five, but as you said, H - tenuous. We need something to tie all five of them together, unless we're looking at a maniac who chooses his victims at random - in which case we're up shit creek and the paddle has fallen in. Joel, will you... no, you still have to see those theater managers. What happened with the Shubert?"

He shook his head. "All the wigs purchased are accounted for. I took hair samples from them, just in case."

"Good thinking. Okay, H, I need you to look into the backgrounds of Richard Lee and Randy Beautiful."

"Randy who?"

"Uh... " I felt myself flush. Jim had called him that. "Our second victim."

"Got it."

They were about to leave when my phone rang. I pressed the button on the tape recorder, and Joel waited until I raised the receiver.

"Fifteenth Precinct, Detective Sandburg."

"Where have you been?" No accent at all this time, but I knew who it was.

"Excuse me?" I nodded to Joel, and he started the trace.

"I do not know that I will do that. I tried to call you earlier, only to be told you were not at your desk."
Where were you?"

"What are you, my mother?"

"Are you mocking me?" I could hear temper in his voice. "Do not dare mock me, Detective Sandburg!"

"Or what? You'll spank me?"

He didn't respond to that, but his breath hitched. Did the idea of having his hands on me appeal to him?

"And I thought 'Detective Sandburg' was too formal for you, that you were going to call me 'Blair'."

"Do not change the subject. I am cross with you."

"Now that breaks my heart."

H gripped my shoulder, but I brushed his hand away. After yesterday, I wasn't about to handle this man with kid gloves.

"You're killing innocent men... " I glanced at Joel, and he held up five fingers and gave me the sign I should stretch out the conversation. "... propping them on the toilet, and kissing them on the forehead."

"I did not kiss them!"

"Well, you left a lipstick kiss behind, and that's as good as the same thing."

"It is not! Pah! Why do I argue with you? They are not innocent. They perform unnatural acts! How dare you... "

"You wanna know how I dare, sunshine? I dare because at least two of the men you've decided were innocent were Joseph Bishop was engaged to a very nice young lady... "

"You did not see the way he looked at me! When he let me into his house... " His voice was strident and his breath came in harsh pants over the phone.

"... and Paul Richmond..."

"You will not make me feel guilty! I am not guilty!"

"You are guilty," I snarled. "Your last victim, that boy?"

"He was living with an older man whose lust for him was palpable!"

"He was living with his brother!"

"Is that what that depraved debaucher of youth told you? He sat beside that angelic-looking young man, and yet he smiled at me! Oh, Detective Sandburg, you have so much to learn about the world."

"At least I'll be alive to learn. I'm gonna see to it that you aren't!"

"What are you saying? I am doing a service... "

"Is that what you tell yourself when you lie in bed at night, alone?"
"Who I do or do not share my bed with is no concern of yours!"

"Losing your grammar there, sunshine. That should be ‘with whom.’ What am I doing, talking to someone like you? I'm hanging up."

Joel shook his head frantically.

"Do not hang up, Detective Sandburg! Do not!" He was starting to lose it.

"Or what?" I bared my teeth in a feral grin, even though he couldn't see it. "You want to get your hands on me so badly you can taste it, can't you? Well, fine. Tell me where you are, and I'll be right there!"

"Oh, no, Detective Sandburg. I am not so easily fooled. I am smarter than you, remember?"

"I remember, you... You want to know what I think of you, sunshine? You're a ..."

"I read what you think of me." His words became more and more rapid. "It is in the newspaper, for the whole of the city to see. You disparage the memory of my mother! You disparage me!"

Apparently I had pushed too hard. "I am not a pervert!" he screamed, and I had to hold the receiver away from my ear. "I am NOT!"

"Yeah, well, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it sounds like one perverted duck to me."

The men in the room with me looked taken aback by that. I shrugged. My caller was breathing heavily, and it took him some time to regain some control.

Maybe we'd luck out and be able to trace the call this time.

Finally, "You have made me lose my temper, Detective Sandburg. That is something I hate to do, because it is so common."

Like I cared a shit.

"So not one more word." He sighed. "Detective Sandburg." I didn't say anything. "Detective Sandburg!"

"Yeah?"

"Do you... Do you forgive me for shouting, Blair?" He had the gall to ask me?

"You're a putrid blight on the face of humanity, sunshine!" I spat. "Do I forgive you? Never in a million years! Not for shouting, and most especially not for killing those men!"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I'd said the wrong thing.

"I see," he said, and the son-of-a-bitch had sorrow in his voice. "You are very volatile, are you not?"

And he hung up.

I turned off the tape recorder and looked to where Joel stood. He shook his head, and I swore. He tapped my shoulder. "What?"

He nodded behind me.

The Captain stood in his doorway, his hands on his hips. "What happened to your eye? Did you
"walk into a door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not funny, Sandburg." The scowl on his face was so fierce I wanted to duck under my desk.

"No, sir. Sorry." I sighed and slumped in my chair, and waited for him to tear a strip off my hide for losing it myself and screwing up so royally.

"My office _now_!"

"Yes, sir." I kept my relief hidden. The Cap didn't generally dress down his men in public, but I'd been around when he had, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Lieutenant Dawson glanced at the Captain. "I'll wait outside."

"Yeah."

He touched my shoulder and left us, closing the door behind him.

A balding man wearing glasses sat in the chair beside the Captain's desk, writing something in a note pad. Dr. Schaefer. He looked up and studied me with interest.

"Nice shiner."

"Thanks. I..."

"... walked into a door. Interesting that you should say that. You know, that's the most common excuse given for a black eye?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it. What could I say to that?

The Captain took his seat and continued to glower at me. He didn't tell me to sit, so I didn't.

"So you're a psychiatrist now, Sandburg?"

"Excuse me?" I'd thought he was going to rip into me for not keeping The Strangler on the line long enough. "No, sir. You know I'm not."

"But you feel qualified to diagnose our killer." There was a copy of _The Post_ on his desk, and he drummed his fingers on it. "Do you know it's in every paper in the City? Oh, your friend Sam tried to bury it in the very last line of his article, continued behind the Op Ed page, but even _The News_ printed it. It's even in the goddamned _Rolling Stone_!"

"Captain..."

He overrode whatever I was going to say. "You'll be happy to know Dr. Schaefer agrees with you."

Dr. Schaefer crossed his legs, leaned back in his chair, and steepled his fingers under his chin. "An obvious paranoid exhibition of mother-hate."

"But why is he killing queers?"

"I would imagine he has latent homosexual tendencies. Perhaps his desires were directed at one point toward a boyish-looking woman. In that case he would be secure in his masculinity, because the object of his desire was still the correct sex."
"But his mother? That's sick."

"It's Oedipal." He shrugged.

"Are we supposed to look for a man whose mother looked like a boy? Do you have any idea what the population of Manhattan Island alone is?"

"Approximately 1,765,000," he told me, ignoring my scowl. "Cheer up. You can subtract the female population, boys under 13, and men over 60, as well as blacks, Orientals, and any Indians we might have in this city, I'd say. Serial killers tend to stay within their own race."

"That's one form of bigotry I never thought I'd object to." My mind boggled as I imagined the hundreds of thousands of men.

"If it helps narrow it down, I'd say she is most likely deceased, or for some reason no longer in his life." He chuckled at my expression. "I know. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, but once you've found your man, I'll bet dollars to donuts," he grinned at the Captain, who had a well-known weakness for Hostess powdered donuts, "that a picture of his mother will reveal she had a very slender figure. So yes, I agree with you: he is perverted."

I didn't have a chance to feel relieved.

"What is it with you?" The Captain's glare raked over me. "Why does this sick bastard call you?"

"Cap..."

"I'm taking you off the case! Maybe that will placate this madman. Take the rest of the day off. Better still, take a few days off! And stay the fuck away from reporters!"

"Captain, you can't!"

"Oh, no? Why do you think Lieutenant Dawson is here? I've already talked to him about this. The case is his now." He stalked to his door, yanked it open, and strode into the squadroom.

I glanced at Dr. Schaefer. His expression was rueful, and he shrugged again. I followed after the Captain.

"Taggert! Brown! Lieutenant Dawson is replacing Sandburg. You're on this case with him!"

"Yes, sir." They looked miserable - they must have realized something was going on, and that was why Joel hadn't teased H about his fifty dollar vocabulary - but there wasn't much else they could say.

"Cap..."

"Go home, Sandburg. Obviously we can't print a retraction of what you said, but I've scheduled a press conference. In fifteen minutes I'm going to announce to the City and The Strangler that Lieutenant Dawson is now in charge."

I felt brittle. I'd never been taken off a case before.

H and Joel touched my shoulder, squeezed my arm, but the others avoided my eyes.

I clocked out and went home.

The apartment felt strange at this time of day. Two weeks ago, I'd have been getting ready for work.
Last week, I'd have been at work.

It was dim in the apartment. I hadn't taken the time to open the blinds.

_When I give my heart, it will be completely..._

I'd forgotten to shut off the record player.

I hung up my overcoat, turned off the record player, and opened the blinds.

I changed into jeans and an old NYU sweatshirt, and started cleaning. The bathroom first, washing out the tub and hanging up towels I'd left on the floor and in the sink in my rush to get ready just a couple of hours earlier.

The bed hadn't been slept in, but I noticed a pillow seemed lumpy. Jim's sweater was bunched up under it. I took it out, held it to my face, and inhaled. Jim's scent filled my nostrils, and my heart ached with regret.

_Well, Sandburg. I guess you'll just have to accept the fact that when it comes to falling in love, you were born under an unlucky star._

I petted the sweater, then folded it and put it away in a bottom drawer that also held a baseball cap that Butch had left behind in the old apartment one day. There'd been no rush to return it to him, and then he was gone.

Once that was done, I went into the living room and mopped up the puddle of spilled Dewars. It was a good thing the floor was wood and the Scotch hadn't reached the area rug.

The last thing was the mess in the kitchen, the empty bottles of beer standing on the counter, the frying pan and dishes in the sink.

When I finally had the place looking decent enough that I wouldn't be mortified if Naomi walked unexpectedly in the front door, I sat down and made out a grocery list.

Because of the length of the list, I'd need to take Naomi's shopping cart with me. This was going to be more than two arms full.

****

The phone was ringing when I got home. To show how much I'd gotten over Jim already, my heart only skipped a beat once at the thought it might be him.

"Sandburg."

"Didn't I teach you to answer the phone better than that?"

"Yes, you did. Hi, Mama. I'm sorry."

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

I dropped down on a kitchen chair and told her about being taken off the case.

"Oh, Blair. You were fired? I'm so sorry, sweetheart!"

"No, Ma, not fired. Lots of guys get taken off cases."
"But it's bothering you."

"Yeah. But never mind that. How are you? How are you liking San Francisco?" I hoped to distract her, and it seemed to succeed.

"I'm fine. I haven't felt this good in... well, in a very long time." She talked about Franklin and his wife and new baby, about seeing the sights - the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, following the footsteps of Sam Spade as he tracked down The Maltese Falcon.

"Gee, that's great of Franklin to do when he must be so busy."

"Er... actually, it isn't your cousin who's showing me around."

"Oh?"

"I've... I've met a very nice gentleman, Blair. He's a colleague of Franklin's, and his name is Mitchell Parker. He's treating me so well, and I'm having a lovely time with him."

"That's... that's wonderful, Ma. It's gonna break Mr. Hammerstein's heart though."

She laughed softly. We both knew the elderly gentleman would never have made a move on her.

"What about you, sweetheart? Have you finally met that security guard who works for Simon?"

I cursed myself for ever mentioning him to her.

"Yeah, I did. It didn't work out."

"Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry."

"You know how it is. Easy come, easy go."

"I think they were talking about money when that phrase was coined, Blair."

I hunched a shoulder, even though she couldn't see me. "Look, Ma. I have to put away the groceries. The ice cream is melting all over the floor."

"All right. I understand, Blair. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Mama. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

I felt a little better after I hung up. I hadn't heard her sound so excited about a man in a long time. It was good to think that at least one Sandburg might be lucky in love.

I put the groceries away. It was too late for lunch and too early for supper. I decided to make myself something to lift my spirits.

Two bananas, six scoops of ice cream, chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. I drizzled it with Bosco, then topped the chocolate syrup with chopped walnuts, crumbled toffee bits, M&Ms, colored sprinkles, and whipped cream. Lots of whipped cream. I splurged with the Maraschino cherries too, adding a handful.

I took the banana split into the living room and turned on Channel 2; I might as well see what Tom and Lisa were up to on As the World Turns. I kicked off my sneakers and got comfortable on the
I spent the rest of the afternoon eating the banana split and watching soap operas, including *Dark Shadows*, a supernatural soap Naomi was hooked on, which had me shaking my head, but then I guessed vampires must have problems in their love lives as much as we mere mortals.

By the time Mike Douglas was finishing, so was I. I scraped the last of the chocolate syrup, cherry juice and ice cream from the bottom of the bowl.

I'd learned my lesson and had taken my time. The last time I'd made a banana split this big had been the day I'd learned Butch had left. My stomach had churned and my head had ached, and Naomi had brought the Alka Seltzer from the bathroom. She'd torn open the packet and dropped the two big tablets into a glass of water. Barely waiting for the plop plop, fizz fizz, I'd gulped it down.

I took the bowl and spoon to the kitchen and put them in the sink, then filled up the tea kettle. Bay leaf tea would settle any possible disruptions to my stomach, just in case. A little old Italian g'madre had first dosed me with bay leaf tea when we'd lived in Little Italy. I'd eaten something that had given me the world's worst bellyache, and Naomi had been at her wits' end.

There was a rap on the front door. I put the cup and saucer on the table and went to see who was there.

My stomach rolled over, and it wasn't because of what I had eaten. It was Jim.

"You look awful! Are you all right?" he asked.

"You're in the wrong place." I started to shut the door. His hand shot out to prevent it from closing.

"Chief..."

"Oh, I'm 'Chief' again?" Did he think I'd miss going from a pet name to 'Sandburg'? And in a tone of voice that... "Look, I'm fine. Go away."

"Not until I'm sure... " He pushed his way past me.

"I'm a cop, you know. I can arrest you for breaking and entering."

"You opened the door."

"I didn't say you could come in."

"Look. I'm sorry I hit you. I didn't mean to, but you have to understand..."

"Why? Because I used to peddle my ass?"

He had the grace to flinch.

"Chief... Blair," he corrected when he saw my glare, "we had such a great weekend..."

"I thought so too."

"... and when you turned up outside my door, just when I'd been thinking about you, wondering how you'd feel if I turned up outside your door... That was one of the reasons why I wanted to see your wallet, Chief. To find out your address."
"You could have just asked."

"I didn't want to seem too... I don't know... needy? nosy? pathetic? This was the first time I've ever been in a... a...

"Relationship? I told you that was what I wanted with you. Was I too subtle?" I sniped, although I was pleased that he didn't think of what he'd had with Randy Beautiful as a relationship.

"I just... I couldn't believe... And then I smelled another man on you and saw his mark on your neck... "

"He was an old client, one I hadn't seen in years, who was happy to see me. It was in the course of the investigation; I didn't look him up, and he... He's involved with someone. I don't play games, Jim."

"I should have let you explain."

"You should have. If we had undressed, you'd have discovered the smell was only on my clothes. And you're the only one who could see that mark. I made him get away from my neck right away."

"Yeah?" He offered a hopeful smile. "A cup of tea would be good right now, Chief." The tea kettle began whistling. He'd probably heard it as the steam went up the spout.

"Oh, all right." I hoped my seeming petulance would disguise the pleasure coursing through my body at the sight of him. "Take off your jacket and hang it over a chair." It was a leather jacket, black and - I just knew - buttery soft. This time he was wearing a pale blue turtleneck that brought out the blue of his eyes. I swallowed. "Once you're done with your tea, you're leaving."

"All right, Chief."

That wasn't the response that I wanted, fool that I was, but I went into the kitchen and took down another cup and saucer. I put the bay leaves in the blue and white ceramic tea pot Aunt Rebecca had bought for Naomi when she'd been discharged from the hospital, poured in the water and replaced the lid, and covered it with a cozy to let it steep.

"Did you have dinner?" I was making polite conversation. I could do that.

"Yeah. Some of Richie's leftovers. What about you?"

"I ... noshed."

"I'm... I am sorry I hit you, Chief. I've never... I've never hit anyone."

"What, never? And if you say, 'hardly ever,' I'll give you such a hit!"

He gave a soft huff of laughter, then asked, "Do you forgive me, Chief?"

Was there any doubt? "Yes, Jim." I poured the tea. "I hope you like this. It's guaranteed to cure what ails you."

"Is something ailing you?" He inhaled cautiously, his expression at first uncertain, but then it brightened. "It worked, Chief! The dial-thing worked!"

"Good."

"Is something ailing you?" he pressed.
Other than him almost breaking my heart? "No, but I wanted to make sure. I noshed on a banana split built for two."

"Greedy."

"I thought this past weekend would have made you aware of that. Are we... are we okay, Jim? I wouldn't cheat on you - I'm a one-man man."

He reached across the table and gripped my hand. "Next time I smell another man on you, I'll listen to what you have to say. And then I'll go hit him."

****

I could tell from Jim's expression he didn't care for the tea. "You don't have to drink it, babe. Would you like a beer instead, or maybe a Coke?"

"No, this is fine. Really." He took another sip. I didn't have to be a Sentinel to see the shudder he tried to suppress.

I went to the fridge and took out a bottle of Rheingold. "Here."

"Thanks, Chief. I... uh... I didn't come over here just to apologize. Exactly."

"No?" I sat down and crossed my legs. "What brought you here?"

"What was on television. Richie ran up to get me; I don't have one."

"I hadn't noticed."

"No." He smiled. We'd been too busy doing other things to think about watching the boob tube. "Anyway, he said there was something about you on the news."

"Oh, the news conference?"

"You knew? Of course, you'd know," he scoffed at himself. "I didn't realize... When you came over last night, it was after that boy was killed, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I didn't handle it well. Adults make their choices and have to accept the consequences. But dammit, Jim. All Paul Richmond did was open the door to the wrong person. I'll bet the bastard told him he'd found a kitten on the street and needed help with it. The kid barely had time to enjoy being sixteen."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Chief." He rose, came around the table to stand behind me, and started to knead the knots out of the muscles of my neck and shoulders.

"Ohhh, that feels good. You've got magic fingers."

"I do, don't I?"

"And we could have been doing this last night."

"I'm sorry."

"You apologize too much, Jim. It's over, forget about it."

"Just don't do it again?" There was a smile in his voice.
"Yeah."

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. I pulled away slightly, turned my head, and this time the kiss landed on my mouth.

"Yeah." I didn't need to be a Sentinel to hear my beard rasp against his skin. I pulled away again. "Give me a minute to shave, okay? I don't want to irritate your skin."

"Don't be too long."

I rose, and he grabbed my ass and squeezed.

"Keep that up, big guy, and I won't get to shave, and you'll have razor burn. How will you explain that at work?"

"An allergic reaction to the detergent I used for my laundry?" I swatted his arm. "All right. I'll be good."

"But not too good." I kissed him carefully, then went into the bathroom just as the phone rang. "Get that, would you?" I reached for the electric razor and was about to plug it in when Jim appeared in the doorway. His expression was grim, and all I could think was something had happened to Naomi. "What is it?"

"I think it's him. The Strangler. There's something about his voice..."

I ran into the kitchen and grabbed up the phone. "Sandburg."

"You have a visitor, Blair?"

"Just the neighbor from across the hall. We swap recipes."

"Ah. I am glad it is nothing more. I would hate..."

"How did you get this number?"

"Now, now. You do not expect me to tell you all my little secrets, do you?"

"Why did you call?"

"That I will tell you. I was going to call to say I forgive you for your very hurtful comments in the newspapers. I am a very forgiving man, you see. However, now I want you to know that I am shocked and horrified to learn you have been taken off this case. Shocked and horrified! We are such good friends. Does your Captain think I am fickle, that I will speak with just anyone in Major Crimes? I think not. Tell him I want you reinstated."

"I can't..." I felt sick that he considered us friends.

"Yes, you can." His tone was suddenly vicious. "You can, or I will kill a hundred of those men!"

"Don't do that!"

"Orders? Perhaps I read your tone of voice wrong. Perhaps you are begging?"

"Sure." My gut churned. "Please don't kill anyone else."

"You sound very good doing that. Beg me more."
"Please. Please don't kill anyone else."

"I cannot promise that. You will talk to your Captain." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. All right, yes. I'll talk to him. I promise."

"Good. Oh, by the way, do you like limericks, Blair?"

"What?"

"Pay attention." He fell into an English accent. "There was a detective from Kent, Who got so involved in his case that he bent. He had so much trouble, He bent over double, Instead of going to the scene of the crime - He went. Cheery-bye, Blair!"

The dial tone hummed in my ear.

"Goddammit!" I started dialing Major Crimes.

"Chief... I recognize that voice!"

"You do? Hold on a second. Lieutenant, it's..."

"Sandburg?"

"Yeah, it's me. What are you doing still there?"

"Cleaning up some details on one of my own cases. What's going on?"

"He just called me."

"Who? The Strangler? What, at home?"

"Yeah, here at home. He said if I'm not reinstated he's gonna kill again."

"Dammit. I'll contact the Captain and let him know. Oh, and I might as well tell you, the manager from Tiffany's came by."

"Oh. Well, that's great. Whose name was on the receipt?"

"We don't know. When he learned you weren't on the case anymore, he walked out in a huff. It's a good thing the Captain had left for the day."

"Dammit!"

"Yeah. He gave me his home phone number, said I should give it to you."

"What is it? I'll call him and get this straightened out right away."

He recited it, and I jotted it down on the message board beside the phone.

"Okay, I'll let you know what he's got."

"I'll talk to you later, then." We hung up.

"What is it, Chief?"

"Harry..." I touched my neck, and his eyes narrowed. "Yeah. He has some evidence, but he
wouldn't turn it over to Lieutenant Dawson." I dialed the number. "I'll see if I can maybe go to his place and pick it up... 

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want you going there, Chief."

"Jim, it's my job."

"Yeah, but you were taken off the case."

"Jim, you can't... " I held up my hand as someone answered the phone.

"Travis-Williams residence," a voice said in my ear.

"Is Harry there?"

"Who's calling?" There was suspicion in his tone.

"This is Detective Sandburg."

"Oh. You. Well, Harry brought the receipt to the Precinct. You weren't there."

"No. I was...

"Taken off the case." Now there was gloating in his voice. "I saw on TV."

"Yeah, well, I need that receipt. Let me talk to Harry."

"He's out at the moment. I'll tell him you called."

"No, don't... 

He hung up.

"Little shit. He's pissed off because I didn't buy those earrings."

"You were gonna buy earrings, Chief?" He moved the hair away from my ears. "That would be an interesting look for you. Would the Police Department allow it?"

"For you, you ass. I thought one might look good in your nipple. And you'd have a spare."

"Thanks for the thought. You're calling him back?"

"Yeah. Harry doesn't have this number. He wanted it, but I gave him my work number. That's odd. It just rings." I hung up, and this time I dialed the operator. "This is Detective Sandburg of Major Crimes in the 15th Precinct." I gave her my badge number. "I need the address for this phone number." I reeled it off. It took her a few minutes, but she came back with the address. "Thank you very much. Oh, and would you try ringing the number again?"

"How did you do that?" Jim demanded, looking curious.

"It's my natural charm."

"Yes, it is."
I kissed him.

"Detective Sandburg? I'm sorry..."

"Busy signal?"

"No, no one answers, it just rings. And I verified that there is nothing wrong with the line."

"Okay. Thank you." I hung up. "I don't like this, Jim. Look, I'd better go check it out. I'm sorry..."

"I'm going with you, Chief."

"That's not a good idea."

"I'm going."

"I could tie you up."

"Kinky. But I'd get loose and follow you. You know I can."

"Yeah, you can. All right, but..."

"I know. 'Don't touch anything.' Get your shoes on."

I laced up my sneakers, put my wallet in one pocket and my badge in another, made sure my gun was loaded and the safety on, then slid into my shoulder holster. Jim already had his jacket on. I pulled mine out of the closet - black, butter-soft leather - and he whistled.

"Okay." I grinned at him. "Let's go."

****

The front door to the apartment building was unlocked. There were a bank of elevators in the lobby.

"Harry's apartment is on 4. Let's take the stairs. It'll be quicker."

"Chief, this elevator is almost down."

"Oh. Okay."

The doors opened, and we stepped inside.

"Chief."

"What is it?"

"He was in here. The one who was in the elevator in Randy's building. I recognize his scent - excitement and... some cologne I'm not familiar with."

"Oh, shit." I jabbed the button for 4, as if that would make it go faster. I could picture the scene when we got there: Harry cradling his strangled lover on the bathroom floor, and a red smear on the dead man's forehead where Harry had tried to remove the taunting kiss.

I had my gun out and the safety off. When the door opened, I looked at the numbers of the apartments across from it. "417 should be down this way."

In the end, it was easy to find the right apartment. A uniformed officer stood in front. He became
tense, then relaxed and smiled. "Hi, Sandman. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hi, Andy. I could say the same." I holstered my gun. "What happened?"

"We got a call of a disturbance at this address. Who's this?"

"Jim Ellison. He works security."

"Nice to meet you." It was obvious Andy had no idea why a security man would be accompanying me, but he didn't question it.

"Can you let us in?"

"Sure." He stepped aside.

Before we could enter, two men came out. They were dressed in white uniforms, and one carried a medical bag. Ambulance attendants.

They shook their heads and rolled the empty stretcher between them down the corridor toward the elevators.

"Shouldn't the coroner have been called?"

"Why? This wasn't a murder. Though it is a little odd."

"Maybe we'd better check it out, Chief."

"Uh... yeah."

Inside, the apartment was surprisingly quiet except for the sounds of a muted conversation. I followed it into the kitchen, and I felt the knot in my stomach unravel.

Harry was sitting at the table, holding an icepack to his eye. Beside him on his knees was Travis, petting his arm. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm so sorry. You know how I get."

Another uniformed cop was taking notes.

"What's going on?"

Harry looked around and broke into a happy smile when he saw me. "Blair!" His mouth dropped open. "What happened to your eye?" He put the icepack on the table and revealed his eye. In the morning, he was going to have a beaut of a shiner, but it wouldn't hold a candle to mine.

"I walked into a door." I didn't have to see Jim's expression to know it held remorse and regret. "It's okay," I murmured so softly only he would be able to hear, and he squeezed my shoulder.

Harry rose to come toward me, and Jim stepped between us. Travis glowered up at Harry from where he knelt.

"Sit!"

Harry sat.

The cop was staring at me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Detective Sandburg." I dug my badge out of my pocket. "This is Jim Ellison. I was attempting
to reach Mr. Williams by phone. He has some information that he was supposed to pass on to me."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. I didn't recognize you in civilian clothes. I'm Officer Davidson."

"Can you tell me what happened, Officer?"

"I was just taking down their statements."

"Go ahead."

"Mr. Williams, if you'll continue?"

"Oh, er... " Harry blushed and looked away.

"It was nothing more than he deserved, tramp that he is! Imagine, opening the door without looking to see who it might be."

"But he said I'd won a contest!"

"You never win contests! And where did you enter one?"

"Well, he said it was at the Baths."

"The Baths never have contests. Not like that. You've lived in New York too long to do something so stupid, Harry."

"I know. You're right. I'm sorry. I deserved to have you hit me, Wally."

"This was a domestic?" I asked, still wondering why neither had bothered to answer the phone.

"Not exactly."

"If you'll let me explain, Officer?" Travis rose to his feet and stood with his arms akimbo. "After I hung up on you, Detective, I was put out with Harry, as you can imagine. He was out in the courtyard, having a cigarette. Filthy habit - the smell gets in the drapes and in the slipcovers. It's bad enough that kissing him can be like kissing an ashtray... "

"Mr. Travis?"

"Sorry. Anyway, I knew if I saw him then, I'd say something horrid, so I decided to take the garbage down to the incinerator in the basement. There's a garbage chute just down the hall, but... "

"I understand. You needed some time away."

"Exactly! Well, I wasn't gone more than five minutes." Davidson arched a brow at him. "Well, ten at the most. I did stop to chat with that divine vision from just down the hall... "

"And you call me a tramp!"

"Chat, I said!"

"Gentlemen, please?"

Travis gave a sniff and continued. "And when I came back, he had a man in the apartment with him!"
"He said I'd won ... um..." Harry turned even redder. "... **something** he was sure I'd be interested in."

If I recalled correctly, Harry had been intrigued by butt plugs, ball gags, and paddles. Was that what had been used to lure him to open the door?

"And it required him to put his hands on you? You're just a tramp, Harry!"

"Yes, you said that before." Harry sounded resentful.

"Who was this man?" Officer Davidson asked.

"He said his name was Dorian Smith."

He wrote it down. "Had you ever seen him before?"

"No."

"And you just let him in? I'm sorry, sir. That really wasn't too... That wasn't a good idea."

"But he was so sad! He said someone he'd trusted had proved to not be the man he'd thought him to be, and he'd had to ask him to move out. That was why he was working late, to soothe his breaking heart."

"A likely story," Travis hissed, and Harry scowled at him.

"Can you describe this Dorian Smith, Mr. Williams?"

"Of course! I'm very observant." He ticked the items off on his fingers. "He was about six feet tall. He had a very nice body. He had platinum blond hair. I don't know what color his eyes were because I couldn't see them; he was wearing sunglasses."

"And that didn't make you hesitate to let him in?" Travis smacked the back of his head.

"Ow!" Harry rubbed his head. I found the dynamics of their relationship interesting. While Harry was the boss at work, it seemed at home his subordinate was in charge. "I thought it was because he didn't want anyone to see how red his eyes were. You do that sometimes."

"All right."

"Besides, I can take care of myself!"

"Yeah, right." The two glared at each other.

"What happened then?" Officer Davidson tapped his pad with his pen. It looked like a nice pen. I wondered where he'd gotten it.

Travis took up the tale. "I walked into our home to see the person who was supposed to love me body and soul about to share that body and soul with another man."

"No, I wasn't!"

Travis ignored that. "I lost my temper. Well, wouldn't you? My intention was to punch that interloper."

"But you hit me!"
"I said I was sorry! That Smith person had his hands around your neck..."

"He was just giving me a massage! It felt good, too! Maybe you should learn how to do that."

"Wait a second," I interrupted. "Were you sitting on the sofa in the living room?"

"Why, yes, I was."

"May I continue?" Travis tapped his foot until he saw he had our attention. "Anyway, once Smith saw me, he started babbling about Harry and me trying out the... " He blushed. "... you know... and if we liked them, it would be just twelve easy payments of one hundred dollars."

"And I said, 'Wait a second, you said I'd won a contest.' And he said, 'You won a free advanced viewing of these items, is what you won!'

"I ask you! That's twelve hundred dollars! For... you know! We could get a cucumber for a nickel in the grocery store!" Travis fumed. "He must have realized what I was going to do, because he ducked in the nick of time."

"And you hit me!"

Travis turned up his nose. "And Smith picked up his sample case and ran out."

"Apparently there was some noise, and one of the neighbors called us," Officer Davidson told me in a quiet aside.

"But he left this behind!" Harry crowed, and he displayed a life-like rubber penis, complete with a thick vein and two nice-sized balls.

"They make stuff like this?" Officer Davidson looked a little taken aback.

"Well..."

The officer shook himself out of his reverie. "Okay, Mr. Williams, do you want to press charges?"

"Against who? Wally? I should say not! I love Wally!"

"Yes, sir." Davidson ducked his head, but I could see his smile. It was easy, with no trace of malice or condescension in it.

I'd have to remember his name. There weren't many cops who weren't homophobic. And if he was a 'member of my church' so to speak, he might need a friend one day.

"I'll file this report and notify the other officers who patrol this area to be aware and on the lookout for this man. It sounds like a scam to me, but I strongly advise you to look before you open the door next time. Detective Sandburg. Mr. Ellison." He left.

"He's right, Harry." I said. "You shouldn't have answered that door. I was afraid I was going to find you on the john with a lipstick kiss on your forehead!"

"Oh, my god! Was he the... Oooo!" he moaned. "Wally! I feel faint!"

Travis put his hand on the back of Harry's neck and pushed his head between his knees. "Deep breaths, sweetheart! Slow, deep breaths!" He glared at me as if affronted to find me still in the apartment. "Can I help you?"
"I'm sorry, but I need to see that receipt."

"Would you get it, sweets? It's in my wallet on the dresser."

"Am I going to find a slew of phone numbers in there as well?"

"No. I promised you I wouldn't do that anymore."

"Yes, well..." Travis stormed out of the room.

"You really shouldn't tease him like that, Harry."

"It's all right." He sat back and smiled complacently. "I'll make it up to him. He knows that. I like your look. It's so butch." He ran his palm over my cheek, and I remembered I hadn't had time to shave. Jim growled, drawing Harry's attention to him. "Who's your friend?"

"Don't touch." Jim took his hand and threw it away from me.

"Ooo, he's so forceful!"

"He's mine, and we don't play games."

"Oh. Still new, hmmm?" Harry looked Jim over and fluttered his lashes, and this time I growled.

"All right. I'll be good."

****

"Here you are, Detective." Travis held out the receipt, and I sighed and wondered how many people's fingerprints were on it.

I took it by the corner. "Do you have something I can put it in?" I glanced over the receipt.

"Oh, yes. Will a wax paper bag do?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine. Thanks." I put it in the opaque bag and then into a pocket.

"Now if you'll leave? Harry needs to recover from this horrible experience!"

"Okay, but I'm serious. Don't open the door to someone you don't know, either of you."

"Will he come back?"

"I don't know. He's returned to the scene of one crime, so why take chances? I'll get this receipt back to you as soon as I can."

"No rush, sweets. Ow!"

Travis had pinched Harry's arm.

"Let's go, Jim. Goodnight, you two."

Travis followed us to the front door. "Thank you, Detective Sandburg. I'm sorry if I seemed like a witch, but Harry can be so..."

"I understand."

"Do you?" He studied my eyes. "Maybe you do."
"Be careful. This guy isn't playing around."

"Harry really was in danger?" He turned pale. "We'll be careful."

I waited until I heard the locks engage before linking my arm with Jim's and walking away.

It wasn't until we were riding down in the elevator that Jim asked, "What do you think?"

"I think Harry had a really close call."

"Blair. Your friend Harry is blond."

"Yeah. And I don't know if this was The Strangler's objective, or if he went after Harry because this
receipt may be linked back to him."

"That makes my brain hurt. I'm glad I'm not a cop."

"You could be a great cop, if you wanted." I pretended I didn't see the expression on his face. He
was a smart man. Hadn't anyone ever told him so? "Anyway, I'll call Lieutenant Dawson from a
phone booth and fill him in. He may want to put a cop on their door."

"Chief, I'm going with you."

"What are you talking about? After I talk to Dawson, I'll see you home, and then I'm going home
myself."

"Sure you are."

"Look." I shrugged. "I screwed up, Jim. It's not my case anymore."

"Of course not. Are you going to the address on the receipt?"

"How did you know there was an address on the receipt?"

"I saw it."

Of course. Sentinels and their Sentinel vision. Well, at least he wasn't Superman and could see
through my clothes. Although, come to think of it, I wouldn't mind that too much.

"Yeah," I conceded. "I'm going to that address."

"I'm going with you."

"All right. Let's find a phone booth."

****

No one answered at Major Crimes, which was a little unusual for a Tuesday night. I left a message
with the switchboard: I'd turn the receipt in to Lieutenant Dawson in the morning.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Jim? It's a lot of running around, and it will probably be for
nothing."

"Don't you want me to see you at work?"

"When you put it that way... " 
We arrived at the address on the receipt, to find it was a hotel in the Murray Hill District. A forest green canopy shielded the door, which was frosted glass with gold lettering, *Bonheur*, and curlicue trim. The doorman bounded forward to open it.

"Thanks."

"My pleasure, Detective."

"Do I know you?"

"Not personally, no. My nephew - he called to let us know your picture was in the newspaper, and that's how I recognized you. Anyway. Mike got in with a bad crowd. Kids can be so dumb sometimes. He ran away from home. You found him in the course of another case and talked to him, talked him into coming home."

"Mike Long?"

"You remember him? Yes! That's my brother's boy!"

"Sure I remember Mike. How is he?"

"He's good. He's a junior in college now."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"He's majoring in anthropology, because of something you said."

"Wow. I'm flattered."

He smiled, then shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you standing out here in the cold."

"That's okay. Give him my best, okay?"

"I will. Thank you."

We walked into the elegant lobby. There were comfortable-looking armchairs in a seating arrangement in front of a fireplace. Newspapers and magazines were stacked neatly on occasional tables, and a large vase of fresh flowers was on one long, low coffee table, flanked by lead crystal ashtrays.

"You're a nice guy, Chief." He rubbed my back.

"Glad you think so. Come on." I led him to the registration desk and reached for my badge.

The young woman behind the desk had been watching us, and she smiled. "Good evening, gentlemen."

"Miss." I placed my badge on the counter. "I'm Detective Sandburg of Major Crimes."

"How may I help you, Detective?"

"I have reason to believe that a Robert Jameson stayed in your hotel. I need whatever information you may have about him."

"I'm sorry," she said, real regret in her voice, "I'm not permitted to give out that information."
Jim touched my shoulder and leaned down to murmur, "Someone's watching from the back office, Chief."

"Got it," I breathed as I shot a glance in that direction. I recognized the man lounging in the doorway. I said in a normal tone of voice, "I'll need a court order?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Okay." I sighed. "It was worth a shot. I'll get that court order first thing in the morning." I looked toward the interior of the hotel, where there was an etched glass door. "Is that the hotel's lounge?"

"Yes. That's the Moonlight Lounge."

"It's not reserved just for hotel guests, is it?" She shook her head. "Cool. Come on, Jim. I'll buy you a drink."

"Enjoy, gentlemen."

I smiled at her and led Jim into the small room. It was dark and smoky, with tables scattered around a postage-stamp-sized dance floor. It could accommodate maybe twenty people not counting those seated at the bar, but right then there was only one couple dancing and another cuddling in a corner. Off to the side, a trio - piano, drums, and bass - was playing a jazz set.

"What would you like to drink?"

"It's a work day tomorrow, Chief. I'd better stick to beer, and just one."

"Okay. Two beers, please?"

"I've got Bush Amber, Maredsous, and Beck's on tap."

"No Rheingold?"

"Sorry," he laughed, "no."

"Let me have one of each."

"Okay, pal." He set them up on the bar before me.

I took a sip of each one, then gave one to Jim. "This should be okay for you. What do I owe you?" I asked the bartender.

"Five dollars will cover it."

"Ouch," Jim muttered.

"Thanks." I took a five and a couple of singles from my wallet and placed them on the bar. "Let's take a seat over there, okay, Jim?"

"Sure." He shrugged and followed me. "You're not gonna finish both of those, are you Chief?"

I just smiled. We slid into a curved booth.

About five minutes later, the door to the lobby opened, and a figure sauntered in. He was about 6'3" and although it wasn't discernible in the dimness of the Lounge, I knew he had ink-black hair and green eyes. He went to the bar, said something to the bartender who pointed in our direction, then
skirted the dance floor to join us.

"Hello, Firecracker. It's been a long time."

"Neil. How have you been?"

"Good. And you?"

"I can't complain."

"It doesn't matter if you do; no one will care." Our customary greeting.

We grinned and shook hands.

"Neil, this is Jim. Jim, Neil ran the escort service I used to work for." I could feel Jim tense up and squeezed his knee under the table.

"Neil." His body language was very possessive. He reached the table, extending his hand, but his other hand was around me, gripping my shoulder.

"It's okay," I murmured almost soundlessly and turned toward him, covering his hand with mine. He gave Neil a smug grin.

Neil shook his head and sat down beside me.

"So, what are you doing here? Slumming?" I pushed the third glass toward Neil.

"No. Good luck." He raised the glass in a toast and took a swallow, then set it down. "I own this place. Can you believe it? One of my clients left it to me. Boy, talk about one burned-up family! There are more luxurious hotels on Park Avenue, but this one has a nice, steady clientele."

"The family give you a hard time?"

"They wanted to, but the old man had his will tied up so tight, if they tried to break it, everything would go to the Greta Garbo Home for Wayward Boys and Girls. They'd stand to lose it all. And really, this place is just a drop in the bucket compared to all the other properties he owned."

"Well, good for you. How are the other boys doing?"

He grinned. "Good. I always had good boys."

"You treated us well." Not like some of the services that rented their boys out to anyone with the price of a lay. They wound up doing drugs to numb their emotional pain.

"Gray is running the business now." He raised the glass to his lips, paused, then set it down. "I saw your picture in the newspaper."

"Oh, geez! Don't remind me. I'm off the case because of that."

"I saw the press conference on the news. I'm sorry; you're a good detective."

"And how would you know that?"

"I haff my vays," he said in a patently fake German accent, pretending to twirl a mustache.

"Right."
"So. What can I do for you, Blair?"

"I need information." He nodded, and I gave him the Reader's Digest version. "Someone named Robert Jameson gave your hotel's address as place of residence for a purchase at Tiffany's. It was made in the fall of '65. I can get a court order, but it will take some time."

He waved that aside. "Give me half an hour. I'll need to dig up the records for that year. And have another beer. It's on the house."

"Thanks, Neil." He left us, his beer barely touched. "You want another one, Jim?"

"Yeah. This isn't what I was expecting. It doesn't have a kick at all."

"Okay." I finished mine and took the two empty glasses to the bar. "Hit us again, please." He looked a little surprised, and I wondered about that, but before I could ask, the door burst open, and a gaggle of women entered. They were noisy, and they were bombed.

"Shit. Sorry. I thought they'd turned in for the night. They're a bridal party, from Rhode Island, staying here while they have their fittings."

I studied them while the bartender built the beers. They wore knee-length skirts and sensible black pumps. Their blouses half-hung out of their waistbands and were unbuttoned, revealing lacy slips beneath. Around their necks were strings of luminous pearls.

One climbed up on a table and attempted to Frug to "Satin Doll". Another lost her shoe as she clambered onto the piano and crooned along off-key.

The bartender shook his head and reached beneath the bar for the switch that would summon security. "Neil isn't gonna be happy." He nodded toward where Jim was sitting. "I don't think your friend is either."

"No." I could read the distress in Jim's posture. Three of the women had descended on him and were yanking on his arms, trying to get him up to dance. "Can you bring those to our table when they're ready?"

"Sure thing."

"Thanks." I returned to the table, tempted to pull my gun on the women who thought they could poach on my territory. The odor of their perfumes clashed and was almost overwhelming for me. What must it be like for Jim? "Excuse me, ladies. This is my table."

"Ooo!" One of them shrieked. "Fresh meat!"

Jim flinched, and I put my hand on his shoulder. "Dial it down."

He gripped my hand.

"Wassa matter? You guys queer 'r somethin'?"

"Ladies..." Four big, burly men walked in. "Cavalry to the rescue," I breathed, and Jim sighed in relief.

The men split up. One caught the woman who was dancing on the table just as she tipped it over. She hung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, giggling inanely and groping his ass.

Another man scooped the would-be chanteuse off the piano, to the relief of the black man playing.
He'd been trying to dodge her expansive hand gestures and succeeding only part of the time.

Two approached our table. "Ladies, I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to leave."

"Why?" Their expressions were sullen.

"You're disturbing the other patrons."

"Well, fuck 'em. We've got every right to... right to... " The woman speaking seemed unable to recall what she and her friends had a right to do. "Um... " She wound a lock of hair around her finger and giggled up at the security men, batting her eyelashes.

"No, I don't think you do. Let's go, shall we?"

The other two women traded what were no doubt supposed to be sly glances, then made a break for the door.

"We're not getting paid enough for this."

"Yeah. Come along, Miss. Sorry for the inconvenience, everyone. Don, a round of drinks on the house."

"Got it, Sal."

They left.

"Well. That was exciting."

"Are you okay, Jim?"

"Uh... " He squinted at me, blinked, and smiled. "Yeah. Were you really gonna shoot 'em?"

"Huh? Oh, you saw me start to go for my gun? I wanted to, believe me."

"I like that." He pulled me down into the booth, leaned against me, and rubbed his cheek against my shoulder.

"Uh... " I was right at the edge of the booth, and I was about to ask him to shove over when the bartender arrived with a tray bearing our beers. "Thanks, Don."

"Welcome."

"Y'know, this is really good beer, Chief."

I blinked. "You want to take it easy with that, Jim?" He'd practically inhaled that glass.

"Didn't they say we could have another one?" He licked the foam off his upper lip. I didn't moan out loud, but I must have made some sound. He grinned and reached under the table, humming as he rubbed the front of my jeans and found me half-hard.

"I thought you just wanted one?"

He pouted. The man actually pouted. He looked kind of cute, and I kind of melted.

"Okay, Jim. But this is the last one."

I had just returned from the bar when Neil strode in. "I've got the information you wanted,
Firecracker. Or rather - lack of it."

That didn't sound promising. "What do you mean, 'lack of it'?" I went to the other side of the booth and slid in, but before I could move over and make some room for Neil to sit beside me, Jim had scooted next to me.

Neil had been watching with a grin. He shook his head and sat down on Jim's other side.

Jim looked inordinately pleased.

He took his glass and knocked it back.

"Uh, Jim? You want to take it easy, big guy?"

He grinned and waggled his brows, licked his lips, and set his glass back down, then started drawing designs on the water stains on the table, humming along with the trio, who were now playing "Mona Lisa".

"Okay, hit me with it." I kept an eye on Jim. I'd almost swear he was drunk, but the beer I'd chosen for him hadn't tasted that alcoholic.

"No one by that name stayed here. I checked for the entire year of 1965. No one."

"Damn. I was afraid it might be a phony address. Oh, well, it was worth a shot."

"'Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, men have named you... " Jim started nuzzling my neck.

"Uh... Neil, I don't want to drink and run, but I think I'd better get Jim home."

"What did he have to drink?"

"Bush Amber."

"That's 12% alcohol!"

"It didn't taste it!"

"It doesn't. It creeps up on you."

"He's never gonna trust me again."

Neil reached across and patted my shoulder. "Sure, he will."

"Sure, I will, Chief," Jim said at the same time, and knocked Neil's hand away. He gave me a lopsided grin, rested his head on my shoulder, and sang, "'Do you smile to tempt a lover, Mona Lisa... ""

"How are you getting home?"

"We were gonna take the bus, but... "

"I'd better call you a cab."

"Why're you callin' me a cab? I'm not a cab. I'm a Sss... "

"Security guard! You're a security guard, Jim!" I jumped in before he could announce to all and sundry that he was a Sentinel.
He smiled sweetly. "That's right."

Neil chuckled. "I'll call that cab."

"Thanks, man. I owe you. Come on, Jim. Time to go home."

He slung an arm over my shoulder and kissed my cheek.

I paused at the bar to leave some singles for the bartender.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. And you never saw us here." I was kidding, but he took me seriously.

"Nope, I never did."

The cab was waiting at the curb. "I paid him, Blair."

"Thanks, Neil. You didn't have to do that... "

"You can send me a check." He frowned abruptly and tipped my head to the side so the light from the streetlamp shown on it. "What happened to your eye?"

"I walked into a door."

"Yeah, right." He cut a look toward Jim.

Jim was trying to walk along a sidewalk crack. He muttered to himself, "If I can walk a straight line, I can't be drunk!"

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"Didn't I always?"

"I hate when people answer a question with a question."

"I'm a big boy, Neil. I can take care of myself."

"All right." He hugged me. "I hope you get that Strangler soon."

"So do I." I poured Jim into the cab and followed him in. "852 East 14th Street."

"Got it."

The driver eased away from the curb, and I waved to Neil out the rear window. He was looking thoughtful.

"Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa..."

"I guess your friend had a little too much to drink." The cabbie grinned at me through the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah."

"... or just a cold and lonely, lovely work of art? Are you cold and lonely, Chief?"

"Uh... He's getting' a little grabby back there. You okay?"
"I'm fine. Thanks."

"Okay. But you let me know it he gets fresh, an' I'll pull over."

"That won't be necessary."

Fortunately, the lights were mostly in our favor, and it wasn't too long before the cabbie turned into East 14th Street.

I got Jim out of the cab.

"Hey! No tip?"

"You mean to tell me the gentleman didn't tip you?"

"No, he didn't."

"He's lying, Chief. I can tell by his breathing. Plus I could hear Neil tell him to keep the change. And he's blushing. I can feel the heat of his skin from here."

"What the fuck? What is he, Superman or something?"

"He's just very astute. I suggest you leave now."

"'Astute,' my ass," he grumbled but put the cab in gear and left.

"Whoa!" Jim stumbled, and I caught him. "I don't feel too good, Chief."

"Hang in there, babe. I'll get you up to your place and make sure you're okay."

We made our way into the building and up the stairs, swaying and weaving back and forth as I attempted to keep Jim upright.

"I'm really sorry, Chief." Jim's voice was watery.

"Geez, Jim. Don't tell me you're a maudlin drunk!"

He sniffed hard. "No. I never get drunk. I mean I'm sorry I didn't trust you. I'm a bastard. I hit you, I hurt your feelings, and..."

"Jim, where's your key?"

"Oh, it's in my back pocket."

"It's not a good idea to keep it in there, you know. Your pocket can be picked." He snickered. "Right, what am I talking about? You're a Sentinel - you'd feel it."

"Yep." His smile was sunny, and I shook my head at his rapidly shifting emotions. He looped his arms around my neck. "Get my key, Firecracker?" He snickered more. "Firecracker, Chief? I want to hear the story about how you got that name."

"Another time, all right? It's getting late, and..." I fished the key out of his pocket, not an easy task with him gyrating under my touch. I unlocked the door and pushed it open. The light switch was just inside, and I pressed it. "Okay, come on, tough guy. Let me get you undressed and into bed."

"Chief." He was suddenly sober. "Will you stay with me?"
"I really should go home."

"Please?"

"Sure, Jim. Now let's get you ready for bed."

"Okay." He reached for the hem of his blue turtleneck and yanked it off, then shoved down his jeans and shorts. In ten seconds flat he was naked.

"Jim..."

"You're not leaving, are you?"

"I told you I'd stay. I'm just gonna get you something for that headache you'll have in the morning."

"Thanks, Chief." He frowned in concentration. "There's some Bufferin in the medicine chest."

When I came back, the spread had been stripped off the bed, and he was sitting there with a sotted smile on his face.

"Hi, Chief." He patted the spot beside him.

"Here."

Jim took the Bufferin and finished the glass of water I held to his lips. A confused expression crossed his face, his eyelids drooped, and he tipped over. He was out cold before his head hit the pillow.

I set the glass down, hoisted his legs onto the bed, and pulled the covers over him.

"Promised..." he mumbled.

"I know, babe." I picked up his clothes and folded them, removed mine and put them beside his, then turned out the light and climbed into bed next to him. The pillow was a little lumpy, and when I raised it, I found the shirt I'd worn to work on Friday. I tossed it on the floor. We'd both have the real thing tonight. I stroked his hair back off his forehead and kissed him.

"Chief..."

"I'm here." I curled up around him. "You gotta share these covers, Jim. I'll put up with a lot..." I tugged some of them free. "... but being cold isn't one of them."

****

The fragrance of freshly brewed coffee tickled my nostrils, luring me out of the cocoon of warmth that was the bed.

"Are you awake enough to hold this, Chief, or do you want me to hold it for you?"

"Weren't you looped last night?" I blinked and rubbed my hair.

"I've got a fast metabolism. Thank you for taking care of me. I'm... I'm really sorry."

"For what?" I took the cup and sipped, being careful not to burn my mouth.

"I made a fool of myself last night."

"No, you didn't."
"I acted like a jealous..."

"I didn't mind."

"You didn't."

"No. In fact, I kind of... It felt good, Jim. To be wanted that much."

"Chief!" He took my cup and set it aside, wrapped his arms around me and just held on, whispering in my ear in Quechua, the language of the Chopecs.

"Jim!"

He let me go and retrieved my coffee.

"I drank too much."

"Three beers, Jim. And it wasn't your fault. According to Neil, you were ambushed."

"Did I hear him say there was 12% alcohol in..."

"Yeah. And how do you think I feel? I gave that beer to you, thinking it was safe."

"Well, I sang 'Mona Lisa.'"

"No, you... Yes, you did."

"I'm sorry."

"Jim..."

"I know. I say that too much. I'm sorry."

I threw a pillow at him.

"How come you're dressed?"

"Work, Chief. I have to go in. I didn't want to leave while you were still sleeping."

I looked at my watch. "Geez! You should have woke me earlier! You're gonna be late!"

"No, but I do have to leave now. Would you... Blair, would you mind locking up for me?" He held out a key.

"Sure. But just give me a minute to get dressed, and we can leave together. I'll shower, shave..." I ran a hand over my cheek and gave a rueful smile. I had a pretty good beard starting. "...and have breakfast once I get home."

"Okay, but... Chief?"

I paused in pulling on my jeans. He was still holding out the key.

"This is yours. If you want it."

I pulled him into my arms and kissed him, then took the key and put it on my key ring.

"But Jim, we've gotta get a bigger bed."
The squadroom was empty, but I could hear voices coming from the Captain's office. Shit. I should have stopped at home to shower and change into clean clothes. I sniffed discreetly.

Oh well. I wasn't too whiff. And fortunately, none of my coworkers had a Sentinel sense of smell.

I went to the door, knocked, and opened it.

"Excuse me, Captain?"

"Sandburg? What are you doing here?"

"I had to come in, Cap." I figured I'd better talk fast - I had about thirty seconds to tell him what had happened the night before. "Last night I received a phone call at home. From The Strangler. He said I should tell you to reinstate me. Since this is no longer my case, I called Major Crimes hoping to speak to Lieutenant Dawson, which I did. He said he'd get in touch with you?"

"He did. Go on. I'm listening."

I let out a surreptitious breath. "Lieutenant Dawson mentioned that the manager from Tiffany's wanted to talk to me, so I tried to contact him."

"Could you?"

"No, sir, he was out. I spoke to his roommate, who agreed to have Mr. Williams call me back. He hung up before I could give him my home phone number." The Captain didn't need to hear about Travis' jealous snit. "I tried calling back. However, no one picked up, and I decided it might be a good idea if I went to see him in person."

"You decided."

"Yes, sir. According to Lieutenant Dawson, Mr. Williams left in a... er... He wasn't happy because I wasn't available. Anyway, I found an officer at his door. A disturbance at that apartment had been called in. As a domestic dispute, sir."

"Just a second, Sandburg. These are two men who are... " He made finger quotes in the air. "... living together?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. As long as I have that straight. Go on."

"The story was that Travis, the roommate, returned from throwing out the garbage to find his partner sitting on the sofa. A man who had introduced himself as Dorian Smith stood behind Mr. Williams, ostensibly to massage his neck. That was when the... er... altercation occurred. Dorian Smith was gone by the time Officers Andrews and Davidson arrived."

"So you're thinking... what?"

"I think Dorian Smith is another persona of The Strangler. I think Harry Williams, the manager, was going to be targeted by him. If his partner hadn't walked in when he had, Harry would have been found on the john with a lipstick kiss on his forehead."

The Captain's face grew dark, and he gestured to his desk. I finally got to see what all the others had been looking at, and I felt myself turn pale.
A bathroom mirror had been removed from a medicine chest. Scrawled across it in red lipstick were the words, **Reinstate Blair!**

My stomach twisted. I wished it was two hours earlier, and I was still in bed with Jim. "Who was killed?"

"Noah Treadwell."

"Blond, blue eyes?"

"Oddly enough, this time, no. Tell me something, Sandburg. What is it about you? He calls you here, he calls you at home, he does something like this... How does that make you feel?"

"Lousy, Captain." What did he think?

He nodded. "If you didn't, I'd wonder about you. All right. I'll call another press conference. Dammit, I'll call the Commissioner and see if he'll talk to the networks. You'll be back on the case. But get this, Sandburg. You are riding your desk. This is still Dawson's case. Is that clear?"

"But Cap... "

"Is. That. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were you doing here anyway?"

"I have the receipt from Tiffany's." I took the wax paper bag from an inner pocket. "We can have it dusted for prints, but it's at least two and a half years old, and so many people have touched it..."

"Dawson, this is yours." He waited until I handed the bag to the Lieutenant. "Now, all of you! Out of my office!" He stared at the mirror and glowered. If he'd been Simon Banks, I'd have expected him to start chewing his cigar. He picked up his phone. "Get Riley up here!"

Out in the squadroom, Lieutenant Dawson went to his desk and started checking off items. "Okay, Taggert, are you done checking out the theaters for that wig?"

"All except the Amanda Gill. I'm having a bit of trouble meeting with that manager. Both times I've been there, it turns out he's been called away."

"All right. Try again. If he's still stalling, tell whoever is there we'll get a court order and shut down the theater."

"Can we do that?"

"No, but they don't know that. Brown, how about you?"

"I'm following another lead on Maria Hernandez, Lieutenant. I need to go out to JFK..."

"Okay, okay. Take a black and white and go. I'll check out this address myself, and then see if I can backtrack Noah Treadwell's last hours."

Joel and H sent me a sympathetic look, grabbed their overcoats, and left.

"Lieutenant? I already checked the address. Last night. It's the **Bonheur**, a hotel on Park Avenue. I spoke with the owner. He was kind enough to pull out his records. No one by that name was
registered at the time the necklace was purchased."

"Dammit!" He didn't look happy. "And of course, after two and a half years, no one would remember what he looked like anyway."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry about this, Sandburg. About you having to ride a desk."

"What do you want me to do, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing. There's nothing you can do about it."

"No, I mean... at my desk. What do you want me to do?"

"Oh. Right. Okay. Do me a favor and get started on the paperwork for Treadwell."

"Got it." I watched as the squadroom emptied out, then hung up my overcoat and gathered up the forms I would need. I put the first page in my typewriter and began filling in the blanks.

Noah Treadwell. Age thirty-nine. Date of Death 3/19/68. Brown hair, brown eyes. Height and weight would have to wait until I got the autopsy report. Address...

I read it twice, then reached for my phone and called the coroner's office. "Dr. Wolf, please. This is Detective Sandburg."

"He's finishing an autopsy right now, Detective."

"Noah Treadwell?"

"Yes."

"All right. Would you have him call me as soon as he's done? I'm at my desk, and he has my number."

"I'll give him the message."

"Okay. Thanks." I rose, went to the Captain's office, and knocked.

"What is it, Sandburg?"

"The address where last night's murder occurred?"

"Yeah?"

"It's the same building Harry Williams lives in. I've got a call in to Dan Wolf. I want to know when Noah Treadwell was killed. I'd also like to request protection for Harry and his partner, or else get them out of the building for the time being. Harry is a blue-eyed blond. We don't know if he was targeted for that reason, or because he had the receipt for that necklace."

He opened his mouth. Was he going to tell me I was overreaching my responsibilities? "All right. Let me know as soon as you hear from Dr. Wolf." He reached for his phone, and I went back into the squadroom.

Riley was just walking in the door. "I hate this guy, Sandman."
"You and me both." I could see him considering my eye. "I walked into a door," I told him, forestalling the question. "Where's Stephens?"

"Idiot broke his ankle this time. Can you believe it? He tripped over that mutt of his. Damn dog was lying across the doorway to the kitchen." He shook his head and went into the Captain's office.

I sat down and got back to the paperwork. I didn't realize I was waiting for the phone to ring until it did.

I pressed a button that wasn't flashing. "This is Sandburg. I've got a call on line two."

"Got it, Sandman. We'll start the trace as soon as you pick up. By the way, glad you're back on the case."

"Thanks." I waited a second, then pressed 2. "15th Precinct. Detective Sandburg." And held my breath.

"Hey! Firecracker! I'm glad I caught you."

"Neil! Hold on a second, okay?" I didn't wait for him to agree, just put him on hold and switched lines. "This is Sandburg again. False alarm. Kill that trace, okay?"

"Okay." The cop on the other end chuckled, and I wondered how long it would be before this nickname made the rounds of the Precinct.

"Sorry, Neil. What's up?"

"I tried to reach you at home, and when you weren't there, I thought maybe you'd be at the Precinct. I felt bad that I couldn't help you last night, so I went looking through earlier records, just on the off-chance he might have stayed with us before."

"You wouldn't call me if you hadn't found anything."

"No, I wouldn't. Robert Jameson stayed here in February of '64. And... " There was an expectant pause.

"Don't make me beg, Neil. It wouldn't be pretty."

"Okay." There was a satisfied smile in his voice. "You won't believe this! I've got his home address! Can you meet me for lunch?"

"You can't tell me over the phone?"

"Sure I can, but what would be the fun in that? Besides, you have to eat sometime."

"True. Where and when?"

"Suppose you come to the Bonheur? The restaurant here is excellent, if I say so myself. Around noon?"

I looked up at the clock. It was almost eleven. "Sounds good. I'll see you then." I hung up and got back to work.

****

Riley had left, Monaghan and McGaffney came back from investigating a stabbing, and then went
back out to answer a call of shots fired.

I took the last page out of the typewriter and stacked it with the others. I'd have to go over them again when I got the rest of the information from the coroner.

As if conjured by that thought, the door to the squadroom opened, and Dan Wolf walked in. He looked exhausted.

"Dan. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Who made it?"

"I did.

"In that case, sure." He removed his overcoat and unwound a scarf from his neck. "I really wish the groundhog hadn't seen his shadow this year. I could use an early spring."

"We all could. Milk and sugar, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He sat in the chair beside my desk. He looked into my face, but didn't say anything about my shiner, so neither did I. "You wanted to know about Noah Treadwell."

"The time of death. I need to know if he was murdered before or after an incident at the same address."

He placed the results of his autopsy on my desk, picked up the cup, and took a sip. "Ahhh." He smiled, then set the cup down and grew serious. "11:45 p.m."

So it was after the encounter with Harry Williams.

"This is one for the books, Blair. Treadwell was incapacitated by a blow to the head, and then strangled. The bruising indicates that he was facing his attacker."

"Fuck."

"I also found bruising on his chest, suggesting ... "

"What? The Strangler may have knelt on him?"

"Possibly. Also, Noah had a thick neck." Dan spread his hands as if to encircle a neck, demonstrating his point. "There are other differences, as well. He was older than the other victims. He was shorter, about 5'6", and not at all in good physical shape, approximately seventy-five to a hundred pounds overweight. He smoked, had a heart condition, a bleeding ulcer, and at the rate he was going, it would have been just a matter of time before he became an insulin-dependent diabetic."

"That's really different. All the others were basically healthy."

"Yes, according to my findings. Do you think our Strangler is changing his MO?"

"I don't know. Cap won't let me touch this case."

"I thought I heard that you were back on it. Through the grapevine."

"Officially I am. Unofficially, Dawson is still in charge, and I'm stuck here in the squadroom."

"I'm sorry."
"I hate not... Well, never mind. That's my problem, not yours. I'd take into consideration the fact that this might be a copycat killer..."

"I can tell you the brand of lipstick is the same."

"That's reaching, Dan."

"And it matches the lipstick on the other victims. Still think I'm reaching? Plus there was that message he left on the bathroom mirror."

"Oh, you got to see that? I itched to get to the scene of the crime and try to piece together this puzzle, but I knew the Cap wouldn't let me anywhere near it. "Okay, so where does Dorian Smith fit in?"

"Who?"

"That's who The Strangler apparently was earlier last night."

"I've got no idea, Sandman. This case gets more twisted with every murder."

"You're right. And the only reason why the public isn't screaming for it to be solved is because most of the victims are homosexual."

"Unfortunately, I think you're right." He tapped his report.

"What?"

"His date of birth."

"March 19, 1929... Fuck. Yesterday was his birthday."

"Yes. What a fucking birthday present."

His use of profanity surprised me, and then it didn't. This case was getting to all of us.

He sighed and rose to his feet. "Would you mind giving this to Captain Haines? I'm going home now. I've been on the clock since almost this time yesterday."

"When is Santini coming back?"

"Damned if I know. His flu cha cha'd into pneumonia. He's out for the rest of the month at least. Thanks for the coffee, Blair."

"Thank you, Dan. Take it easy." I checked the time. I'd need to hustle if I wanted to get to the hotel for noon. I tapped on the Captain's door. "I have the autopsy report on Noah Treadwell, sir." I lowered my voice. He was on the phone. I placed the report on his desk. "And I'm going to lunch now."

"Yes, yes." He waved me out.

****

I was a few minutes late. "Sorry, Neil." I checked my coat, and Neil let out a low whistle.

"Is the Police Department advocating a new line of uniforms?"
I looked down at the jeans and fisherman knit sweater I wore. "I was supposed to be off today," I obfuscated, "but I needed to come in to catch up on some paperwork." That was kind of the truth.

"There was something on the noon news about you being back on the case." He ushered me into his hotel's five-star restaurant.

Over a lunch of Seafood Newburg, Neil told me that Robert Jameson had stayed at his hotel the week of February 9th to the 16th.

"Here's the address he gave, Firecracker." He slid a piece of paper across the table.

"Thanks. Y'know, I wish you wouldn't call me that. It's bad enough everyone calls me Sandman... "

His expression became an exaggeration of disbelief. His jaw dropped, his eyes widened, and he pressed a hand to his chest. "You're Sandman?"

"Oh, please. As if you'd heard that before now."

He laughed. "Sorry, Fire... Blair. I couldn't resist. How'd you get that nickname?"

"You don't want to know. It isn't salacious."

"Let me be the judge of that. Come on. Tell Papa."

"I fell asleep during a speech the mayor gave when my class was graduating from the Academy. Okay?"

"You're right. I didn't want to know." He laughed and shook his head. "What are you going to do with that information?"

"I'll... " No one was supposed to know I wasn't really in charge of this case. "I'll check it out as soon as I can."

He nodded. "Let me know what you find? This maniac is bad for the business. Gray stopped by for a drink the other night, and he told me the clients are afraid."

"We're doing our best, Neil."

"You mean you're doing your best. The City couldn't care less that queers are getting strangled."

He had a point. "He always seems just one step ahead of us. But he's getting sloppy, as little as he's likely to admit it."

"You'll get him. You were always very thorough. Now that we've got that out of the way, tell me about this guy you've got yourself involved with. Is this black eye you're sporting a one-off thing, or does he like to show the guy in charge who's really in charge?"

"Neil, Jim isn't like that. He... he's... " I couldn't tell Neil that Jim was a Sentinel, and for him to hurt me - the man who was guiding him through the use and control of his senses - would be worse than sticking his hand in a fire and leaving it there, although something in the back of my mind insisted that this was so.

"You haven't become one of those men who thinks that what happens at night between two people makes everything else okay?"

"No."
"He's bigger than you are."

"Neil. I'm not seventeen anymore. I can defend myself."

"But will you? You didn't do a very good job of it the other night. And I saw the way you looked at him."

"What do you mean? How did I look at him?"

"Like the sun rose and set on him. I think you'd let him get away with murder..."

"No."

He looked startled at how cold my voice had grown.

"Not murder, Neil. I'm a cop. Now, let's finish lunch. Why don't you bring me up to date with what's going on in your life?"

"All right. If you're sure." He began talking about what it was like to own a hotel on Park Avenue, and how the lawyer who'd handled probate had wound up handling more than that. "As soon as we could, without there being a conflict of interest for him, he moved into the owner's suite with me."

"I'm glad you found someone to settle down with, Neil."

"Yeah. Who would have thought? Are you sure you don't want a beer, or a glass of wine?"

"Not while I'm on duty. I will have a cup of coffee, and then I have to get back to the Precinct."

"No dessert?"

"No, much as I'd love it. I'll be pressed for time as it is."

"Okay, Firecracker. But if you ever need any help, send up a flare, and I'll be there."

"Thanks, Neil. I appreciate it. More than I can tell you."

He reached over and squeezed my forearm, then signaled to a waiter and ordered coffee for the two of us.

****

The autopsy report was back on my desk when I returned from lunch. I settled in to fill in the blanks in the police report, and the more I learned about Noah Treadwell, the more certain I became that he hadn't been last night's original target.

I wanted to be in the field, discovering why there had been a single Martini in his stomach. Why had he been hit over the head before he'd been strangled? As overweight and out-of-shape as he'd been, had he proved something of a match for Hans?

One by one, the members of what was ostensibly my team came back in.

"I gotta call the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Department," H said. "When did this get to be so hard?"

"Can you believe that theater manager lost the friggin' key to the wardrobe department?" Joel complained. "I have to go back again tomorrow. Maybe he'll have found it by then."

"The bartender at Moe's isn't on duty until later. I'll go back and talk to him then." Lieutenant Dawson commented. "Sandburg, is that paperwork done yet?"
"Yes, sir."

He took it and glanced over it. "Nice typing."

"Thank you. Lieutenant, can't you tell me what you've found so far?"

"Sandburg... "

"If I could just see his apartment... "

"Look, Sandman, if I could let you get out into the field, I would. Don't think I wouldn't. But the Captain took a lot of flack from the Commissioner over this."

"Jesus. Because I called the bastard a pervert?" He shrugged, and I slumped in my chair. "Damn."

"However, I can't stop you from listening in while I discuss the findings with Taggert and Brown. Just keep your mouth shut."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant!" I snapped him a salute and folded my lips together.

Joel and H gathered around my desk, and I waited expectantly.

"We found lipstick on Noah's collar," H said. "The same color as on his forehead and the writing on the mirror."

I scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Hmmm. That might indicate The Strangler was wearing it. He hasn't done that before, to our knowledge. Maybe that ties in with the Martini Dan found in Treadwell's stomach. If he went to Moe's to pick up a woman... ?"

"We don't know that," the Lieutenant observed.

"No, we don't, sir."

He paused in his perusal of the report and looked up, his eyebrow raised. "No food was found in his stomach?"

Again, I wrote something down, and H took it.

"Just an olive. Maybe he skipped dinner entirely, in an attempt to lose weight?"

"One drink could hit him pretty hard then."

I wrote, H read. "Maybe, maybe not. He weighed 230."

The Lieutenant gazed at me. "Yeah, but there's still the fact your boy beaned him with a lamp."

I handed a note to H, "Oh, is that what knocked him out?" and started writing another one.

"All right, Sandburg. You're carrying this too far. Just spit it out, okay?"

"Okay. It just seems to me that if Dorian followed his normal pattern, the lamp thing was overkill. Why would he feel the need to do that?"

"Where are you going with this?"
"Maybe nowhere, but Dan said Noah had bruises on his chest." I looked from Joel to H, then
gestured for H to stand with his back to me. I encircled his neck with my fingers. "Not much trouble
here." I pointed to the floor. "Joel, if you wouldn't mind being the demonstration dummy?"

He shrugged and lay down. I balanced a careful knee on his solar plexus, and he looked up into my
eyes, batting his lashes. "You will be gentle with me, won't you?" he asked in falsetto.

"Asshole." I shifted until my knee was on his breast bone, then fit my hands around his throat.
"Okay, Joel's a big man, but he isn't overweight."

"Wait a second. You're face to face."

"Yes. According to Dan, that's what Dorian did."

"Oh, man, you're giving me a headache!" Lieutenant Dawson rubbed his forehead.

"But can you see where I'm going with this?"

"You'd have a problem choking a guy with a bigger neck, so..." 

A door opened, and we looked around to see the Captain standing there, his expression inscrutable.
"I assume there's a reason for this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do I want to know? What am I saying? Sandburg is involved. Dawson, when you're done, I want
to see you." He shut his door.

"You want to get off me now, Sandman?"

"Yeah. Sorry, Joel." I gave him a hand up. "But you do see what I'm driving at?"

"Yeah. He'd need to bean him in order to successfully strangle him. I've got it."

"Of course..." I paused.

"You've brought us this far, Sandburg. Don't stop now."

"Our boy could just have been pissed he'd missed his original target. He likes to plan things out, and
when he doesn't, when something happens to interfere with his preparations, things go wrong. Like
with Richard Lee."

"You're grabbing at straws."

"Maybe, but..."

The Lieutenant sighed. "But I'll talk to the bartender."

"Cool. Oh, I have Robert Jameson's address."

"Who? Oh, the name on the receipt."

"Yeah. Do you want me to go check it out?"

"No." He held out his hand, and I gave him a piece of paper with the address on it. I had the original.
"This is in Midtown. My dogs are barking, and I have to go across town... I hate switching shifts."
"I'm going down to the break room." Joel scrubbed his face. "I could use a Snickers."

"Me too." H and Joel left, weariness in their steps. We needed to get this case wrapped up. Wrapped up, hell. We needed to find some viable clues.

"I'd better go see what the Cap wants." The door closed behind Lieutenant Dawson.

I sighed and put another page into my typewriter.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Blair has an idea to lure The Strangler out of hiding. But will it work?

"Detective Sandburg?"

I looked up to see a uniformed officer at the door. "Yes?"

"You have a visitor."

"Oh?"

He stepped aside, and Mr. Kupperman, dressed in a suit that must have come off the rack of Barney's Boys' Town, bustled into the squadroom.

"I'm ready to confess, Detective Sandburg." He climbed onto the chair beside my desk.

"What did you do this time?" Usually he came in every month or so to confess to one crime or another, but I hadn't seen him for some time.

"I murdered those men." He held out his hands and flexed his fingers. "Strangled 'em with these very hands! Bet you didn't know I had it in me."

"Did you have them in you too?"

"Huh?"

"Are you also confessing to being homosexual?"

He turned white, and then red. "I'm not... How could you... I..."

"The department shrink says our boy is a latent queer."

"I... I was... faking?" he offered weakly.

"Were you?"

"I'm not... not what you said. But I did it!"

"No, you're not queer, Mr. Kupperman. And you didn't do it." His expression became mulish, and I sighed. "Okay, Mr. Kupperman, if you're The Strangler, then you spoke to me a number of times on the telephone, correct?"

"I did? I mean, yeah, I did. I like you. You appreciate my work. It said so in the newspapers!"

Poor little man, to be so desperate for some validation of his life. "All right, then. Let me hear you do Cary Grant." We hadn't released to the press the fact that each phone call had been made in a different accent.
"Excuse me?"

"I want to hear your Cary Grant impression."

"Uh... 'Judy, Judy, Judy!'"

"Try again. Anyone can do 'Judy, Judy, Judy.'"

"Uh... " He appeared to be thinking hard, and then his face cleared. "Oh, myte, lookit your poor back! Not bad, huh? Gunga Din."

"Nice try, but that was Victor McLaughlin's line."

He looked stricken. "I can do better, honest. Give me another chance." He hopped off the chair and struck a pose. "'I went to Philadelphia once. It was closed!' Pretty good W.C. Fields, huh?"

I bit back a laugh. It was pretty good. "Mr. Kupperman..."

"No, no! Wait a second!" He went down on one knee and threw out his arms. "'Mammy! My little Mammy! You ain't heard nothin' yet!'"

I cleared my throat. "I haven't. Not from Al Jolson, at any rate."

"'Here's lookin' at you, kid!' He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

I shook my head.

He scowled. "You're a tough audience." He put a hand on his hip and rolled a shoulder. "Why don't you come up and see me... ' No wait, too queer! Okay, I was saving my best for last! 'Thanhk heaven for leetle gurls,' he sang, 'for leetle gurls grrrow beeger avvv'rry day...'"

"Mr. Kupperman..."

"'Thanhk heaven... ' You don't believe me, do you?"

"No."

"You're gonna let me go, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry..."

"You're gonna be even sorrier! Y'know what tomorrow's headline is gonna be?" He grabbed a piece of chalk off Taggart's desk and ran to the door.

"Mr. Kupperman, please." He scribbled furiously on the door. "Mr. Kupperman, you're defacing police property. Mr. Kupperman!"

He spun around and glared at me. "You had me in the palm of your hands, but you let me go! You won't see me again, Detective Sandburg! You've... you've let me free to go out and kill again, and... and that's what I'm going to do!" He actually shook his finger at me. "You'll be sorry!"

He tossed the chalk in my direction and stormed out.

On the door was written, 7th Victim!

And a little light bulb in my head went on. I jumped up to go to the Captain's office. Both he and
Lieutenant Dawson were standing in the doorway, staring from the door that had slammed shut behind Mr. Kupperman back to me.

"Captain, I have an idea!"

It didn’t take much convincing. "All right, Sandburg. Call your friend. But if this doesn't work... "

"It'll work!” I knew it would!

****

The wheels were put in motion.

Sam Samuels had been very cooperative. He promised me that tomorrow's headline would reveal that a seventh victim had been claimed.

"Are we actually going to use a body, Cap?"

"Yes. A John Doe was pulled from the East River. Approximately the right age, the right coloring, and from the description of the clothes he was wearing, I'd say the right sexual persuasion."

"Was he a suicide or a murder?"

"The coroner will have to determine that. At this point... " He must have heard the disgusted sound I made. "This from you, Sandburg? I have to say I'm surprised."

For a second I couldn't catch my breath. Captain Haines knew I was homosexual?

"And disappointed."

"Why, sir?" I decided to answer as if I didn't suspect he knew my closely guarded secret. "Because I resent this situation? A young man was either killed because he would rather have a boyfriend than a girlfriend, or else he was so unhappy with the fact that he preferred boys to girls that he couldn't live with himself and chose to end his life in the river?"

The Captain stared at me thoughtfully. "I should have realized your train of thought would be on another track entirely."

"It's my early interest in anthropology, sir," I obfuscated, and changed the subject. "You're not gonna... " I made a motion as if I were drawing on my forehead.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, Sandburg. Don't tell me you're squeamish."

"Of course I'm not squeamish." I swallowed hard, glad that I wasn't the one who'd have to put the kiss on our John Doe's forehead.

"Are you done typing? Then go on home. There's nothing else for you to do today."

"I could check out the real address for Robert Jameson... "

"There's nothing else for you to do."

"Yes, sir." But he was wrong. There was something else for me to do.

I was going to invite Jim to join me for dinner.
I clocked out and went home, stopping at a florist first. Naomi liked having flowers in the house, but since she'd been away, I hadn't bothered. The yellow jonquils would add a touch of brightness to the dining room. And the living room. And my bedroom.

As soon as I got home, I put the flowers on the counter, hung up my overcoat, and dialed Jim's number.

He picked up on the first ring. "Chief?"

"Hi, babe. One of these days, you have to tell me how you know it's me. Listen, would you like to come over for dinner?"

"I'd love it. I just got in, and I need to shower... "

"Yeah, me too. Can you make it for 6:30?"

"Sure."

"How do you like your roast beef?" I had a nice roast in the fridge. It would be a perfect dinner.

"Medium rare."

"Okay. I'll see you then. Oh, and Jim? I'd... uh... I'd like to make breakfast for you too."

"I'll be sure to bring a change of clothes then." There was pleasure in his voice.

"Good idea. See you later."

"Bye, Chief."

Once the roast was in the oven, a bottle of red wine was in the fridge to cool, and the flowers in water until I was ready to arrange them, I went into the bedroom, stripped out of my clothes, and set them aside to take to the laundromat.

I'd shave, shower, and brush my teeth, and then decide what I was going to wear.

****

By a quarter after six, everything was in readiness. The table was covered with Naomi's lace tablecloth, the china was out, flanked by the silverware, the jonquils were in a lead crystal vase in the middle of the table. Two tall, ivory candles in matching lead crystal candlesticks were waiting to be lit. The wine was decanted and ready to be poured.

In the living room, I'd pushed the chairs and ottoman out of the way, leaving a space for dancing, and turned on the lamps on the end tables. A stack of record albums was on the spindle; I'd done some quick figuring, and by the time dinner was finished, Nat King Cole should be on the turntable. I turned out the overhead light, and the room was bathed in a soft, warm, romantic glow.

Now all that was needed was Jim.

There was a knock on the door. I got a funny feeling in my stomach, and I took a deep breath, shook my hands to relieve the tension, and blew the breath out. Then I lit the candles, turned on the record player, and went to answer the door.

Jim stood there. He was wearing his overcoat, but on his feet were black biker boots. I stared at them and swallowed, and finally managed to drag my eyes up to his face. His lips were parted and his
"You smell good, Chief."

"I'm not wearing cologne or aftershave."

"You, Chief. Your own scent."

"Oh. Thanks." I licked my lips. "Come in."

A dry cleaner bag holding his uniform was folded over one arm. A duffel bag was slung from his shoulder - it was large. Maybe he brought more than a single change of clothing.

_Don't get excited, Sandburg_, I warned myself. _Maybe that's all he had, and a brown grocery bag would not have looked cool. _"Let me take your coat."

"The temperature is going down again."

"All the better to snuggle, my dear." I gave him a playful leer, and he laughed and removed his coat. I swallowed again. Black jeans and a black sweater twin to the one he'd let me borrow. I was so hard I had to bite back a whimper. I hung his coat in the small closet by the front door.

"I brought dessert." A white rectangular box that was tied up with bakery string. Across the top, in bold script, was the name, _Vincenzo's_.

"Yes, you are. Um... did." I accepted the box.

"It's cannolis. You'll want to refrigerate it, Chief."

"Let me do that, and then I'll show you where you can put your things." I was back so fast he didn't have time to miss me. He was looking around.

"This is a really nice place you have here, Chief."

"Thanks."

"It's so Jewish."

I choked on my laugh. "Naomi will be pleased to hear that. Right this way."

"I remember."

"Yes. You can hang the garment bag in the closet, and there's room on the shelf in the bathroom for your razor, toothbrush, comb... stuff."

"Thanks, Chief." After a second, he put his duffel on the bed. I waited as he unfastened it and removed his shaving kit. While he was in the bathroom, I peeked into the bag. His gun, a shoebox - no doubt to keep his shoes separate from the rest of his clothes - underwear, jeans, that black turtleneck...

I itched to get my hands on his clothes, but I waited until he came out of the bathroom.

"You can use this, Jim." I pulled open a drawer I had emptied for him.

"Thanks, Chief." He paused a beat, then put his clothes in it, his gun on my dresser, and took a pair.
of black shoes out of the box and put them under his side of the bed. He looked at me for a moment, then sighed. "Where can I...?" He held up his empty duffel.

"There's room on the floor of the closet."

I waited until he was done, but then I couldn't wait any longer. I pounced on him and kissed him, holding his face between my palms, and feasted on his mouth. He moaned and held on. When we had to break apart in order to breathe, I didn't let him take more than a step back before I pulled him against me again.

"I thought you were having second thoughts, Chief."

"No." I caressed his cheek. "I didn't want you to think I had no self-control."

"Screw self-control."

"I'd rather... " I waggled my eyebrows at him.

"Later?"

"Yes. Let's have dinner, and then later... " Oh, yes.

I took his hand and led him to the dining room. "Sit. It will just take me a minute to get everything on the table."

"Let me help."

"Okay." I liked the way we worked together, and I thought again about asking him to move in with me.

It was a good meal. The roast was perfectly medium rare, and I'd been careful of the spices for Jim. We had mashed potatoes, creamed spinach, and rolls.

"These are good, Chief. I've never tasted ones from the can this good. What brand are they?"

"Sandburg's Own."

"You made them yourself? Damn, you're a good cook."

"I had to learn how to cook young. Naomi worked weird hours, so that was my way of helping her out."

Over coffee and the cannolis we talked more - of movies we had seen, books we had read, music we enjoyed - and the candles burned down to their stubs. Then we put away the leftovers and washed the dishes. Meanwhile, I was keeping an ear out for Nat King Cole.

_Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa men have named you...

I dried my hands. "Dance with me, Jim."

"Sure."

_Is it only 'cause you're lonely they have blamed you...

We went through the dining room to the living room. Jim leaned down, unlaced his boots, and pulled them off. He was wearing white socks.
I toed off my sneakers.

"Chief!" Jim dropped to his knees, took a foot in his hand, and caressed it. I was wearing white socks too. He released my foot and ran his hands up my legs, nuzzled my groin, and bit lightly at the material that covered my hard-on.

"Jim." I could barely get his name past my lips.

He rose to his feet, his body brushing against mine, and I couldn't tell if the resulting shiver was his or mine. I put one hand around his neck, slid the other into his back pocket, flexing my fingers and urging him closer to me.

_Do you smile to tempt a lover, Mona Lisa?_

Jim's hands were on my back. One slid lower and settled on my hip.

"That's better."

His fingers spread and traced patterns on the material that covered my ass, and my cock grew harder. I threaded my fingers through his hair, loving the feel of it in my fingers and against my palm.

"Blair." My name was a whisper on his lips as they came down and caressed mine. We kept swaying to the music, and our tongues teased and dueled and explored.

_Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa, Or just a cold and lonely, lovely work of art?_

The song finished and another started, and another until the last song played and the record player turned off.

By that time we were in my bedroom, a trail of clothes like breadcrumbs behind us.

****

I was dreaming of running through the rainforest, the black jaguar at my side. I'd had this dream before, the nights I hadn't been in Jim's bed, and I'd wakened from it sweating and shaking and sticky from having climaxed. In my waking hours, I would never consider coupling with a beast, but in those dreams, it seemed the most natural, the most logical and _right_ thing to do. And as I made love to the jaguar - because it was making love and not simply rutting - the sensation of the soft fur of the big cat's tail stroking over my balls, teasing my hole, would drive me closer to orgasm, until with one smooth thrust, it would penetrate me, and both of us would go flying over the edge.

This time the dream was different. Instead of my cock being buried in the jaguar's hot, tight channel, it was touched by nothing but my own torso and the cool sheets beneath me, sheets which quickly heated. Instead of all that wondrous black fur being under me, it was above me, resting on my back.

_Do you wish this?_ that voice in my mind demanded.

_Yes!

_Then so it shall be!_

My legs were pushed wide apart, careful hands parted my ass cheeks, and something cool and slick anointed my hole. I was so far gone that I didn't think to protest that I didn't do this, that I was the one who rode and was not ridden.
Something hot and bulbous pressed against my hole, slowly gaining entrance. I tried to wiggle backwards to take in more of it, but I was held motionless by two broad palms on my hips.

And then the entire cock was seated within me, and abruptly, I was awake. This was no dream. This was really happening. I stiffened, but it was too late to expect pain when there was nothing but pleasure sweeping over me. I shuddered and moaned.

"It's okay, Chief." Jim's breath was warm in my ear. He urged me onto my knees, and one hand closed around my cock while the other pinched and teased my nipples. "I have you."

His tongue swept over the patch of skin on my left shoulder, and I whimpered and tried to drive forward into his grip.

His hips began to move, and I groaned and tried to drive backward to impale more of myself on his cock.

And then he hit something inside me that made me see fireworks, and I howled and came.

"That's... that's it, Chief. Become mine as I... as I am yours!" He bit down on my shoulder and poured himself into me, shuddering and flooding me with heat that soothed and scalded at the same time.

My knees gave out, and I sprawled on the bed, with Jim's solid weight a comforting presence.

"Jim," I whispered when I'd finally caught my breath. I clamped down internal muscles, but he'd softened, and I couldn't keep him within me.

"Blair." He kissed the hinge of my jaw and rolled to the side, taking me with him. "I've never done this. Thank you."

"Neither have I. That was amazing."

"Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I? I wasn't sure if I was doing it right."

"Babe, if you'd done it any more right, I'd be dead." I turned in his embrace and pulled him against me. "I always heard there's supposed to be some pain involved the first time. Thank you for taking care of me."

Even though I wasn't a Sentinel, I could feel the warmth of his blush. "Jim, how come you did that?" The two nights we'd had together, he hadn't been shy about waking me up for sex, but though he'd played with my hole, he'd never shown any real interest in fucking me.

"It was the strangest thing. I was having this dream... "

****

We cuddled a while longer, but it was a working day, and finally we had to get up. We showered together, made breakfast together - waffles, since cold cereal would have been too gauche to serve my lover - and sat at the kitchen table to eat.

I was offering Jim a last bite of my waffle when he stiffened. "Someone's coming in."

I heard the front door open and close. "Naomi isn't supposed to be home."

"The footsteps are female."

"She's not supposed to be home."
"Blair? Sweetheart, I'm home!"

"In the kitchen, Ma." I looked at Jim. "She's not supposed to be home."

"I got that, Chief. How is she going to feel about finding me here?"

"I don't know. I've never had anyone stay overnight."

He looked happy to hear that.

She breezed into the kitchen and threw herself into my arms. "Blair!"

"Naomi. Why did you cut short your stay with Franklin?"

"You sounded so sad, Sweetheart. I took the first flight I could get. And I... " She leaned back to look at me, frowned, and touched my cheek just below my eye. "What happened? And don't tell me you walked into a door. You were never clumsy, not even as a toddler. Did Simon Banks' security guard do this to you?"

"Mama, it was a misunderstanding."

"Was it?"

"It was, Mrs. Sandburg."

She wheeled around to glare at him, and then something in her expression eased. "You're Jim Ellison?"

"Yes, I can't tell you how sorry I am. I've... You see, I couldn't believe someone as wonderful as your son could want someone like me for more than a couple of nights. So when he came to my place, smelling of another man, it felt as if the other shoe was dropping, and I... "

"Hey! I keep telling you... "

"Excuse me?" Naomi's expression was confused.

"I'm sorry, Chief. I know now, but then... "

"Suppose you tell me what happened, Blair."

I ran through my options and settled for the most logical and least revealing explanation. "Jim's one of those people who have a very good sense of smell."

"Oh, you mean like the ones who work for perfume manufacturers."

"Yeah, something like that. So when someone I used to know hugged me, Jim was able to smell his cologne on me."

"I understand. I think. That was overreacting, though, wasn't it, Jim?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You don't intend to overreact again, do you, Jim?"

"No, ma'am. Blair's given me a second chance. I won't blow it."

"Good. Because if you hurt my boy, I will hunt you down and when I'm done with you, you'll be
singing soprano."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Naomi."

"Yes, Naomi."

"Are you hungry, Mama? Can I fix you some breakfast? I made waffles, and there's batter left over."

"Thank you, sweetheart, but I ate on the plane." She actually liked airline food. "A cup of tea would be nice, though."

"I'll make you a pot."

"I'll help you with your bags, Naomi."

"Thank you."

He followed her to retrieve her luggage, and I filled the kettle with fresh water and put it on. Then I ran some hot water into the teapot to pre-warm it and spooned in some loose tea. Naomi liked it strong, so I added an extra spoon for the pot.

"Chief?" Jim came in, looking stunned.

"What is it, babe?"

He held out his hand. In it was a snow globe with the Golden Gate Bridge inside. "She gave me this."

I smiled. "You're lucky. She's probably brought me a shirt that says, 'King Kong died for our sins!' Or 'My mother went to Alcatraz, and all I got was this lousy tee-shirt.' She always brings back something."

"Yes, but someone isn't going to get his souvenir."

"No. This is for you."

"But she had no idea I'd be here."

"Jim. Naomi has been bringing back something from wherever she's gone - Atlantic City, Niagara Falls, Virginia Beach, even Disney Land - for whoever might be keeping company with me since I was fifteen..."

"Oh?" His voice was cold. I went to him and rested my head against his chest.

"... even though there's been no one."

"What, no one?"

I pinched his hip. "No one. She has a small trunk filled with souvenirs. I guess you're going to get them all."

"Why would she do that, Chief? By the way, the water's about to boil."

And of course the kettle started whistling. "Thanks." I poured it into the teapot, covered it with a
cozy, then set it on a tray.

"Chief?"

"She made a mistake once. It wasn't her fault, and I never blamed her, but she's been trying to make it up to me ever since." I could see Jim was curious but hesitant to ask. "My friend Butch - she was afraid our relationship would be hard on him. He was small, you see. Some of the boys called him Shirley Temple until I beat the crap out of them. It kind of made sense that he would be the one to get hurt if the truth about our friendship ever came out."

"But instead it was you who wound up being hurt."

"Yes. Not physically, although I think that actually would have hurt less. Like I said, one day he and his mother were just gone." I put a cup and saucer on the tray, along with cream and sugar. I looked at the clock. "Damn. I've got to shake a leg." I carried the tray down the hall and into her bedroom. "Will you be okay, Ma? I'm back on the case, and I have to hurry."

She smiled, but it looked a little tired. "I'll be fine, sweetheart. I'll just have this lovely tea, then take a bath and go to bed. I'm a little jet-lagged. Jim, I'll expect to see you at dinner tonight."

"I thought maybe the two of you would want some time alone."

"I think it would be a good idea for us to get to know each other."

"All right. Thank you."

She went to him and kissed his check. "And remember... " She whispered something in his ear that I couldn't hear.

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned broadly at her.

"Come on, Jim." We were dressed, but we still needed to put on shoes and get our guns. "I'll be right back to say goodbye, Ma."

"All right, sweetheart."

We went back to my bedroom. I stepped into my shoes and laced them up while Jim did the same.

"What did she say to you, Jim?"

"When?"

"Don't be a pain-in-the-ass. After she kissed you. She said, 'And remember...' What did she want you to remember?"

"That she has a very sharp knife in the kitchen drawer, and if I hurt you, she will use it."

"That's my mama. Jim, why don't you bring another change of clothes with you when you come tonight?"

"Uh... I was thinking maybe it wouldn't be a good idea for me to stay over."

"Why? Don't you want to stay?"

"Of course I do, but with your mother here, won't you feel uncomfortable?"
"In case you hadn't noticed, babe, Naomi's bedroom is on the other side of the apartment. I don't remember you howling like a banshee when I made you come." He laughed. "What?"

"You were pretty noisy this morning."

I felt myself blush. "I was?"

"You were. And I loved it." He ran his hand over my hair. "Okay, Chief. As long as you're okay with it."

"Yes." I kissed him, relishing the warm, pliant feel of his lips on mine. "Damn, I have to leave!"

"I'm ready."

"You don't have to be there this early, though."

"It's okay. I'll stop somewhere for a cup of coffee. I'll see you tonight about six thirty."

"Okay. Naomi, we're leaving now."

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, and I thought she looked sad, but then she looked up and smiled, and I thought maybe she was just tired. "Have a good day, sweetheart. You too, Jim." She kissed us both.

I made sure the door locked behind us, and we walked to the elevator. It would have looked really queer for me to hold his hand, but I really wanted to, and I murmured that under my breath. Jim grinned. He heard me.

****

When the elevator stopped on seven, there was no one else in it. We entered, and I said, "Dial up your hearing. I want to be sure this elevator isn't going to stop."

"Okay, but why?"

The doors slid shut, and I backed him into a corner and kissed him.

"Oh." There was a smile in his voice. "That's why." And he inclined his head to initiate another kiss.

We were lucky. No one else was leaving at that time. When the elevator came to a halt on the first floor, our clothes were straight, if slightly rumpled, and our hair smoothed down.

He took my hand and squeezed it briefly. "Be careful out there, Chief."

"I'll be in the Precinct all day. No danger there."

"I'm glad."

We passed a newspaper stand, and the headline in *The Daily News* caught my eye. As Sam had promised, it read, 'Seventh Victim!' But in slightly smaller letters it also read, 'Commissioner Declares Everything Under Control! Detective Sandburg Back on the Case!'

"Oh, shit."

Jim tried to look somber, but I could see the corners of his mouth quivering as he fought back a grin. He leaned close to whisper, "My boyfriend, protector of the city!" He bought a copy. "I think I'll
"start a scrapbook."

*The Post* and *The Herald Tribune* had similar headlines. He bought a copy of each as well.

I picked up *The News* and started to scan the article.

"Hey, bub. You gonna buy that? This ain't the public liberry."

I handed the vendor some change and continued reading. "Oh, shit!" A suspect?

The Captain was not gonna like this!

****

I walked into the squadroom, and everyone - Monaghan, McGaffney, Taggert, Brown - dropped to their knees, did salaams, and chanted, "Salami, salami, bologna!"

"Jesus. You guys have been watching *Popeye* again, haven't you?"

"We feel so safe knowing you're back on the case, Detective." They knelt there, gazing up at me, the adoration in their eyes patently false.

"Fuck you."

"Now, now." They stood up, chuckling and dusting off the knees of their trousers.

"Bastards. I didn't tell Sam to do that, you know."

H patted my shoulder. "Of course you didn't."

I growled at him and hung up my overcoat. "What does the Cap have to say about it?"

"Dunno. He's not in yet."

"Shit." I sat at my desk. "I was hoping to get it over with." I had no doubt that once he saw the headlines, he was going to chew out my ass, but good. Well, there was nothing I could do about it just then; I pushed it out of my mind. "So how are things going?"

Knowing there would be no more excitement until the Captain came in, Monaghan and McGaffney began catching up on their own paperwork. Joel dropped into the chair beside my desk, and H dragged his chair over.

"Marc Addams has gone out of town. Are you ready for this? He's on his honeymoon! Want to take a guess as to who the blushing bride is?"

"Maria Hernandez?"

"Give the boy a cigar."

"Man, that makes me tired. Well, we may need her back here, but we'll wait until we've got the case built, and then let the D.A. worry about it. The Cap's already spoken to Immigration."

"I've got dibs on flying down to Palm Beach to bring her back! There's a jet leaving every hour at JFK."

"You know this how?"
"When I was tracking down the flight Addams took, I just happened to notice. And for the good of the department, I'm willing to go."

"Asshole. What've you got, Joel?"

"I talked to the manager of The Amanda Gill. He was very apologetic. Said he'd finally found the key to the wardrobe department."

"Do you believe him?"

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter now. I'm going to see him this afternoon; I've got a court order, and I'm bringing along an axe. If he doesn't produce that key, he'll feel my wrath!"

"Good man. Anything else?"

"Dawson had problems with his feet, so he asked me to talk to the bartender at Moe's."

"He did mention something yesterday about his feet hurting. What have you learned?"

"Noah Treadwell used to stop by once or twice during the week. He'd come in with love beads and a Nehru jacket and psychedelic bell bottoms - they were so loud the bartender needed earplugs... "

"Very funny."

"I thought so. And of course there were the ever-popular hip-huggers."

I cringed.

"Yeah. I can't imagine it was pretty, all that flab hanging over his waistband. Anyway, Noah would hit on any woman who came in, even if she was a dog. He got turned down every time, and more than one told him to lose the weight and the hippie clothes, but he didn't. The bartender said on Tuesday night, Noah came strolling in at about eleven, which was unusual for him."

"How so?"

"Usually he'd turn up at nine, have a few drinks, make a round of the girls, get turned down, and go home. Not only that, this time he was wearing a nice suit. He still was fat, but he didn't look as fat, if you follow me?"

"Yeah." I remembered the findings in Dan's autopsy. "He'd skipped dinner, too."

"And lunch. Dawson talked to some of the people he worked with. They said he'd been very quiet all day."

"That's really changing his routine. What would make a man do that?" H asked.

"It was his birthday."

"Oh, shit!"

"Yeah. Maybe he decided it was time to turn over a new leaf. He'd cut back on calories, dress like an adult instead of a teenager, maybe actually find a nice woman to date."

"So he thought that by eleven Tuesday night, he'd be changed enough to pick up a chick?"

"Who knows? What happened after he arrived at Moe's?"
"According to the bartender, Noah told a joke to a group of young women who were sitting at a table. What's the difference between a drunk and a dead man?"

"Lovely choice of riddle. And?"

"One carries his beer, and the other his bier carries him." I gave him a look. "Sorry. They laughed, and one of them winked at him. He looked so hopeful that Charlie, the bartender, said he had to look away. But he could still hear what was going on. Noah said to the woman, 'They get funnier at my place,' and the woman said, 'Not for me, they don't.' Noah took it the way he always did - with a little smile and a shrug - sat at the bar, and ordered his Martini. He finished it, noticed a woman sitting at the end of the bar, and recited a limerick that freaked her out."

"Dirty?" At that time of night, it didn't seem logical that a woman in a bar would be offended by a little off-color humor.

He shook his head. "It had something to do with The Strangler, which makes it kind of odd, but she'd told Charlie that she'd seen him and was terrified he was coming after her."

"Huh? Pearl Menzel?"

"No, this was a real dish. Blonde hair down to her ass, the biggest, bluest eyes, a gorgeous figure, and a mouth made to suck dick. I tell you, I prefer brown sugar, but my tongue woulda been hanging out, just from his description!"

"So this dish was supposed to have seen our boy?"

"That's what she said. She sat at the end of the bar, sobbing. Noah went to her, fell all over himself to apologize, told her she could come home with him, and no monkey business, he swore. They could pop some popcorn, watch Johnny Carson, and generally have a ball."

"She went with him."

"Yeah. Charlie said he'd never seen him so... solicitous. The women at the table watched them leave, and he thought they were gonna make some crack, but they didn't say anything, just looked kind of wistful."

"Does this dish have a name?"

Joel took out his notepad and flipped through it. "Ammie."

"Was there anything about Ammie, besides her tits and ass, that Charlie noticed?"

"She was a tall chick, taller than Noah, maybe by six inches, and had a scarf wrapped around her neck. Charlie noticed because it was tucked right into her... um... cleavage?" Joel looked tired. "It was our boy, wasn't it?"

"Makes sense. Was Riley able to pick up any prints at the scene this time?"

"A beautiful print that matches another beautiful print."

"The one at Norbert Himmel's apartment?"

"Yeah. So we've got them linked. We just don't know who they belong to."

"Goddammit!" My phone rang.
Joel was on his feet. "Okay, Blair."

I turned on the tape recorder and picked up the receiver. "15th Precinct. Detective Sandburg."

"Chief?"

"Just a second." I made a slashing movement across my throat, and Joel stopped the trace. I turned off the recorder and leaned back in my chair. "Hi, Jim. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I just wanted to check how you're doing. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, I'm great." I wanted to tell him that he was great, that what we'd done was great, but I was aware of my audience.

"I'm glad. I... uh... I was wondering if you could meet me for lunch?"

"I'd... " ... love to... "Sure. What time?"

"About one fifteen?"

"That should be fine. Do you want me to meet you at the bank or did you have someplace in mind?"

"Would it be too much out of your way to meet me here? I know a nice little place in the Village... "

"Great." Actually, that was a little out of the way, but since the Captain had me staying in the Precinct, I didn't think it would matter if my lunch hour ran a bit late. "That sounds great, Jim. I'll see you then." I dropped my voice to less than a whisper, "And thanks, babe."

"It was my pleasure, Chief." There were memories in his voice. "See you later."

I hung up the phone. I wanted to cross my legs, stack my hands behind my head, and swing a leg gently as I gazed up at the ceiling, smiling, but four sets of interested eyes were watching me.

"So, Joel, you were saying we've got matching prints, but no one to match them to."

"Uh... yeah."

I could see he wanted to ask about that phone call - except for Naomi, I never got personal phone calls - but he glanced at Monaghan and McGaffney, and tabled his questions for the time being.

"Okay, so... "

The door opened, and the Captain strode in, Lieutenant Dawson right behind him.

"Sandburg, my office, now." The Cap was carrying a newspaper. I couldn't see which one it was, but since they'd all had equally inflammable headlines, I guessed it didn't matter.

"Yes, sir."

Behind my back, either Monaghan or McGaffney - but probably Monaghan - started whistling something funereal. The Captain was already in his office, so I turned and flipped them both off, then hurried after him.

"Sir, you heard me talking to Sam yesterday. I swear to you I wasn't in contact with him afterwards."

"I know, Sandburg. Take it easy. Sit down."
"I sat down and shut up."

"Your eye looks better, by the way."

"Oh ... uh... thank you, sir. I always was a fast healer."

"Good job. Now, as to the headlines in today's papers. The Commissioner decided a little frosting on the cake might be a good idea. He called the editors himself. He frowned, and I wondered if he felt the Commissioner had gone a little overboard."

"Do we have everything under control, sir?"

"I sure as hell hope so. Have you read the article?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're wondering about our suspect." He waited until I nodded. "Your idea was a good one, and since we had a phony victim, I thought we might as well have a phony suspect, who is under arrest. He'll be released, of course, because there isn't enough evidence to tie him to the first six - " his hands fisted - "murders. If I'm right, I imagine you'll be getting a phone call from The Strangler as soon as he reads today's newspapers."

"Yes, sir. May I ask why the Commissioner is involved? Granted this is his police department, but face it, sir. Most of the men strangled were queer, and the two who weren't... well, except to their loved ones, they weren't anybody important."

"Haven't you read the papers? Mention of their sexuality is one thing that's been scrupulously avoided."

Sure. Nothing would have been done otherwise.

"The truth of the matter is, two of the victims come from money, and in Richard Lee's case, blue blood. Their families want results."

"Yes, sir." What else could I say. I looked toward Dawson who was standing by the window looking out. "How're your feet feeling, Lieutenant?"

"Huh? Oh, my feet? They're fine."

"There never was anything wrong with them," the Cap interjected.

"I don't understand then. Why did you send Taggert to Moe's last night?"

"The Cap said... "

"Let's just say I had my reasons and let it go at that, shall we?" He grinned, but there was nothing amused in his expression.

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then... "

There was a knock on his door, and H shoved it open. "Sorry, Cap. Blair, you've got a phone call. I'm pretty sure... Joel is tracing it."

I bolted out of the Captain's office, not even waiting for permission to leave. Joel nodded, letting me
I dropped down in my chair, licked my lips, and picked up the receiver. "Detective Sandburg."

"I did not do it!"

"Hans? Or is this Jacques? You're not using an accent."

"Yes, yes, it is I. You know that. I am calling about this last murder, this Sebastian Redman. I did not kill him!"

"Sure you did." I wondered who had come up with that name. "It has your MO all over it."

"Why would I kill him? I do not even know him!"

"He was homosexual. We found him on the john with a Jungle Red lipstick kiss on his forehead."

"I cannot help how you found him, Detective, and that is immaterial to me! I did not kill him! You know that!"

"How do I know that?"

"If you will just think a moment, think logically, my dear Blair. Afterwards, have I not called you to tell you about what I had done?"

I sat back in my chair. "Not every time."

That gave him pause. "Yes. That is true. I apologize for having misspoken. However, I cannot be blamed for not calling you before I knew you would have an appreciation of my work, or for not talking to you when I do call, because you are not there!"

"No, of course not. But I'd pissed you off the other day. What better way to show me what a very clever man you are by killing this poor schnook?"

"He was not a poor... You are trying to confuse me."

"No, I'm just curious."

"Blair. Pay attention. I was angry with you on Tuesday, this is true. However, I did not wish to have you removed from the case. Did I not take steps to have you reinstated?"

"Yeah." I glanced toward Joel. He held up two fingers.

"And have you not been reinstated?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then. I think the least I am due is a 'thank you.'"

"Thank you." Did he even hear the sarcasm in my voice?

"And you realize I did not kill this last man?" It may have been a statement, but it came out a question.

"No. Nothing you've said has done anything to change my mind. Tell me something, just to satisfy my curiosity. You have one of those 'Name Your Baby' books, don't you? Do you open a page,
cover your eyes, and stick a pin in to see which name you'll use next? You were Aaron for Joseph Bishop. You won't tell me who you were for Randy Beautiful." I wondered if he'd used his real name for that. "For Norbert, you were Hans, for Richard Lee, Mrs. Roosevelt... That was spur of the moment, wasn't it? Your standard is usually so much higher."

"There, you see? So you must agree..."

"I'm not done yet, sunshine." My voice hardened. "What name did you use for Paul Richmond?"

"I just told him I was Mr. Jefferson, a custodian of the building, and I had found a kitten with which I needed his help."

"Because he was so good with cats." My hand tightened on the receiver, and I had to recite the Ten Commandments in Hebrew three times before I had myself under control again. "Then there was Harry Williams, the manager of Tiffany's. You were Dorian Smith for him."

"You learned of that?" He sounded disgruntled. "Well, I knew you had to be good. Only someone of your caliber could appreciate someone of mine."

"Right. And for Noah Treadwell, you were Ammie. Tell me something, sunshine..."

"Do you know, I find I really dislike when you call me that, Blair. Really."

"Really." It was a good thing he couldn't see my grin. "So tell me. Did you like dressing as a woman? Putting on makeup? The bartender really appreciated your curves."

Joel held up one finger.

"I am an excellent actor." I could almost see him preening. "And there are instances of men dressing as women. In the Elizabethan era..."

"Yeah, yeah. You're nothing if not authentic. So what name did you use for Sebastian Redman?"


"Y'know something, Dorian? I'm tempted to believe you. After all, you haven't lied to me. Except when you have. You promised you were going to be good, and then..."

"That was not my fault, Blair!"

"Okay. This last murder really was sloppy work."

"Thank you. Do you have a name for this copycat?"

"Hmmm? Oh, it's 'William Gibson.' Of Tudor City. Actually, we only have proof that ties him to this last murder."

"There! You see! He is a copycat. Now..."

"Yes. We'll have to let him go."

"WHAT?? NO!"

"As I said, we only have proof that he killed this one man... Since we can't tie him to the other murders, we have to let him go."
"If you do that, he will kill again!"

"I'm afraid that's a chance we'll have to take."

"You cannot... This killer is a copycat! He is trying to make a name for himself using my... Do you have any idea how hard I have worked? How diligent and meticulous my research? And I should let this... this William Gibson take credit for it?"

H touched my shoulder and pointed to Joel, who was giving me a thumb's up. We had the bastard!

"But... Look, what do you want me to call you? You're not using a German accent, so I can't call you Hans. You're not doing a French accent, so Jacques is out of the question."

"My name is Chr... " He bit back the rest of it. "Oh, you are clever, Detective Sandburg. Very, very clever!" And he disconnected the call.

"He didn't say goodbye!"

"Imagine that." Joel's grin was hard.

"Where is he?" I jumped to my feet and went for my overcoat.

"He's at The Sixes."

"The NBC building?" I shook my head.

"Going somewhere, Sandburg?"

"Captain, please!"

"I've notified the local precinct, and there's a black and white waiting for you downstairs." His gaze went from me to Joel to H, then turned to Lieutenant Dawson. "I'm giving this case back to him, Bill."

The Lieutenant nodded.

"All right, gentlemen, go get him!"

"Thanks, Cap!" I didn't question why the Captain had given me the case back. I ran out of his office before he could change his mind.

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We piled into the squad car and were there in a matter of minutes.

He wasn't, of course. The phone booth, part of a bank of phones separated by smudged plastic partitions, was abandoned, the receiver dangling at the end of its cord.

The building's security guards, a couple of them wearing Banks patches on their sleeves, had corralled a number of suspects.

"We found these men in the area," a patrolman told us.

I looked them up and down. Ordinary-looking men. One a little shabby, who'd probably come into the building to get out of the cutting March wind. One a black man in custodian's clothes, who avoided Joel's and H's eyes. One in the usher's uniform for the NBC studios, one dressed in a
business suit, one in a cardigan sweater who looked annoyed and vaguely familiar.

"I'm the weather man," he informed anyone who cared to listen.

I sighed. "Thanks, men."

We'd bring them to the Precinct to get their prints and question them, but odds were our boy wasn't among these five.

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It was almost one by the time we were finished. As I'd suspected, none of the prints matched the ones Riley had lifted at the two scenes. The men were released.

"I'm going to lunch."

"Oh, yeah?" H leaned close. "And maybe a quickie?"

"Since when have you become a dirty old man? Lunch involves eating..." I covered my face with a hand as I realized how that could be misconstrued, and sure enough, H burst into laughter. "Never mind. I'll see you later."

I caught a cab down to 23rd Street. "Can you wait here a second? I'm not sure if we need a cab."

"Sure thing, Mac. You're payin' for it."

I got out of the cab and lounged against it. In less than a minute, Jim came out of the bank. His face lit up when he saw me, and he strode to the vehicle.

"We don't need a cab, Chief. It's close by."

"Okay." I paid the cabby. "Where are we going?"

"I thought I'd show you a little place I know. It doesn't look like much, but the service is quick and the food is very good." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Suits me. Something wrong?"

"I don't... I've got this feeling that someone is watching us."

"Well, sure. You're pretty gorgeous."

He blushed. "No, seriously."

"I am serious." But I could see it was disturbing him. "Look around, gradually increasing the scope of your vision."

"Like the dials again?"

"Kind of. More like the knob on a microscope."

"Okay. Whoa!" He shook his head. "Too much."

"A little at a time, Jim."

He tried again. "Better." He scanned the area, and his eyes narrowed. "There, Chief! There's something about him..."
I saw someone back away. There was something creepy about him, and I didn't like the fact that he was watching Jim. He turned and ran, and I took off after him.

"Chief! Wait!"

"Police!" I shouted as I dodged and wove through the pedestrian traffic. "Freeze!"

People squeaked, squealed, and yelled, but they got out of my way, and finally I had a clear view of the man trying to get away.

He was wearing a camelhair overcoat that flapped behind him like a pair of wings. His head was tucked down, and his arms and legs pumped furiously as he tore toward The Avenue of the Americas.

I put on a burst of speed and launched myself at him, tackling him.

We went down to the sidewalk, and he skidded beneath me and cried out.

I sat on his back, catching my breath. Two mounted cops rode up and dismounted. "What's the problem... Sandman, what are you doing down here?"

"Walt?" Mounted cops were sent where they were needed, and I assumed he had been assigned to this area of the city. "I was meeting a friend for lunch..." I looked around but I didn't see Jim. We must have outpaced him. "... and this guy was... "

"Get him off me!" the man I was sitting on whined. "I can't breathe!"

"Benny? What are you doing down on the ground?"

"You know him, Walt?"

"He's a small-time pickpocket." He angled himself to face the crowd.

"Chief." Jim arrived, puffing a bit. "Are you okay?" He held out a hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Yeah, I'm good. Jim, this is Walt Raleigh, a friend of mine. Walt, Jim Ellison." I smiled at Jim. "A friend of mine."

Walt grinned and extended his hand. "Always good to meet a friend of the Sandman's."

Jim studied him, sniffed discreetly, then smiled and accepted his hand. "Hi."

"Lookit this! Look at my hands! Ow, man! I'm bleedin'!"

"Just don't bleed on me." Looking bored, Walt's partner collared Benny and started patting him down.

"Hey, watch it! You're bendin' the suit!"

"So what was going on?" Walt asked. "Benny trying to pick your pockets?"

"I wasn't doin' nuthin'! I swear! I was just standin' there... "

"Chief... "

"Why'd you run, then?"
"Chief..."

"I can tell a cop when I see one. You was lookin' at me, and I knew you'd find somethin' to arrest me for."

"Chief!" Jim leaned close to my ear. "I'm trying to tell you. He isn't the one..."

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The officer pulled out a wallet, shocking pink, with rhinestones. "You going queer on us, Benny?"

Benny cringed. "Uh..."

"My wallet!" a woman screamed. "Someone's stolen my wallet!"

"Right here, ma'am." The corner of Walt's mouth curved in a grin. "I love my job. Want to come in and take care of the paperwork, Sandman?"

"No! I've got enough of my own to do. You can have the collar. All I want is some lunch."

"Okay. Thanks for the assist. Ellison. Nice meeting you."

"Same here."

"S'long." We walked away. "Jim, what do you mean 'he isn't the one'?"

"Just what I said. He was wearing the same color coat, and they were very close, but the one who was watching us..."

"Dammit!" My explosion drew some glances, and I glared at them, even as I felt my face heat up. "Dammit," I said more softly. "Did you get a good look at him?"

"Yeah. You know what you said about the shape of the face and the distance between the eyes? I've seen this guy before. Chief, I think he's the man I saw with Randy at the Museum."

"'Chris'?" I sighed.

"Yes. Of course, he's long gone now."

"Of course." I looked around, but it was futile. "So where are we going for lunch?"

Jim checked his watch. "Damn. It's getting late. There's this nice little place just down the street, but they're always mobbed, and now we won't even be able to get a table."

"Y'know, I was kind of hoping we could go to your place. Even if there's no time for... lunch... we could... check out each other's pistols?"

"Yeah?" Jim's expression became suddenly hopeful.

"Yeah." I stepped to the curb, put my fingers between my lips and whistled up a cab, and we got in. "852 East 14th," I told the driver.

"Oh, no. Not you two!" The cabby gave us a cautious glance. "He ain't gonna start singin' Mona Lisa again, is he?"

"No. Now drive."
I did nothing in the back seat except sit there, thinking about having Jim again and getting harder and harder. By the time we got out of the cab, up the stairs, and into Jim's apartment, I was shaking with need. I shoved him back against the door, and we unzipped our flies, took out our cocks, and began to jerk each other off. His mouth fed off mine, and I swallowed the desperate sounds he made. It was fast and frantic, and we both came so quickly no one would have believed we'd spent the night before making love.

We sank to the floor, our chests heaving.

"Do you... know what you... did to... to me, Chief?" he panted. He raised his hand to his mouth and licked off my come.

"I... I made you ... come." I liked him doing that, liked watching him do that. I brought my hand to my mouth and tasted him on my palm. It was like nothing I'd ever had before; I shivered in unexpected pleasure and wondered if it was part of his being a Sentinel and me being the man who was his Guide.

"Whatever you... were thinking in... that cab..." 

"I... was thinking... about us."

"Doing this?"

"No. Actually, I was... I was thinking of... of sixty-nining you."

"Oh, my god!" He grabbed the neck of my overcoat, yanked it until I was flat on my back, then covered my body with his and kissed me. Our sated cocks nestled against each other, and our combined taste filled my mouth. "I could smell the want rolling off you in waves. Better than fine wine. Better than chocolate. I was almost drowning in it. I wanted to strip off my clothes and have you take me right there in the cab."

I groaned and flipped him to his back, and took his mouth, and he shuddered under me as my tongue rubbed against his. Finally, we broke the kiss.

"What time is it?"

His left arm was behind my head. He angled it around until he could see his watch. "It's almost two."

"I don't mind missing lunch, but I really wanted to have you in bed."

"Chief!" He kissed me again, then gently tugged my head back so he could look into my eyes. "Is this the way you talked to your clients?"

"No. It's the way I talk to my lover." I snatched a kiss. "We'd better start getting ourselves in order." It took me a few seconds to steady myself once I'd staggered to my feet. Then I reached down and offered Jim a hand.

"It's too bad they haven't invented something that could heat up leftovers faster than sticking them in the oven."

"That's an interesting idea." I tucked myself away and zipped my fly. "Man, we're so tacky, screwing without even taking our coats off."

"It was fun, wasn't it?"
"Yeah. It was. I've never done it that way before."

"What never?"

"No, never. Not even hardly ever."

"Chief, you should eat."

"So should you. There's a vending machine in the break room at the One Five. I'll get a Snickers or something there. What do you feel like for dinner?"

"You?"

"Oh, man, I cannot get hard again so soon!"

He reached between us, squeezed, and made a pleased sound.

"Is this what you did to your clients?" I teased, breathless in spite of myself.

"No, it's what I do to my lover."

****

Jim called for a cab. He smoothed his palms over my coat as we kissed one last time before we left his apartment and went down to the street to wait for it.

"Ya'know... " He gazed around, his expression irritated.

"What's bothering you, babe?"

"I've got that ... Did you ever have the feeling that eyes were watching you?"

I looked around too. "I don't see anyone." It was a quiet afternoon. Kids were in school, and their parents were either at work or busy inside their homes.

"It's gone now. I'm probably just antsy. Never mind. Here's the cab." We got in.

"Where to?"

Jim gave him the address.

"You got it."

We'd have gotten there faster if we'd walked. The streets were blocked by students from NYU protesting the war, and it took him about twenty minutes to get there. Walt and his partner were among the mounted cops weaving through the crowd, trying to keep a lid on the volatile emotions sparked by this war.

"Will there be a problem because you're late, Jim?"

"Simon will understand. There wasn't anything we could do about the protest."

"You can say that again, mac!" the cabby tossed over his shoulder. "Dunno why those damned kids couldn't protest somewhere else." He'd been complaining about it nonstop.

"I'll see you around six thirty, okay?" I said as Jim got out.
"Okay. How about if I bring some Chinese take-out?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Anything in particular?"

"No, Naomi and I lived in Chinatown for a while. No pork or shellfish. Otherwise, we like it all."

"I should have known." He started to lean down toward me, then stopped himself, aware we had an audience. "Be careful, Chief."

"You too." I watched as Jim walked into the bank.

"Where to now, Mac?"

I removed the paper with Robert Jameson's address from my pocket. "Take me to West 54th and 9th, please."

"You got it."

He made good time, and as he crossed 8th Avenue, I said, "Let me out over here." I wanted the opportunity to study the area.

"You got it, mac."

I gave him the fare and a tip, then got out and gazed up and down the street.

I'd lived all over the City, but while I'd never lived in an area like this, I'd gone to school with boys and girls whose parents had worked there.

It was quiet, as if the noise of the city didn't dare disturb the calm of this wealthy enclave.

This was a block of elegant old homes. The facades were beautiful and well-cared for, trees grew at the curb, and greenery spilled from rooftop gardens.

The few cars that were parked at the curb were Buicks and Oldsmobiles, no doubt belonging to those employed by the people who lived in this area of Manhattan. The Bentleys and Mercedes I imagined the residents drove - or were driven in - were parked in secure locations awaiting their owners' pleasure.

The address I was looking for was three doors away from 9th Avenue. A black wrought iron gate barred the short front walk, and I unlatched it, walked up the three shallow steps that led to the front door, and pressed the bell. After a minute or so, I pressed it again, and then I heard the no-nonsense staccato tapping of a woman's heels.

An attractive middle-aged woman, her hair a neat cap covering her head, wearing a slim houndstooth skirt and yellow silk blouse, answered the door. "I beg your pardon. I hope I haven't kept you waiting. May I help you?"

"I'm Detective Sandburg of Major Crimes." I showed her my badge. "Does Robert Jameson live here?"

"Yes, he does."

"I'd like to speak to him, please. It's a police matter, ma'am." I could see she'd been about to object.
"Sandburg? I've seen your name in the newspapers." She turned pale. "This has to do with those poor unfortunate young men?"

"It might, ma'am."

"Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." I stepped into the entry hall, and she closed the door behind me.

"I'm Mrs. FitzHerbert. I'm Mr. Gill's housekeeper."

"Mr. Gill?"

"This is his house. Is Robert... Mr. Jameson in some kind of trouble?"

"I just need to speak to him, ma'am."

"Of course. If you don't mind coming downstairs to my sitting room?"

"That will be fine." I followed her down a rather steep staircase to a lower level that was more well-appointed than some homes. There was dark paneling on the walls in the wide hallway, and a number of doors opened off it. "Nice paintings."

"Mr. Gill is very generous in allowing us to share in the beauty of his home. We were just about to take tea. Would you care to join us?"

"Oh, that isn't..." My stomach chose that moment to growl. "Sorry." I gave her a rueful smile. "I missed lunch."

"Not at all." Her smile was gracious. She led me into a large room. "Please make yourself comfortable, Detective. Robert. This is Detective Sandburg. He wishes to speak with you."

A white-haired older man dressed in a black suit was seated at the cherry wood table, reading a paperback with a lurid cover. He set it aside, rose, and gave a short, dignified bow before offering me his hand.

"How do you do, Detective."

"Mr. Jameson."

"Jameson, please. Have I done something wrong, Detective? It can't have been a driving ticket I neglected to pay. I don't drive." He offered a prim little huff of laughter at his witticism.

"No, sir. I just have some questions for you. You work here, sir?"

"Just Jameson, please. I'm the butler. Yes, I've worked for the Gill family for more than forty-five years."

"If you'll excuse me for a second, I'll just see how the tea is coming." Mrs. FitzHerbert left.

"Let me take your coat, please, sir."

I gave it to him, and while he was hanging it up, I took the opportunity to study the room. A brown leather sofa and brown leather chairs formed a seating area at the front of the room. There was a window high in the wall, but it was small, and floor lamps provided the lighting. Bookshelves had been built into one wall and were filled with paperbacks and the occasional hardcover.
There were a few feminine touches - a throw in soft earth tones draped over the sofa, an embroidery hoop with vibrant threads spilling over it, a vase of daffodils and tulips on the mantel. A fire burned in the fireplace, attempting to chase the March chill.

"This is a very nice room."

"It is, isn't it?"

Above the fireplace was a portrait of a middle-aged man whose dour expression was belied by the sadness in his eyes.

Mr. Jameson noticed my interest. "That is the late Mr. Gill."

"Ah, I've heard of The Amanda Gill Theatre." I wondered if Joel was having any luck with the elusive key to the wardrobe department. "Any relation?"

"Oh, my, yes! Mr. Gill purchased the old Siddons Theatre for his wife the year they were married. He had it gutted and completely renovated for her. She was a very gifted classical actress, you see. Her portrayal of Medusa was electrifying. They're both gone now."

"I'm sorry." I wasn't going to say it was unusual for the deceased owner's portrait to wind up in his butler's sitting room, but he must have seen my curiosity.

"That portrait was completed shortly before Mr. Gill passed away. Have a seat please, sir."

It felt weird having a man old enough to be my grandfather address me as 'sir'. For all her easy-going methods in raising me, Naomi would not have been happy.

"I'm Detective Sandburg, or Detective." I sat down. "Had he been ill? I don't mean to come across as inquisitive, but once a detective, always a detective, and he doesn't look that old..."

"It was an unfortunate accident. The family spent the summers at their home in the Hamptons. He and Mr. Christopher had gone swimming, and Mr. Gill hit his head on the sea bottom when he demonstrated an incautious dive. Mr. Christopher was just a lad at the time. He struggled to get his father to shore, but by the time he did, it was too late."

"I'm sorry. Was he an experienced diver?"

"No. As a matter of fact, Mr. Gill was not very fond of the water, and we were surprised that he... " He coughed and changed the subject. "Mr. Christopher was kind enough to offer this portrait to me and Mrs. FitzHerbert. It was to have been placed in the upstairs reception room, but of course I quite agreed with Mr. Christopher that the constant reminder of her loss was not good for his mother's state of mind. A portrait of her as a young woman is there instead, quite a lovely one, done by... Dear me, what was the artist's name? It wasn't Lancaster. After he completed the portrait of Mrs. Gill as Medea, he moved abroad. Carter? Colbert? I'm sure Mrs. FitzHerbert will know."

As if on cue, Mrs. FitzHerbert entered, pushing a tea trolley. She placed a cup and saucer in front of me, as well as a platter of sandwiches cut into neat triangles.

"Mrs. Fitz, what was the name of the artist who painted Mrs. Gill? Not Lancaster, the one before she and Mr. Gill were married?"

"That would be Collins, Mr. Jameson."

"Yes, of course. Collins. Please help yourself, Detective."
"Thank you." I reached for a sandwich and took a bite. "This is very good. Is that a touch of dill?"

"Yes! Oh, I'm so pleased!" She fussed with Mr. Jameson's tea, then looked into my eyes. "I will take my tea in the kitchen. Please feel free to continue your conversation."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She closed the door behind her, and I turned to Mr. Jameson, who was adding spoon after spoon of sugar to his tea.

"I imagine you'd like to ask me your questions now, s... Detective."

"Yes, sir. I'll get right down to it." I took out my note pad and was pleased to find a fountain pen in my pocket. I didn't recognize it, though. Had Jim slipped it into my breast pocket before we'd left his place? I smiled to myself and uncapped it. "Did you make a purchase from Tiffany's in the fall of 1965?"

"Oh, no, Detective. The items sold there are quite above my touch."

"Mine, also." I thought of the earrings that had caught my interest. "The thing is, a receipt from Tiffany's was made out to Robert Jameson."

"I'm very sorry, Detective Sandburg. I can't explain how that came to be - there could be any number of Robert Jamesons in a city this size - but I assure you it was not I who made that purchase."

"All right." I'd set that aside for the time being. "Did you happen to stay at the Bonheur Hotel at that time?"

"No. Definitely not. That was around the time Mrs. Gill passed away, and things were very hectic. For a time ... " His lips tightened, and again he changed the subject. "I did stay at that hotel once. However, that was in February of 1964."

"You remember exactly?" That was the information Neil had given me.

"Yes. You see, usually I spend the first week of my winter vacation at the Plaza before joining the Gills in Palm Beach. 1964 was the year Mrs. Gill fell ill. A stroke," he murmured as if confiding a secret. "She collapsed right on stage. Quite a shock to us all. Things were at sixes and sevens, and I was willing to forgo my vacation, but Mr. Gill insisted I take it anyway. However, I had waited too long to make a reservation. An English rock and roll group was staying there, you see, and the rooms were booked. I had to go elsewhere." He frowned.

"Was there something wrong with the Bonheur?"

"Oh, no, not at all. It was quite a nice hotel, and they took care of me very well. I mentioned that to Mr. Gill when I returned. Always such a thoughtful employer. I'm just a man of habit, you see, and they know me at the Plaza."

"So you didn't go back to the Bonheur in '65? Maybe for a ... tryst?"

There was a twinkle in his eye, and he leaned forward to touch my hand. "No, sir. As you can see, I am rather an old man. Young ladies have better things to do than tryst with me."

"Then it's their loss." I imagined Mrs. FitzHerbert might have something to say about it as well.

"How kind of you to say so."
"So you told Mr. Gill that you'd been to the Bonheur?"

"As I said. He was distracted at the time, with his mother so ill. He still took the time to inquire as to my holiday, such as it was."

"He sounds like a very considerate employer."

"He is, Detective." And, the perfect family retainer, he would never tell me if Mr. Gill were anything less.

"Did you follow the same routine this year?"

"I did, yes."

"And then you joined Mr. Gill in Palm Beach. How long..."

"Pardon me for interrupting, Detective, but Mr. Gill did not go to Palm Beach this year."

"Really? Why not?"

He poked up. "I am not privy to that information. Suffice it to say, he chose to remain in the city this winter." He was becoming agitated.

"I see." I'd get in touch with Simon Banks. Maybe he'd know something about Mr. Christopher Gill. I finished my tea and rose. "Thank you for tea and for taking the time to speak to me, Mr. Jameson."

I extended my hand.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

"That's the way it goes. We follow the leads, and sometimes they pan out, and sometimes they don't. This was obviously a dead end. Would you also thank Mrs. FitzHerbert for the tea? It was very good."

"I'll be sure to let her know. If you wouldn't mind, Detective?" He led me to a door that turned out to be an elevator. "My knees aren't quite what they once were."

"I understand. This is very convenient."

"Yes, it is." The elevator came to a smooth halt on the first floor. "Would you care to see the portrait of Mrs. Gill?"

"Yes, I would, if it isn't too much trouble?"

"Not at all." He showed me into a reception room at the front of the house.

Tall windows looked out on the street, and there was another fireplace. Above this one was a portrait in pastels, a lovely young woman, blonde hair spilling down past her shoulders in a riot of curls, blue eyes framed by thick lashes, lush, red lips, and a slender figure one could almost call boyish. Around her neck...

"Excuse me, Mr. Jameson, but what is she wearing around her neck?"

"Oh, that's her locket. She was never without it, you know, not until the day she passed from this mortal coil. Mr. Gill - the senior Mr. Gill - did not care for it. The style, you see. There were some quarrels..." He caught himself and coughed. "Let me show you out, Detective." And he walked me to the front door. "Good day to you, sir."
"Good day, Mr. Jameson. Thank you again."

He gave a slight smile and bow, and closed the door behind me.

That necklace looked an awful lot like the Sabatini links. And she wore it in the painting by Collins. If Mr. Gill didn't care for it, odds were another man had given it to her.

Maybe Frederick Collins would remember. Instead of going back to the One Five, I went to the Public Library on 42nd Street to see if I could find some information about him.
Christopher Gill is getting nervous. No, wait, he isn't!

I would not be afraid.

How had he learned where I lived?

Was he aware this was where I lived?

I stood at the window in the playroom at the top of the house, keeping my hands fisted so I would not tear at a ragged cuticle, and watched as he walked away from my home.

He had been here quite a long while.

I would not be afraid.

It was mere chance that caused him to come here. I had no doubt.

Later I would seek out Jameson and encourage him to talk about his meeting with the detective, his impressions.

I frowned, remembering the sight of Detective Sandburg earlier with that security guard. I recognized him from that last day with Randolph, who had taken pleasure in informing me his one-time pet had been a whore, someone who accepted money for letting his body be - I shuddered - used.

I sneered at him in my mind. I had no doubt Detective Sandburg was unaware of the life that man had once led.

I also had no doubt the whore would like nothing better than to take advantage of Detective Sandburg and debauch him.

I would need to make plans, but that was something at which I excelled.

I found myself tearing at that cuticle, and I forced myself to stop. I slid my hand into my pocket.

It had to be merely chance that had led him to my home.

I closed my fingers around the broken necklace in my pocket and gripped it tight.

I would not be afraid!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The pieces are starting to fall into place.

As soon as I walked into the apartment, I could smell the aroma of Chinese food. I was late for dinner.

"Sorry," I called as I hung up my overcoat.

"It's all right, Chief. Everything's still warm."

"Good. Just give me a couple of minutes to freshen up." I put my gun away and changed into jeans and a flannel shirt. I noticed that a brown paper bag was on the bed, and I peeked in. More of Jim's clothes. He hadn't taken the duffel with him that morning.

I grinned and started whistling *Mona Lisa* as I washed my hands, and then I went into the dining room.

The table was set for three, and Jim had opened the numerous cartons. White rice, beef fried rice. Egg rolls. Egg drop soup, wonton soup, hot and sour soup. Moo Shu beef, pepper steak, egg foo young, Moo Goo Gai Pan. Fortune cookies.

A pot sat in the middle of the table, and the small Chinese tea cups were at each setting, steam rising gently.

"You told me no pork or shellfish, so I tried to play it safe."

"That's so sweet of him, isn't it, sweetheart?" Naomi used her white lacquered chopsticks to help herself to white rice, and then pepper steak.

"Yeah. This is great." I took a helping of Moo Shu beef.

Jim had egg foo young on his plate. The chopsticks he used were the same black lacquer as mine, but where the Chinese figures on mine were red, my lover's were gold.

My lover. I ducked my head and smiled to myself. A foot nudged mine under the table, and I looked up to meet his eyes. The expression in them caused me to harden, and I hardened more when his nostrils flared, and he flushed.

"Is there something wrong with your dinner, sweetheart?" Naomi had noticed I'd stopped eating.

I licked my lips. "No, it's fine."

She smiled. "Then let's eat!"

****

Since I'd become a cop, I had made it a point not to talk shop at the dinner table. Naomi got the conversational ball rolling by telling droll stories about her latest visit to the West Coast, but I could
see something was bothering her.

"Mama..."

She shook her head, and I let it drop for the time being.

Jim spoke of his adventures on his trip east after he'd graduated from William Tecumseh Sherman Military Academy. The tales were riotously funny, but I was able to read between the lines, and I wanted to shoot his father.

"What about you, Chief? You have any stories you'd like to share?"

"Oh, please, sweetheart! Tell him about the time you were in the 5th grade and your class went to the Central Park Zoo..."

And I wound up telling him how a class trip ended when an elephant grabbed one of the kids' thermos bottles and played catch with it. That led to a story about another trip, this one to the Statue of Liberty, and then one to the Museum of Natural History.

"You had an interesting class, Chief."

"Keep in mind I was the youngest. I always looked so innocent, none of the teachers believed I could be involved in the mayhem that ensued."

"I'll bet. When did they wise up?"

I just grinned at him.

We began opening the fortune cookies and finished the last of the tea. Naomi smiled. "Mine says, 'Today is the tomorrow you wished for yesterday.'"

"Well, that's profound. What does yours say, Jim?"

"'You will find true and everlasting love. Cherish it.'"

"'No it doesn't! Does it?"

He grinned.

"You don't do innocent as well as I do. Let me see that."

"No can do, Chief. It's bad luck." He tucked it into his pocket. "What does yours say?"

"'Your true and everlasting love will be a pain in the ass.'"

"Blair!"

"Sorry, Ma." But she giggled. "Mine says, 'Live each day well and wisely.'"

"And you do, sweetheart."

I grinned, put my hand over my heart, and bowed, intending to say something clever, but then the phone rang. I was out of my chair and into the kitchen before anyone else could react. "Sandburg," I growled.

"Is Naomi Sandburg there?"
I didn't recognize the voice, but that didn't mean anything. "Who wants to know? Hans? Dorian? Jacques?"

"I... I hadn't realized she was so... so popular. I'm... I believe I may have made a mistake."

"Hold on! Don't hang up! Who the fuck are you this time?"

"I'm Mitchell Parker." He sounded disgruntled. "I met Naomi in San Francisco. I must say I'm surprised she's said nothing of me... "

Shit I cleared my throat. "Dr. Parker. I'm Blair Sandburg. I'm very sorry. Obviously I was expecting another phone call. Just a moment. I'll put my mother on the line." I covered the receiver. "Naomi! Oh." She had been standing in the doorway with Jim. "It's for you."

"It's Mitchell?" I nodded, and various expressions chased themselves across her face. She held out her hand, and I gave her the phone. "Mitchell. I must say I wasn't expecting to hear from you." Her voice was cool. "Yes, well, after your reaction when I told you... "

"Come on, Chief. We can start cleaning up."

I wanted to stay and listen, but Naomi made shoo-ing motions.

Reluctantly I followed Jim back into the dining room. "I had a feeling something was bothering her, but then I thought maybe it was just jetlag, like she said."

"Naomi will let you know what's going on when she's ready to talk." He rubbed my shoulders. "Why don't you tell me what you've learned?"

We gathered up the cartons, and I talked. I started with the visit to the Gill house. "That necklace in the portrait, Jim. It kind of looked like... " I told him about the Sabatini necklace, then blew out a breath. "And I don't know if this is just a shot in the dark, but we seem to have the theater running through this. Some of the victims worked in the Theater District, Paul Richmond's brother is a CPA for a firm that does bookkeeping for some theaters. I'm not sure where Randy Beautiful fits in, but I have a feeling Richard Lee and Noah Treadwell were just unlucky."

"Randy was a big supporter of the arts."

"Oh?"

"He liked chorus boys." Jim gave a sour laugh. "I know - so he asks me to move in with him, and how much further from a chorus boy can you get than me?"

"At least he showed one spark of intelligence." I cupped his cheek and brushed my lips over his. "He was a fool, Jim."

Naomi came into the room. She looked a little stunned. "Mitchell is here. In the City. He came after me! He wants to take me out for a drink."

"Do you want to go, Mama?"

"Yes. I... I think I do. If only to... Yes, I do."

"Okay. Why don't you put on something pretty? Jim and I will finish cleaning up."

"Thank you, sweetheart."
I would have expected her to almost dance on air as she went to her bedroom, but her tread seemed measured.

"Maybe I should wear my gun, just to let him know if he messes with my mama there'll be hell to pay."

"Sounds like a good idea, Chief. And after the kiddies go out... "

"Yes?"

"Maybe we can play cops and robbers?"

I laughed. "Yeah, maybe we can."

Sooner than I expected, there was a knock on the door - had he been calling from the phone booth on the corner? - and I went to answer it. The man standing there was about six feet tall; he held himself very erect, and I wondered if he'd been in the military. His close-cropped hair was prematurely gray, and his eyes were hazel and sharp as they ran over me from head to toe.

"Dr. Parker? I'm Blair Sandburg. How... "

"You're Naomi's son?" His surprise was almost insulting. What had he been expecting?

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"From something Naomi said, I thought... "

"You thought what?" Some of the hostility I was feeling must have bled through.

"I just expected someone... " He flushed and his mouth tightened. "... a little taller."

"What? I don't look Jewish?"

"Sandburg... "

"That's 'Detective' Sandburg." The phone rang, and I went cold. "Excuse me."

As I left him standing there, I heard Jim say, "Won't you come in, Dr. Parker? I'm Blair's friend, Jim Ellison. Am I tall enough?"

I smothered a laugh and answered the phone. "Sandburg." And held my breath.

"It's Joel. Sorry to call you at home, man... "

"No problem. What's up?"

"I just got in."

"Just now?" I looked at the clock. It was almost eight.

"Yeah. Talk about fucked up. By the time I got to the theater, they were getting ready for tonight's performance."

"What? That early?"

"That's what I thought. Anyway, I had to wait. I thought you'd want to know. All black wigs are
"Dammit!" I hadn't realized how much I was counting on that wig being missing.

"Yeah. I don't like it, Blair. What was the big deal in showing me the fucking thing?" Normally Joel was one of the most easy-going men I worked with. This had gotten to him. "I took hair samples to compare to the other wigs just to be on the safe side, but this seems like a real wild goose chase."

"Kind of makes you wonder why, doesn't it? Thanks a lot, Joel. You did a good job."

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow. I'm gonna take a hot bath and have my woman rub my feet."

"Sounds like a good idea. Take it easy." We said goodbye and hung up.

Everyone was sitting in the living room. Jim looked up when I walked in, and I shook my head.

"Just dotting another 'i'."

"Blair, Mitchell and I are going out for a drink."

"Where?" I held up my hand to forestall his comments. "Naomi has to be careful of her lungs. She has to avoid places with cigarette smoke."

"I'm aware of that, young man."

"Good. So where are you taking her?"

"I thought I would leave that up to her. This is her city, after all."

"I'll be all right, Blair. Don't fuss. And Mitchell is a doctor. He'll take care of me."

He'd better. "I'll wait up."

"You don't have to. Your mother is a grown woman."

"I have work to catch up on."

"Sweetheart." Naomi rested her palm against my cheek. "I'll be fine."

"Okay. Have a good time." I walked with them to the front door and took Naomi's coat from the closet. Parker took it from me and held it for her.

I approved of that. Grudgingly.

After the door closed behind them, I turned to Jim and said, "I don't like that man."

"I could tell, Chief. Come on. Let's finish cleaning up, and you can tell me the rest of what you learned."

~

At the Public Library on 42nd Street, I'd found a book titled *Classical Actresses of the American Stage*. As I'd hoped, there was a chapter on Amanda Gill. It touched in passing on the fact that she had married Maximillian Gill, also well-known in theater circles, and had one child, Christopher, but it dealt primarily with her professional career and contained a reproduction of Lancaster's *Medea*, which was actually scary in its capture of the madness in her character's eyes.
There had been no mention of Frederick Collins in the chapter about Amanda Gill.

A very helpful reference librarian finally managed to locate a slim vanity book on his life. The name on the flyleaf was Penelope Collins St. Paul, Frederick's sister. She had paid to have the book published, and it bordered on libelous.

According to *A Passion for Painting, or One Man's Talent Used and Abused By The Ill-Fated Love Of Another For The Stage*, Collins was the perfect child who'd grown into the perfect adult. His one fault was that he worshipped Amanda Peabody. He devoted himself to painting portrait after portrait of her. However, Amanda loved acting more than anything, and in order to pursue her career and achieve her goals had married a wealthy man with ties to the Broadway stage, who had become aware of her when he'd seen and then purchased one of Collins' portraits.

Afterwards, Collins, who at the time had been building a reputation as a fine artist, never painted another stroke.

He had remained in Connecticut, but on occasion, Amanda would come to visit him, continuing her hold on him and preventing him from getting over her and returning to his one true love - painting. It was hinted darkly that the child Maximillian Gill raised as his own was really Collins'.

In addition to the purple prose extolling his artistry and denigrating the woman he purported to love were colored plates of his works, including the portrait that had attracted Maximillian Gill - the young Amanda Peabody, blonde, blue-eyed, and with lush, red lips and a figure that was slender to the point of boyish.

The still life paintings and landscapes that Collins churned out were banal, but that portrait showed a hint of genius.

Maybe if he had continued to paint he would have rated more than a vanity biography.

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As luck would have it, neither book could be checked out, but I'd been able to make copies of the pictures, and I jotted down notes in my pad, using the fountain pen I'd found in my pocket.

"That was from you, wasn't it? Thank you, Jim." I drew my palm up his arm, over the curve of his shoulder to his neck, cupped the base of his skull. I brought his mouth down to mine and ran my lips back and forth over his. "Thank you. Anyway, the librarian couldn't find any record of his death, so I assume he's still alive and living in Connecticut. I'm going tomorrow to pay him a visit."

"I wish I could go with you."

"So do I. What about asking Simon?"

"I'd hate to do that to him. I've been taking some time lately. Albie was sick... "

"Yeah, Richie mentioned that. He didn't get a relapse on Sunday, did he? It can be chilly standing on the sidelines watching the parade."

"No, he's better. He's back at work."

"I'm glad to hear it. Well, maybe another time. What's going on there, Jim? Beyond the obvious, I mean," I clarified as his mouth curled in a grin.

"Albie's religion has no use for him." Jim's grin faded. "He was better after the holidays were behind
us, but now with Easter right around the corner..."

"So that was why no grace was said the other night?"

"Yeah. Richie's pretty bummed about it. He's stopped going to Mass. How do you deal with it, Chief?"

"I try to follow the two hundred forty-eight 'thou shalts' in the Torah, and beyond that, I figure it's between me and God and no one else's business. What about you, Jim?"

"I've got no religion."

That was one of the saddest things I'd ever heard. I put my arms around him and leaned into him. "I'll share mine with you if you like, Jim."

He rubbed his cheek against my hair. "Thanks, Chief."

"Y'know something? Maybe you ought to give some thought to joining the Police Force."

"How did we get from religion to the police force? Was that a detour into the Sandburg Zone?"

"Ass. I'm serious."

He turned red. "Oh, I... I don't think I have the brains for it."

"We could work together. Not at first, of course, but... Wait a second. Are you kidding? You're really smart! Besides, Simon's spoken well of you. He's pleased with your work. And with your senses - you really would make a great cop, babe."

"You... you think I'm smart?"

"Well, sure."

"And... and you first fell for me because of my mind?"

"Yes."

His kiss took my breath away. We were both shaking when we finally broke apart.

"I'll... I'll think about it, Chief."

"Cool."

"And I hear Naomi coming out of the elevator."

I glanced at my watch. "That wasn't much of a date. Unless Parker is with her?"

"No. She seems to be alone."

"Dammit!" I hurried to the door and opened it just as her key was about to enter the lock. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine."

Jim said, "I'll make some tea."

"Thank you. That would be nice." She removed her coat, and I took it and hung it up.
"Come into the kitchen, Mama." I slid an arm around her shoulders. I could feel the bones, and I wondered if she'd been eating.

"I knew there might be problems, our backgrounds are so different, but I thought... He seemed so caring and attentive in San Francisco, and when I said I had to come home because you needed me - I told him a little about your case... That was all right, wasn't it? It wasn't confidential, or anything?"

"No, that was fine, Mama. I didn't tell you anything you couldn't talk to others about."

"That's one good thing at least." She sighed in relief. "For some reason, tonight he got all, 'Your son is a grown man, he doesn't need you anymore.'"

"Which is a load of bologna. I'll always need you." I dropped a kiss on her hair.

"I know that, sweetheart. This is so stupid. I'm sorry, I should know better... But he came all this way, and I thought maybe... Anyway, I... we had an argument. He asked if I'd really needed to come home, and I said something about you having been unhappy because you'd had a fight with your boyfriend, and he got all huffy and said, 'But I thought you had a son, Naomi.' And when I said of course I did, he sneered. 'He's one of those?' 'One of who?' Of course I knew what he meant, but I wanted to see him squirm. Instead he said, 'Well, he won't be coming to visit. I'm sorry, Naomi, but if you wish to continue a relationship with him, you'll have to do it away from me.'"

"Dammit. Why didn't I wear my gun? I could have shot his pathetic dick off."

"I would have liked to have seen you do it, but he isn't worth it, sweetheart. Then he said, 'Is that Neanderthal in your apartment the one who gave him the black eye?' Sorry, Jim."

"It's okay. I've been called a lot worse things, although never that."

"So how did he react when you defended me, Mama?" I had no doubt that she had.

"He looked as if I'd kneed him in the privates. I told him - well, never mind what I told him - and then I left. Oh, Blair, I really thought... He's from San Francisco! The Summer of Love was only last summer!"

"I understand, Mama. I could go after him and beat him up," I suggested with an eager, hopeful expression, and as I'd hoped, she gave a watery laugh.

"Oh, I would like to see that. Misogynistic, homophobic asshole."

"Now I know where Blair gets his flair for words." Jim chuckled and put the cup of tea at her elbow.

"I'm sorry, Jim." She smiled and raised the cup to her lips, then paused. "Actually, I got that from my son."

There was a knock on the door. "Want me to kick him down the stairs, Mama?"

"No. We're civilized people, after all. Besides, he's vindictive enough to try to take your badge."

Jim's mouth became a grim line. "Then I'd kick him down the stairs."

She patted his hand. "Thank you, Jim." As I left the room, I heard her say, "I think you'll make a perfect son-in-law."

I started choking. I'd asked her about Jim moving in, and she'd agreed, but I hadn't thought she'd say something. I listened, but I couldn't hear Jim's response.
"What?" I growled, as I opened the front door.

"Uh... " It wasn't Mitchell Parker standing there.

"Sorry. Can I help you?" He looked familiar.

"I'm Gus Tremont. I live across the hall? I found this in front of your door."

It was Naomi's glove. "Oh. Thanks. My mother must have been so upset she didn't realize she'd dropped it."

"Is she all right? How is she feeling? I know you had to send her out of town for the winter. I've missed seeing her in the hall and the laundry room. I'm glad she's home."

"Gus. Do you drink tea?"

"Only if I have to." His smile was wry.

"How about a beer?"

"Sure. Schaefer?"

"All I have is Rheingold."

"Okay."

"Come on in." We went into the kitchen. "Naomi, Gus found your glove."

"Gus! How nice to see you! How are classes?"

He blushed. "They're going well. I teach physical education and shop at PS 123."

"Cool. I used to go there." I went to the fridge and got him a beer.

"Thank you. So did I. It's a small world. Naomi told me about it, and we figured I was a few grades ahead of you." He blushed even brighter red.

"Jim, want one?"

"Are you having one?"

"No, I think I'll skip it." I made a project of looking at my watch. "I've got to get up early tomorrow. I'm going to Connecticut."

"Then I'll skip it too."

"Why are you going to Connecticut, baby?"

"I have to question someone."

"That's right. Naomi's mentioned you're a cop."

"Oh?"

It was Naomi's turn to blush. "Down in the laundry room. Gus was waiting for his clothes to finish drying."
Hmm. They seemed to have done a lot of talking together.

"I'm glad you're home, Naomi. How are you feeling?"

"A little tired. The time difference, you know."

"I'll just say goodnight. Come on, Jim."

"Goodnight."

"Oh, goodnight. It was nice finally meeting you, Detective."

"Call me Blair."

"Sleep well." Naomi smiled after us, then turned to continue her conversation with Gus. "Perhaps you'll join me in the living room?"

I strolled into my bedroom, the bedroom I'd be sharing with Jim. "Sometimes what you're looking for can be right in your own back yard."

"Does it bother you that he's younger than Naomi?" he asked as I closed the door.

"No. As long as she's happy." I took a breath. "Speaking of happy - Jim, how would you feel about moving in here? My room is pretty big, and if you feel the bed isn't big enough for the two of us, I could buy a larger one. And I can get a dresser for your clothes too. And there's room in the closet. And..."

"How will Naomi feel about it? It's one thing to say..." He seemed flustered. Naomi could be outspoken, and her remark about him being her son-in-law must have thrown him. "But it's something else to have a person actually..."

"She's all for it."

"What do you mean, 'she's all for it'? When did you talk to her?"

"When you were in the bathroom. You were taking forever in there," I said with a perfectly straight face.

"I'd like to move in, Chief, but..." And now he seemed unsure, and I started to worry.

"But?"

"I moved in with Randy Beautiful, and we couldn't make a go of it."

"Yes, but you didn't... " love "... care about him."

"That's true."

"And you... " love "... care about me, don't you? I mean, if I got hit by a bus, it would bother you, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, it would."

"Well, then - what do you say? I'm off on Saturday. I've got Paul Richmond's funeral in the morning, but unless something happens with the case..."
"You're going to that boy's funeral?"

"Yes. It's the least I can do, since I can't seem to find his fucking killer." I bit my lip and turned away. I hadn't meant to say that. "Anyway, I can help you move..."

"Let me sleep on it, okay, Chief?"

"Okay." Had I pushed too hard? Was he not ready for such a big step? I determined not to push him further.

"Blair, I want to go to the funeral with you."

"Thanks, Jim. I'd like that."

We took a shower together. Jim slid down my body and gave me a blow job that nearly sucked my brains out through my cock. When I caught my breath, I returned the favor. Then we shared the sink to brush our teeth.

We climbed into bed, and I spooned against his back. His head was pillowed on my arm, and he folded his hands over mine. And maybe he didn't intend for me to hear him, but I did.

He whispered, "It would fucking break my heart, Chief."

And I smiled and fell asleep.

****

Being a New York City boy born and bred, I didn't drive. With buses and subways - and taxis if I was feeling extravagant - I'd never felt the need to learn. Plus there were a fleet of black and whites available.

Simon volunteered to drive me to Abington, Connecticut, where Frederick Collins lived. He was waiting in his car outside my building.

"Thanks a lot, Simon. I appreciate the ride."

"Glad to do it. Gets me out of the city for a bit." His eyes narrowed as he took in the fading bruise around my eye, and he clamped down on the cigar between his teeth. "Door?"

I nodded, and he growled but didn't question me further.

"I've dug up more information on Frederick Collins. He's a resident of the Windham County Nursing Home for Treatment and Rehabilitation," Simon told me as he merged into the FDR Drive. "Collins' sister visits him every day, and we should make good enough time that you'll be able to speak to her at the Home."

"He's in a nursing home?"

"Yeah."

"That makes sense, I guess. He's probably in his late 60s."

"Actually, it's also a facility to care for people who have... what did the director call it? 'Severe trauma to the head.'"

"Why are you mentioning this?"
"Through my charm and excellent phone manners, I was able to ascertain that Collins has been a resident since December of 1965, at which time he'd been released from Windham General Hospital. Where he'd been treated for - severe trauma to the head."

"That's interesting."

"I thought so." He grinned around the cigar in his mouth. "Seems your boy may have a fondness for whacking people over the head as well as strangling them."

I'd told him about Noah Treadwell being hit with a lamp before he'd been strangled.

"We've got to solve this soon, Simon."

"You will, Blair."

A drive that should have taken a little more than three hours took a little less than two and a half. Simon had a lead foot. Having ridden with the taxi drivers of Manhattan, it didn't bother me. Much.

He parked in the visitors' lot, and we stepped out of the car, both letting out a long whistle.

The main building was a white colonial with green shutters. Chimneys interrupted the expanse of the roof.

"I'm gonna look around," Simon murmured, and he approached one of the security guards. "Hi, there! I'm Simon Banks, of Banks Security in Manhattan? I'm thinking of expanding to nursing homes in the City. I wonder if I could talk to your supervisor about the logistics, one security man to another?"

They wandered off, and I entered the building. There was green carpet on the floor and flowers on console tables.

The place reminded me of a funeral home, and I shuddered.

I walked to the receptionist's desk. "I'm Blair Sandburg. I have permission to see Frederick Collins?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Sandburg. Mrs. St. Paul is already there. If you'll wait one second, I'll have someone escort you to his building."

"Thank you."

She picked up a telephone and murmured into it. Within a couple of minutes, a plump young woman in nurse's whites bustled up.

"Mr. Sandburg?" Her smile was sweet. "Hi. I'm Dominique. I'll take you over to Serenity Hall."

"Serenity Hall?"

"Yes. Our buildings are named for a calm, quiet emotion. This is what we strive for for our residents."

"Residents."

"Well, we don't like to refer to them as 'patients'. Dr. Birch, who is the administrator, feels it's degrading to label the people who live here."

"I see."
"I had a feeling you would. Tell me. Are you planning on using our facilities for a loved one? This is a wonderful place. Nothing but the best for our little family. Round the clock nursing care, our own ambulance for transport should the need arise, food prepared by a four-star chef, entertainment for those well enough to enjoy it... I assure you, if I could afford it, I'd want to live here!"

I made a noncommittal sound. It sounded too good to be true.

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Dominique led me to a duplicate of the Admin building, except that the clapboard siding was a pale yellow and the shutters were brown, down a long corridor, and tapped on a partially opened door.

"Mrs. St. Paul, I have a visitor for your brother."

Sitting at the bedside, reading to the figure in the bed from a Dr. Seuss book, was a stocky woman dressed in drab clothes that made her appear wan and washed out.

"Thank you, Dominique." She dismissed her with a glance. "How may I help you?"

"I'm Detective Sandburg from Major Crimes in the 15th Precinct in Manhattan, Mrs. St. Paul."

Her lips folded tight, and she put the book aside. "I must say it's about time."

"Excuse me?"

"I've said all along there was something fishy about my brother's accident."

At one time, Frederick Collins might have been a very handsome man, but now he was little more than a vegetable. The trauma to his head had been enough to cause brain damage. He was washed, fed, and diapered, much as a baby would be. His gaze was vacant, and a little pool of drool formed at the corner of his mouth. An aide in a pale blue uniform was just taking a cloth from the bedside table. She dabbed at his mouth, smoothed his thinning hair off his forehead, and left.

"'Accident,' hmmph!"

"Do you mind if I sit down, ma'am?"

"Yes, yes."

I pulled up a chair. "Why do you feel this wasn't an accident, Mrs. St. Paul?"

"That woman had something to do with it!"

"What woman?"

"That Amanda Peabody," she spat.

"Amanda Gill, you mean?"

"She'll always be Ammie Peabody, the little tramp from the wrong side of the tracks. First she used my brother to get her out of that tarpaper shack, and then she trapped that old man and broke my brother's heart!"

"I read your book about your brother. It was... "

"Oh, did you?" She preened, but then she frowned. "Of course they made me leave out so much of
the truth. Even though I was paying for it with my own money - well, my husband's money."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Weren't you paying attention, young man? She broke my dear brother's heart. 'She loves me, Pen,' he'd tell me. 'She'll be back, you'll see, and then I'll paint again!' He was never the same after she left him."

"No, ma'am. I mean how did your brother wind up in this facility?"

"Oh." She deflated, and her expression became bitter. "Even in death that... that witch could not leave him alone. Frederick was devastated that she was gone - he'd read about it in the newspaper - and I had hopes he'd recover his natural ebullience now that she was out of his life once and for all. But then a letter was sent to him. It was a bequest. Something was to be returned to him."

"You read this letter, ma'am?"

"Of course. My brother had no secrets from me. He was overjoyed, but time passed, and nothing. He wrote to the lawyers, and they called him and assured him there had been an error, and the necklace and locket would be in his possession as soon as they could possibly arrange it."

"A necklace and locket? The same ones that are on the portrait he painted of her?"

"Yes. That was supposed to be an engagement gift." She seemed to forget my presence, as if she were musing to herself. "I... I was the one who... Edward strayed. My husband. I learned of it of course. He never made any effort to hide his peccadilloes, but that time... We have no children, you see, he claimed he never wanted any, and yet... I threatened to leave him. I had before, but this time he knew I was serious. He went to Sabatini and had a brooch made for me. When Frederick saw it, he was enchanted. Well, his artist's eye. So he went to Sabatini and had that necklace created, along with the locket. It's only when you part the links that you realize they're hearts. He gave that wretched creature his heart, and when she left she took it with her."

"What happened, ma'am? The day of his accident?" I asked softly. So much pain and bitterness.

"I don't know. I wasn't there. Frederick was to meet me for luncheon. When he didn't arrive on time, I went to his bungalow. I found him on the floor in front of the fireplace in his studio. I summoned the doctor at once. He in turn called for the ambulance, and Frederick was taken to the nearest hospital. The police investigated because I insisted, but it was declared an accident. A ladder had tipped over while Frederick was attempting to hang a picture above his fireplace. He fell and hit his head on the mantel." She turned to face me. "And then he hit his head on the andirons."

"That sounds..."

"It was horrible. All that blood..."

"You say you wanted this investigated. Why?"

She leaned over and reached for the satchel at her feet. She pulled out knitting needles and a ball of yarn and handed them to me. They were joined by a book, a map of Boston, an Estonian newspaper, and two pressed pieces of wax paper containing a faded red maple leaf. "Frederick gave me this. He was always doing such thoughtful things... Ah. Here it is." She withdrew an envelope, similar to one a birthday card might be sent in. "He had this in his hand."

"May I?" I placed her things on the foot of her brother's bed and held open my hand, and she let the necklace slide into it. It was unbroken. "Is this a Sabatini, ma'am?"
"Only in a manner of speaking. Do you know his work?"

"Not really. I've seen it recently though."

"This was crafted by the son. Not worth as much, not nearly as skillful, and to those unfamiliar with the father's work, it could be palmed off as such."

"And this was in your brother's hand?"

"Yes. I thought we were going to lose him that day, but Frederick is strong. He lived."

He survived. This wasn't living.

"So the police ruled out foul play?"

"Yes, yes. Didn't I just say that?" She was becoming querulous.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I just want to get the facts straight." I handed her back the necklace, took a notepad out of my pocket, and found the pen Jim had given me in an inner pocket. I was pleased that I hadn't misplaced it. I wrote down everything she had told me, then sketched a copy of the necklace. No, that wouldn't do. "Mrs. St. Paul, may I borrow this necklace? I'll write out a receipt for it and return it to you as soon as I'm done with it."

"Take it."

"Thank you." I scribbled, Property taken as possible evidence from Mrs. P. St. Paul - one gold-colored necklace in style of Sabatini, to be returned at my expense upon the completion of this investigation. "Was there a locket too?"

"Yes." She reached into the neckline of her dress and withdrew it. "I wear it always so I never forget her perfidy." It was an asymmetric heart, pierced by an arrow whose tip was a ruby drop of blood. "Press the tip."

I did, and the locket snapped open. Inside were two pictures, Audrey Hepburn in a little black dress and an enormous picture hat and Steve McQueen wearing a suit and tie. Not exactly what I was expecting.

"Ma'am?"

"This was the locket on the necklace. If one didn't know... The original locket was opened with a miniature key, and the pictures within were Frederick and that woman. I discovered the imposture..."

"Did you notify the lawyers?" I tried to draw a picture of the locket, but it looked more like an egg yolk being stabbed by a safety pin.

"Why? To what purpose? It was obvious to me this was one final, cruel joke that woman saw fit to play upon my brother."

"May I borrow the locket also?"

Without a word, she removed it from the necklace she had it on.

Also taken as possible evidence - one gold-colored locket, in the shape of a flat, elongated heart, with arrow with a red tip, I turned it over, engraved on the back, 'To the One I'll Always Love.'
That was original. I signed and dated the paper and handed it to her in exchange for the locket. I put the two in the envelope and the envelope in my pocket.

"Do you know the name of the law firm who contacted your brother?"

"Off the top of my head, no."

I took out one of my cards and wrote on it. "If you remember, or if you find the letter sent to your brother, please call me? This is my extension at the Precinct, and on the back is my home phone number."

"Is this important?"

"It could be, ma'am." She took it. "Thank you." I put the pen in my pocket. Someone cleared his throat, and I looked around to see Simon standing in the doorway. I nodded to let him know I was almost done. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, Mrs. St. Paul. I'm very sorry about your brother."

"Thank you, young man." She pressed her lips together. "No one wants to hear me talk about Frederick. They think I'm just a bitter old woman, but he was the baby, you see, the only boy, a golden child, handsome and loving..."

"I hope you'll contact me, ma'am. Goodbye."

She picked up the book. "Where were we, Frederick? Ah, yes." Her eyes on him, she spoke the words without looking at the page. "Sighed Mayzie, a lazy bird hatching an egg: 'I'm tired and I'm bored And I've kinks in my leg...""

I glanced one last time at the man lying in the bed, then walked out.

"I need to make a phone call, Simon. There's a pay phone in the administration building. Y'know, I wish someone would invent a portable telephone. This is a pain in my rear."

"You mean like Dick Tracy's two-way wrist radio?"

"No, I mean like a regular telephone that wasn't tied to a phone line and that could be small enough to fit in my hand and be carried in my pocket. Oh well, I suppose it would be impossible to fit a rotary dial on something that small."

"Yeah, that sounds very science fiction to me. Do you have enough change?"

"I hope so. I didn't plan on making a long distance call."

Fortunately, the receptionist was prepared for a situation like this and exchanged my singles for quarters, dimes, and nickels, and I was able to reach Mr. Hammerstein.

"I have a necklace and locket I'd like you to look at, sir."

"Do the links you showed me the other day belong to this necklace? I must say I'm looking forward to seeing Sabatini's work again."

"No, this necklace appears unbroken. I'll need you to tell me if it's a Sabatini. It's supposed to have belonged to Amanda Gill at one time."

"Really? I seem to recall... Hmmmm."
"Deposit forty-five cents for three minutes, please," the operator interrupted, and I inserted two quarters.

"My dear boy, you should have reversed the charges! Where are you?"

"I'm in Connecticut right now."

"I may have something... It may take me some time to find what I have in mind."

"We should be back in Manhattan in a few hours."

"Splendid, Blair. Why don't you come directly here? I'll be quite delighted to have a look at this necklace. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, sir. Thank you. I'll see you soon. Goodbye, Mr. Hammerstein."

"Goodbye, Blair."


"Excuse me? This is the operator, and... "

"Sorry, ma'am. What can I do for you? Do I owe more money?"

"No, sir. I just wanted to let you know you're due a refund of ten cents."

"Cool. Just drop it in the return."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that. If you'll give me your address, I'll see that a check is mailed to you."

"For ten cents? That's okay. You can keep the dime."

"Oh, but sir, we're not allowed... "

"Please. There's my ride! I have to go. You've been very kind. Thank you again. Bye, now."

"You're such a liar! There's my ride!" Simon was laughing at me, and I pulled a face.

"Let's go before she calls back."

"Fine by me."

We left the administration building and crossed to the parking lot.

"Would you drop me off at Hammerstein's on 47th?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. How much did you hear of my conversation with Mrs. St. Paul?" I asked as we got in his car.

"Enough. You think the necklace and locket you have were substituted for the one that Collins was supposed to have received upon Mrs. Gill's death?"

"Yeah." I took it from the envelope and carefully parted the links. I couldn't see any difference to the segment I'd shown Mr. Hammerstein and Harry, but I wasn't the expert. "The necklace Mrs. Gill was wearing in the portrait painted by Frederick Collins was supposed to have been given to her by him.
Mr. Hammerstein has agreed to take a look at this one. I hope he'll be able to compare the two and tell me how successful someone would be trying to palm the one off for the other."

"You think Collins may have realized?"

"Possibly. He was an artist, with an artist's eye for detail, according to his sister. What was he doing on a ladder in his studio? It doesn't sound Kosher to me."

"You don't think the Connecticut PD covered up an attempted murder, do you?"

"Not covered it up, no. But she said herself everyone saw her as a bitter woman. They could have thought this was the same old song..."

"... but with a different beat?"

I laughed. "I was going to say, 'different verse,' but yeah. Mrs. St. Paul loves her brother. She wanted better for him than he got, she blames Amanda Gill for it, and she hasn't been shy in talking about it."

"A possessive sister?"

"She was willing to spend her husband's money to have her brother's biography published." I ran a hand through my hair. "There's something else, too. I took out the locket and waited until he was at a stop light, then pressed the tip of the arrow and showed him what was inside.

"This is odd? I've got a picture of Miss Lena Horne in my wallet that came with the wallet."

"Yeah, but this locket is supposed to have some meaning for these two people. If I gave you a locket, wouldn't you want to keep our pictures in it together?"

"Uh... Sandburg, are you trying to tell me something?"

"What?" He was snickering, and I realized what I had said. I cuffed his shoulder. "Ass. You know what I mean, Simon."

"I know. I'm sorry, I was just pulling your leg. You're right. If I gave something like that to my sweetheart, I'd expect her to at least change the pictures, if I didn't do that myself. What do you make of it?" A horn beeped politely behind us - the light had changed, but this wasn't Manhattan - and he accelerated.

"I'm not sure. Either whoever made the substitution didn't realize this locket opened, or else he didn't care. I really hope Mrs. St. Paul calls me with the name of the law firm that contacted her brother."

"Y'know something, Blair?" He merged onto the Interstate and gradually picked up speed. "It shouldn't be too difficult for a man of my talents to discover which law firm in Manhattan handled Mrs. Gill's will. I think I'll do a little nosing around. We'll keep this on the QT. No one needs to know about it unless something comes of it."

"Thanks, Simon. I appreciate your help. While you're at it, would you see what you can find on Christopher Gill also? His father died in an accident in the Hamptons according to the family butler. I'm not sure of the date, but the butler said Gill was a boy. I'd like to know if anything unusual was found."

"Hmmm." He put a cigar in his mouth and pushed in the cigarette lighter on the dash. I cracked a window. I didn't mind his chewing on a cigar, but when he smoked them...
Two and a half hours later Simon dropped me off at Hammerstein's and went to see what he could learn about the Gills.

Mr. Hammerstein welcomed me into his office. There were sandwiches - nothing like the dainty sandwiches that had been offered to me at the Gill residence; these needed two hands to be held - and a bottle of Coke on his desk, along with an enormous binder.

"Eat, my boy."

I took a sandwich and bit into it. Tongue. I grinned happily and set about demolishing it while he emptied the envelope, gave the locket a cursory glance, and set it aside.

"This is Sabatini, the son. The work isn't as intricate. Well, the boy had neither the patience nor the resources his father had. Nor the talent," he muttered as he studied the necklace under his loupe. "Do you still have the links with you?"

"No, that's been placed in the evidence room. I can get it for you."

"I'd like to see the two necklaces side by side, but look here, my boy." He opened the binder to a full page color photograph from the Rotogravure. It was protected, as was every page in the book, by plastic sheets.

The caption gushed, *The lovely and talented Amanda Gill at the reception after her stunning performance as Medea!*

She wore a gown of white velvet that pooled around her feet. It molded her figure and - surprisingly, since most blondes looked washed-out wearing white - suited her fair looks. Her golden hair was piled high. The wide, scooped, fur-trimmed neckline made a perfect setting for the necklace and locket.

"I like to keep track of my patrons, even when they aren't patronizing my shop." Mr. Hammerstein tapped the image of the necklace. "This is the work of Sabatini, the father. Sad that it was damaged; it would bring a staggering price otherwise."

"I imagine the sentimental value is much more."

"Hmmm?" He gazed up at me. "Yes, I imagine you're correct."

"Okay, Mr. Hammerstein. Let's make sure I've got this right. You would be willing to testify under oath that the necklace in this photograph and the links that I showed you earlier this week are one and the same?"

"I'd need to see the links again, but yes, I would have no problem swearing in court, my boy."

"Okay."

The links belonged to this necklace...

... which had belonged to Amanda Gill...

... which should have gone to Frederick Collins upon her death but instead had been replaced with a replica...

... which had been purchased at Tiffany's...

... which, odds were, had been recognized as a replica...
... which perhaps had led to Collins' 'accident'.

The purchase had been made by someone purporting to be Robert Jameson, whose address had been given as the Bonheur Hotel on Park Avenue, which had no Robert Jameson staying there on that date.

However, a Robert Jameson had stayed there at an earlier date. He worked and resided at 473 West 54th Street, the home of Christopher Gill, son of Amanda Gill, to whom the necklace had originally belonged.

"Thank you, Mr. Hammerstein."

He turned a few more pages in his scrapbook. "Ah. This might be of interest to you."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Christopher Gill."

He must have been about twenty when the photograph was taken. He was dressed in formalwear and stood beside his mother. There was almost a possessive air about him, while hers appeared almost flirtatious. She rested one hand on his arm and leaned into him, and his other hand covered it.

Even at twenty, he had rather broad hands, I noticed.

On his pinky was a ruby that covered his finger to the first joint.

"Mrs. Gill was an exceptional practitioner of her craft, but when it came to jewelry... " Mr. Hammerstein winced. "... she was hopeless. She felt the larger the better."

A holdover from her early years in a tarpaper shack?

"She came to me and chose that ruby to be set in a ring for her son. I told her the stone wasn't meant to be left like that, that I could cut it down and mount it in cufflinks and a tie clasp as well, even a watch fob, but she insisted."

"Do you have any photos of him that are more current?"

"I believe I have one taken at the time of his mother's funeral. It struck him very hard. They were very close, you see. Ah, yes." Obviously older in this picture, there were grief lines around his eyes and mouth. "I do believe this is the most recent picture I have. Odd. Perhaps he still hasn't come to terms with her loss."

"May I take this photo, Mr. Hammerstein?"

"Of course." He unclasped the binder and freed the page.

"I'll make sure this gets back to you as soon as I can."

"When you're done with it, my boy."

"Thank you. Thanks for lunch, too. When this is over, would you care to have dinner with Naomi and me and a friend?"

"Why, yes. Thank you. I would like that."

"I should inform you that Naomi is seeing someone. I wouldn't want you to..."
"My dear boy!" He hugged me, which surprised me, as he'd never done anything like that before. "My passion, for want of a better term, for your mother, is merely an old man's daydream. I never imagined... "

"You're not an old man, Mr. Hammerstein. And if things could have been different... Well, I'll call you to make the arrangements. I have to go now."

"I'll be seeing you then. Goodbye, Blair."

"Bye, Mr. Hammerstein." As I hurried out of his office, I passed a number of his employees lingering around his door, and I realized he had set aside his business in order to help me. I'd have to make sure that dinner was very special.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Gill makes it personal, and Blair determines to make him pay.

I brought my evidence to the Captain. "Good work, Sandburg. It might not be enough for an arrest, but it's enough to bring him in for questioning. Take a car and go get him."

Connelly was just coming into the Precinct, and I grabbed him. "We're going to West 54th Street."

"We are, Sandman?" But he grinned and got into his black and white.

But while I was getting my ducks all in a row, the son-of-a-bitch was going to ground.

"I'm very sorry, Detective Sandburg. Mr. Gill is not at home." Mr. Jameson didn't ask me in.

"Not at home, or not at home to me?"

"I assure you, sir, he is not at home to anyone. He told Mrs. FitzHerbert that he was going on a belated vacation and packed a small bag."

"He packed for himself?"

"He is capable of doing that."

"Why a small bag?"

"He doesn't need more than that. The house in Palm Beach has everything."

"Why take even a small bag then?"

He pokered up. "I'm sure I couldn't say."

"When will he be back?"

"In his own good time, I'm sure."

"And the staff?"

"He has given the staff time off."

"Don't they usually go to Palm Beach with him?"

"Usually, yes, but it is his choice, after all. If he wishes to be unaccompanied..."

"Which airport?"

"I couldn't say."

"Could his driver?" I could tell the more questions I asked, the less he liked me.
"He called for a cab."

"Which company?"

"I believe it was a Checkered Cab, sir."

"All right, I'll need the phone number and the address of the Palm Beach residence."

"I don't have that information."

"Does Mrs. FitzHerbert?"

"Robert, what is the problem?" Mrs. FitzHerbert approached us. "Detective Sandburg."

"Mrs. FitzHerbert."

"Dorothea..." He frowned at her, and she patted his hand.

"It will be all right, Robert."

"Ma'am. I'm looking for Mr. Gill. I understand he's gone to Palm Beach, and I'd like the phone number and address, please."

She sighed. "Of course. Have you paper and a pen?" She waited while I took them out of my pocket, then gave me the information.

"If he should get in touch with you, please let him know I'd like to see him." I handed her my card.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"That's all." The door closed in my face. "Well, that's one way to win friends and influence people."

I went down the steps and out to the street and the black and white that waited for me.

****

"Where to next, Sandman?"

"Back to the Precinct, Connelly. I'll call the Sheriff's Department in Palm Beach and ask if they'll drive by the Gill home." If Gill was there, H might get his wish to go to Florida. "I want to call the Checkered Cab Company too, and see if they can give me any information on the fare from Gill's house to the airport."

Hopefully, they could tell me which airport.

"There's a Checkered Cab garage a couple of blocks over. It makes sense he'd use something local, don't you think?"

"He might. Take us there. He's always bragging he's smarter than me, maybe he'll outsmart himself this time."

Connelly pulled to the curb and got out with me. His hand rested casually on the butt of his gun, and he sauntered along beside me, looking around.

"Where's the dispatcher?" I asked the men who were lounging by their cabs.

A short man came toward me. He hitched his pants. "Yeah?"
I took my badge out. "I want to talk to the cabbie who picked up a fare at 473 West 54th earlier today."

"That'd be me." The voice came from behind me.

I turned to face a lanky young man whose hair spilled into his eyes. He wore a black leather jacket. I didn't feel even a twinge of interest.

"Which airport did you take him to?"

"I didn't."

"What?"

"I didn't take him to the airport."

"Where did you take him?"

"He asked me to take him to 44th and 6th. That's what I did."

"Thanks! Connelly, let's saddle up!"

He waited until we were almost at the car. "He wouldn't take the chance of leading us directly to where he was going."

"Right. Smarter than us, remember? So he'll walk the rest of the way."

He was going to his mother's theater.

The two-way radio was squawking as we got into the black and white. "Car 17. Car 17."

Connelly picked it up. "Car 17. This is Connelly."

"See the man at NYU. Some idiot started a rumor that all deferments are being rescinded and everyone is being drafted."

"I'll bet that went over well."

"Yeah, they're really protesting. We have mounted units out, but they're calling for all the back-up they can get."

"I'm on it. 10-4."

"Hold on a second. Is Detective Sandburg with you?"

"Yeah." He handed me the mic.

"This is Sandburg."

"Detective, Captain Haines wanted you informed. A call was received in Major Crimes. It was The Strangler."

"And he didn't wait to talk to me? I'm hurt."

"Uh... Yes, sir. He said we were to tell you where we could find the next body."

"Bastard. Not you. Okay, where?"
"It's... just a second, I have it written down. It's somewhere in the East Village."

I started to get a bad feeling.

"Here it is. 852... "

"East 14th." My gut turned to water. Jim's address. "Tell them it's Jim Ellison's address. Get people down there now! Connelly will drive me. Over. Go, go, go!"

Connelly switched on the siren and floored it.

****

The protest looked more like a riot, and the streets were jammed: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Avenues down to Delancey Street and St. Marks Place were blocked with irate, panicked college students, bums, tourists - anyone who had nothing better to do than get in my way.

Traffic was going nowhere, and Connelly was forced to a halt.

"Get there when you can."

"Sandman, you can't... " But I was out of the cruiser and running.

Chants of "Hell, no! We won't go!" filled the air, shouts, screams. I shut them all out. A grinning student grabbed my coat.

"Hey, man, where ya goin' in such a rush? Got 'ny weed?"

"No."

"C'mon, man. Don't be like that." A particularly strenuous tug, and buttons popped off my coat. He saw my gun. "He's a pig!" he started howling. "He's a pig!"

The only thing these kids hated more than the government were the police. I shook loose, popped him one in the jaw to keep him from jumping me, and kept going.

I skidded around the corner and dashed down East 14th. There were squad cars in front of 852. I tore up the steps, fumbling for my badge. "Sandburg, Major Crimes," I panted.

"Upstairs," one of the officers told me, and I ran up to 3. The door stood ajar, and I barreled in, making a dash straight to the bathroom.

My knees gave out, and I dropped to the floor. The room was empty.

I leaned against the doorframe, struggling to catch my breath. Finally I staggered to my feet.

A floorboard creaked behind me, and I spun around, my gun drawn and my finger tightening on the trigger.

"Chief?"

"Jim!" I dropped my gun and threw myself at him. "You're alive! You're alive!"

"I'm alive, Chief." He held me until the shudders stopped.

"Sorry." I ran the heels of my hands under my eyes. "Who... who did he kill?"
"No one. Not this time. He was going for Albie, but... Did you use your key to get in?"

"No, the door was open."

His head tipped back, his eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared. "The bastard! The goddamned son-of-a-bitch bastard! He was in here!"

"You can smell him, Jim?"

"Yes." He shuddered. "I can't stay here."

"We won't. Let's go downstairs."

"No, you don't understand. Knowing he was in my place, touching my things, maybe... " He swallowed and stared at his bed. The bedspread didn't seem wrinkled, but I didn't have Sentinel sight.

"Okay. So you'll spend tonight at my place, we'll get you moved out tomorrow. Will that make you feel better?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so." He leaned against me for a second, and I took the opportunity to press a reassuring kiss to his lips.

"Okay. Is Albie all right?"

"He will be."

We went down a flight and jogged toward 2E. A group of older tenants was gathered around the door. The women carried rolling pins and brooms, the men baseball bats.

Riley was just coming out.

"Do me a favor and dust 3E? I... " I glanced at Jim. "I have a feeling he was in that apartment too."

"Got it. I heard you may have a suspect. Get me his prints. If they match the ones from today and from Norbert Himmel's and Noah Treadwell's, I'll help you nail his ass to the wall. Y'know something, Sandman? I don't mind the extra work as much when he screws up."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." I squeezed his shoulder. "Take a uniform with you, though? Okay?"

"Sure. We've got enough of 'em. Hey, you! Flynn! You're with me!"

Jim and I made our way through the small crowd. "Go on home, folks," I said gently. "Nothing to see here."

"Officer." One of the women touched my arm.

"Detective, ma'am."

"I'm sorry, Detective. Would you let Richie know that we'll put his groceries away?"

"I will, thank you."

We went into Albie's apartment. It was a little larger than Jim's, but the layout was the same.
Albie was lying on his bed, a compress across his eyes and an icepack on his throat. Richie sat beside him, holding his hand, glaring at the men in the room as if daring them to mock him.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He's alive."

Albie tugged off the compress. "I can answer for myself," he croaked.

"What happened? I thought you had gone back to work. What were you doing home so early?"

"He had a relapse. I told him he was goin' back too soon, but did he listen to me? No. I'm just a... just a stupid old... " Richie buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook.

Albie sat up with a little difficulty, and the icepack fell aside. Vivid bruises were forming on his throat. He reached for Richie and held him.

"You're not," he murmured against his lover's neck. "I'm sorry. I should have listened."

Someone touched my arm, and I turned. "Joel. H. I'm sorry. I didn't see you..."

"The scene's secure. We'll clear out the hallway, okay?"

"They're still there?"

"I get the impression they like Mr. Malloy and would have given The Strangler 'what for' if he'd hung around."

"Yeah. Thanks." I took out my notepad and the pen Jim had given me. Both my men raised eyebrows to see I had one with me. "Come back when you're done. You can leave too," I told the uniforms, and I waited until Jim had shut the door behind them. "Albie, I have to ask you some questions."

"Can't it wait?" Richie sat up and pulled out a handkerchief to dry his face.

"No, I'm afraid it can't."

Albie stroked Richie's cheek. "Would you get me a glass of water, please?"

Richie sighed, hauled himself to his feet, and crossed to the tiny kitchen.

"I came home early because I wasn't feeling well."

"I was goin' to the grocery store to get a chicken to make him some soup," Richie said from the kitchen area. "I thought it was safe enough to leave him alone for twenty freakin' minutes."

"Oh, that reminds me. Your tenants are taking care of the groceries you bought."

He nodded. "They're good people."

"Go on, Albie."

"I was lying down. There was a knock on my door, and someone said, 'Mr. Malloy? Mr. Albert Malloy? It's a moment of your time I'd be likin'. ' I said, 'Go away, you don't have anything that interests me.'"
"I taught him that," Richie gave him the water, and Albie took cautious sips. "The kid was openin' his door to every holy roller an' salesman with a smooth pitch in the south of Manhattan. I swear they must've had a telegraph system. Go to 852 East 14th. 2E is a pushover." He scowled, but Albie didn't seem to mind.

"Anyway, he said, 'I'd be thinkin' your immortal soul would be of some interest to ye.'"

"Barry Fitzgerald."

"Excuse me?"

"It isn't important. What happened next?"

"Well, I looked through the spy hole. In spite of what Richie might think, I'm not stupid. But it was a priest. So I let him in."

Richie groaned. "An' they let you cross the street?"

"Can you describe him?" Not that it would do much good.

"He was about 6 feet tall. Brown eyes. Orange hair." I raised an eyebrow. "Well, it was supposed to be red, but you know that shade?"

"Yes." I jotted it all down. Maybe we would find that one of the recent plays at the Amanda Gill called for an actor to wear that color wig.

"Anyway, I told him he was wasting his time. I was worried about my soul, but the Church wasn't. The Church had turned its back on me, not the other way around. 'Suppose we talk about it, son? I'm Father Kevin O'Doul.' I asked him if he wanted some tea. 'Truthfully, lad, it's up to me eyeballs in tea I am. Now if you've somethin' a wee bit stronger?' Father Donovan always liked to have a 'drop o' the craither' as he liked to call it, so that didn't really surprise me. 'I only have some port, Father,' I told him. 'That'll be fine. I don't think he liked it, though. He made a face, and when he saw I was watching him, he kind of laughed and said it went down the wrong way."

"I'll give him 'goin' down the wrong way," Richie growled.

"Father O'Doul said, 'Ye look tense, me son. Let me see if I can work some o' that tension out of ye.'" Albie looked right at me. "It was seductive, Blair. He leaned down and whispered in my ear, 'Think how much better it will be with your heavenly father, safe in his lovin' arms.' I miss going to church so much."

"Meanwhile," Richie said, "I'd seen him! When I was walkin' down the street, I passed him, an' he says to me, 'Top o' the mornin' to ye, me son.' I just say, 'Hullo, Father,' an' kept on walkin', not thinkin' much of it, an' I'm on my back from the store before it suddenly hits me. I mean, it's 3 o'clock in the afternoon! So I go tearin' home..."

"And it's a good thing." Albie was speaking more clearly. "Father O'Doul kept working the muscles in my shoulders, and every once in a while he'd dig into the muscles at the base of my neck, whispering to me all the while. And then he whispered, 'You'd like to be with the father in heaven, wouldn't you, Albert?' That was what pulled me out of it. No one calls me Albert, not anyone who cares about me. But then his hands were around my throat, and he was choking me."

"An' I come poundin' up the stairs, yellin' Albie's name at the top of my lungs. The door's locked, but I bust through it in time to see his skinny ass disappearin' out the fire escape, the fuckin' bastard! Albie's on his bed, almost unconscious. An' then Jim showed up. He called the cops an' a doctor,
'cause I was fallin' apart."

"No you weren't, Richie. You were taking care of me."

"I didn't call the cops," Jim said. "I called the doctor, but I assumed you called them, Richie."

"I didn't."

"Father O'Doul called them." I wondered if he'd called from Jim's apartment. "What were you doing home early, Jim?"

"He called me. Chris." His mouth tightened.

"At the bank?"

He nodded. "He didn't know I would... I recognized his voice. He told me it was a shame something bad was going to happen to my friend, Albert Malloy. He said I had fifteen minutes to get home to stop it. He knew I'd never make it home in fifteen minutes."

And when he did get home, he'd be anxious and stressed, and he'd walk right into The Strangler's lethal grip. My fingers tightened on the pen. I'd heard everything I needed to hear. I put it and my notepad in my pocket.

"I need to talk to the officers first on the scene about this," I said, and I was relieved when Jim gave a brief nod. I walked to H, who had just come in. "Take the rest of Mr. Malloy's statement, would you?"

"Sure thing, Sandman."

"Albie, this is Detective Brown. He'll take care of you."

"Oh, but... "

"He'll take care of you." I left Albie's apartment, keeping at a normal pace, and spoke softly to Joel. "I have something I need to check out. You've got the scene, okay?"

"Okay." He gave me a curious look that I pretended not to see.

I went down to the first floor and out of the building, where it no longer looked like a mob scene. A man with a doctor's bag was walking up the sidewalk. His eyes widened at the sight of all the police cars.

"Are you here to see Albert Malloy?"

"Uh... yes."

"2E. Take good care of him."

I went to a black and white at the curb and looked at the officer standing next to it.

"Is this yours, Officer... ?"

"Denison. Yes, sir."

"You know who I am?"
"Yes, sir."

"Good. I want you to drive me to the Amanda Gill Theatre on 42nd and 5th."

"Yes, sir."

He went around the car and got behind the wheel. I climbed into the passenger seat. "No need for the siren. Just get there the quickest way you can."

****

There was a sign on the door. *Due to unforeseen circumstances, this Theatre will be closed for this evening's performance. Tickets will be exchanged for another performance, or your money will be cheerfully refunded. - Christopher Gill, Owner.*

"Come with me." I put my hand on the door and pushed. It opened. Luck. Good or bad, I wasn't sure.

"I am sorry, sir. This theater is closed." A youngish man with sandy hair and brown eyes crossed the lobby. Perched on his nosed were black-framed glasses. He was about 6 feet tall, dressed in corduroy trousers and a cardigan sweater with leather patches on the elbows.

"I'm Detective Sandburg of Major Crimes." I showed him my badge, then replaced it in my pocket.

"So you are Detective Sandburg. I've been reading about you in the newspapers."

"And you are...?"

"Oh, I am Ernest Worthing."

I felt as if someone had walked over my grave.

"Mr. Worthing." I offered him my hand, and he shook it. "Is Mr. Gill available?"

"No, I am sorry. He is out of town."

"Why is the theater closed tonight?"

"Mr. Gill does that periodically. Usually it is in honor of Lady Amanda, but this time..."

"Lady Amanda?"

"Amanda Gill. This is her theater, you know. She was practically theatrical royalty. Her collapse onstage was so dramatic. She would have been so pleased with everyone's reaction."

"If the theater is closed, why are you here?"

"It is my job to see things run smoothly. Whether the theater is open or not is immaterial."

"You're the manager, then?"

His lips parted in a thin smile. "Yes. But where are my manners? Would you care for something to drink, Detective? Er... you also, Officer?"

"No, thank you, not while I'm on duty. Could you show me around the theater?"

"I really should not, but... "
"I can get a court order, but that's so... " I smiled at him.

"All right. First off, let me introduce you to my... to my Lady Amanda." He pointed out the framed photo of a woman portraying Cleopatra. "'Hast thou the pretty worm of the Nilus there, that kills and pains not?' 'Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have Immortal longings in me... I am fire and air... ' Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra.'" He gave a self-deprecating smile. "I always wanted to act, but alas, had not the talent for it."

"That's too bad. You would be a very good actor, I think, going by what I've just seen."

"You are too kind. M... Lady Amanda did not think I had the talent, and she was the expert, after all. But come. Let me give you a tour of the theater."

He led us through the orchestra, mezzanine, balcony and private boxes, the dressing rooms - turning on the lights as we entered, and turning them off as we left. While he was busy with that, I reached into my pocket and tore a piece of paper out of my notebook. I managed to get it to my mouth unseen, and worked it into a damp wad.

"Where does this lead?" I pushed open a door. The light above it went on. "Oops. Sorry."

"That is the door to the alley."

"Really?" I poked my head out and looked up and down the alley. It was the same as any alley in the city. "That's so interesting!" I got the spitball out of my mouth and stuck it in the lock so the bolt wouldn't secure.

Finally we returned to the lobby.

"Impressive, is it not?"

"As you say. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Worthing."

"Sir?"

"Later, Denison. He's such a philistine." I shook Worthing's slightly damp hand, and we left. Once we were back on the street, I scrubbed my hand on my trousers and turned to Denison. "Sorry about the philistine remark."

"That's okay. Sir, he didn't show us the basement or the roof."

"I know. Or Gill's private office. Makes you wonder why, doesn't it?"

"I wasn't sure you... He was very charming."

"Much in the same way a Black Widow spider is charming, I imagine. I want you to move your cruiser to the end of the block, call for backup, and wait there until they come. I'm going around to the alley."

"Sir?"

"What?"

"You might find this useful." He handed me a flashlight.

"Thanks." I sauntered to the space between the two buildings, then casually strolled down it. I found the door whose lock I had wedged open and slipped inside.
It was very dark, and I was grateful for Denison's flashlight.

There was nothing on the roof. There was nothing in the basement. Winding metal stairs led up, and I climbed them, to find myself on the stage. There was illumination caused by the faint lights at the end of each aisle. I turned off the flashlight and stepped to the stage, intending to check out the orchestra pit.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"You should not have returned, Detective Sandburg. I did not want to hurt you."

I reached for my gun, to find an empty holster. I remembered dropping it in Jim's apartment. I'd have to bluff it. I slid my hand into my pocket. As long as no one expected me to shoot, I might be able to pass it off for a gun.

I turned toward the voice. "Mr. Gill, I presume," I started to say, and something slammed into my face, the flashlight went flying, and I hit the stage, out cold.

****

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Mother. You are in such a state." Who was talking?

Who was he talking to?

The surface under me was hard - I had to be lying on a floor. My arms were behind my back, and it was very uncomfortable.

Something was running down my throat, and I began to choke.

"Let me help you up, precious one." His arm came around my shoulder, and he eased me carefully to a sitting position. "Lean back. When you are feeling more the thing, I will take you away, but for now, lean against my desk."

Now something was running down my face, and I tried to blot it, but found my hands were secured behind my back.

"No, no, do not struggle, Mother. I have had to restrain you, as much as it pains me to do so."

"What happened?"

"You do not remember? You collapsed on stage. You gave me such a terrible fright, Mother."

"Why do you keep calling me 'mother'?"

"What else should I call the woman who gave birth to me?"

Oh, shit. Someone's trolley seemed to have jumped the tracks. "Christopher?"

"Oh, splendid! You know it is I! I missed you so much, Mother."

"Of course..." He'd called me 'precious'. Maybe that was a name they'd used between them? "... precious."

"There is no 'of course' about it. For so long you just lay in your bed, drooling and... other things." There was distaste in his voice. "You wasted away, and there was nothing I could do. And then you... But no, that must have been a nightmare, because you are alive and with me once more!"
"That's right, precious. And mother is better now. So you can untie me."

"I cannot, Mother. I am so sorry. Things have not gone well, since... " He ran his hand over my... hair? What the hell was on my head? I turned my head and could see golden curls spill over my chest and shoulder. "Oh, dear. Your face is dirty. Let me clean you up. Then I will tell you of my plans."

I licked my lips, tasting blood on them.

He rose and left the room, and I started twisting my hands. While I worked to get them free, I was able to get a good look around the room.

This must be his private office. There were paintings of Amanda Gill in various roles - mostly classical from the looks of the costumes, but one was as a plain woman in a plain dress - as well as a bust of her that looked similar to the painting of Medea.

There was also what appeared to be a miniature reproduction of the stage with its brocade curtain. Off to the right was the office door. It could have been a million miles away for all the good it did me.

Blood was oozing down my wrists now, and the torn skin felt on fire, but I hoped the blood would act as lubricant.

I was nauseous and dizzy, cold sweat was beading at my temple and on my scalp under the wig.

"Here, now, Mother. A nice, soft wash cloth to clean your face. However did you manage... "

I held myself still and let him wipe the blood from my face.

"I have missed you so horribly, Mother." He knelt before me, his hands on my shoulders. "Soon I will take you away to Palm Beach. We were happy there, were we not? You will be safe and protected there."

"Christopher... " I folded my fingers together and managed to ease the heel of my right hand through the first of the loops.

He tipped my chin up and ran his thumb from the corner of my lips to my jaw. He frowned.

"Your skin is rough. I should never have left your care to that incompetent nurse!" The pressure on my chin forced my mouth open, and then he tried to kiss me.

I turned my face away. I could feel tears on my face. They weren't my tears.

"Kiss me, my precious one. Please kiss me."

"Sandburg!" Joel's shout filtered up from the floor below.

"Blair!" H sounded frantic.

"Chief!" Jim sounded... deadly.

"Shh!" Gill ordered, his hand over my mouth. "You must be quiet!"

Was he fucking nuts? I bit at his palm, and he hissed in pain and yanked back his hand.

"I understand, and I forgive you. This has been too much for your nerves. You were always so high-strung, Mother."
I opened my mouth to yell. His hands encircled my throat.

"They will find us here, my precious one, together in death as we always were in life." He began to squeeze. "As we were always meant to be."

Blood was ringing in my ears, and my vision was blurring. I was not going to fucking die with my lover a dozen steps away from me!

Abruptly, my hands were free. I slid them between his arms, drove them outward, and tried to break his hold on me, but I was still shaky from whatever had knocked me out, and I didn't have the strength or coordination.

I dug my nails into his hands, desperate to loosen them, tried to reach his eyes to gouge at them, all unsuccessful.

Jim's pen! I scrabbled in my pocket, searching for it, and it was in my hand, and I used thumb and forefinger to unscrew the cap, and then I stabbed at him.

He must have sensed my movement - he reared back, released his hold on my neck, and struck out at my hand, and instead of stabbing him in the heart, my blow was deflected and grazed his thigh. I could have howled in frustration.

But it wasn't going to stop me. Wheezing and gasping, I reached between us, got my hand on his nuts, and twisted, and he was the one who howled.

"He's somewhere above us!" Jim shouted.

"But where?"

I rolled out from under Gill and tried to call out for help, but my vocal chords had been too abused. I managed to get to my feet, grab up the bust of Amanda Gill, and sling it at the wall, hoping the sound of marble hitting the paneling would alert Jim more closely to my whereabouts.

Instead it went sailing through the little curtain of the miniature stage to crash to the floor below.

There were shouts.

"What the fuck?"

"Police, Gill! Show yourself!"

And then the door burst open, and Jim stood there looking for all the world like an avenging angel. In his hand was a gun. My gun.

My knees began to give way, and he caught me before I hit the floor.

"Where'd he go?"

"Huh?" I rasped. "He's right... " I turned to point to him, but he wasn't there.

"Taggert! Brown! I've got Blair. He's up here." His pupils expanded and his nostrils flared. "He touched you. He had his hands on you. He hurt you." He touched my nose with careful fingers, then ran them down my throat.

"I'll be okay," I whispered hoarsely. How had Albie been able to speak so clearly? "I need some water." I hoped that would distract him.
"Taggert, get Blair a glass of water, would you. Gill has gone this way." He pointed toward what looked like a solid wall.

"How do you know?"

"I know. Stay with Blair."

"Jim, promise me you won't kill him."

His eyes became flat and feral. "I won't."

"You won't promise, or you won't kill him?"

"I won't," he repeated. He quartered the wall with sensitive finger tips, then pressed something. A section of the wall slid open, and he disappeared into it.

I tried to stand, but lost my balance and fell on my ass. The wig dipped in front of my eyes, and I couldn't see anything. I yanked it off and threw it aside.

"Fuck this."

"Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?" H tried for a grin, but his expression was tight. "Jesus, you sound awful, Sandman! You look awful too!"

"Hey!"

Joel shoved a paper cup filled with water into my hands. "Shut up and drink this. The doc will be right up to take a look at you. I'm going after your friend."

"Hey!"

"Shut up! Ah, Doc!" He sounded relieved. "He's all yours!"

"I'm going with you, big guy," H said to Joel.

"Hey!"

As one they turned and said, "Stay put!" then disappeared into the wall. I scowled after them and drank the water. It felt good.

"Well, Detective Sandburg. So you're the Sandman. I'm pleased to finally meet you, although not under these circumstances, of course. Where's the light switch is this place?"

"Beats me." I figured I was entitled to sulk. I'd got hell beaten out of my face, and everyone else got to have fun chasing down the bad guy who'd done it. This time when I tried to stand up, I was prepared for the vertigo and didn't fall. I made it to the office doorway and found the light switch where I'd suspected it might be. I pressed it, and the room was illuminated.

"Sit down, please, Detective. Before you fall down. I won't have any qualms in sending you to Bellevue." He pushed me into a chair and shone a little flashlight into my eyes. "Pupils equal and reactive. Tip your head back, will you?" He felt my nose, put pressure on it, and there was an almost audible snap, more felt than heard.

"Hey!"

"It's okay."
"That's easy for you to say. It isn't your nose that's falling off your face."

"It's not falling off your face, Detective. It wasn't even broken."

"Not before it wasn't."

He ripped open a small packet and removed a gauze square. "I'm going to clean that blood off your face." He opened a bottle that contained clear liquid, poured it on the gauze, and set to work on my face. He made a 'tsk-ing' sound. "You've even got blood in your hair."

"I was lying down when I came to."

"You were unconscious? No one told me that."

"No one asked me. And I don't know for how long," I told him before he could ask.

"I don't like that. Maybe I'd better have you transported to a hospital."

"I'll be okay at home," I assured him. "I have someone staying with me." My eyes were fastened to the opening in the wall.

"Oh, you know the drill, do you? Why aren't I surprised? All right. You're going to have two shiners, just so you know."

"Shit."

"Just tell them you walked into a door."

"Like they'll believe that."

"Believe what, Chief?"

"Jim!" Now that he was back, I could acknowledge to myself how worried I'd been, how I'd been rambling to distract myself. "JIM!" There was blood all over him.

I tried to stand, but the doctor kept me in place with irritating ease.

"I'm okay, Chief. This isn't my blood."

Joel and H were right behind him, looking grim. "Gill is dead. That passage leads to what must have been Amanda Gill's dressing room. Fucking thing looks like a shrine. We found him in a pool of blood."

"What happened?" Not that I cared, but I wished I'd been with Jim. If he'd killed Gill, I could have made it look as if I had. I tried to stand again.

"He bled to death."

I dropped back into the chair with a thud that jarred my tailbone and my sore nose. "How the hell did that happen?"

"This, Chief." Jim held my pen, using two fingers. It was covered in blood. "It was beside him."

"I thought I missed him. I tried to stab him with it... "

"His pants' leg was soaked. You got him in the thigh."
"Sounds like you must have penetrated the femoral artery, Detective." Doc looked around on the floor. "Not much blood except for some over there."

"That's probably mine. My nose was bleeding pretty good for a bit."

"You should see the other room. Looks like someone took a paintbrush soaked in red and splashed it all over the room."

"Arterial spray. Makes sense," the doctor said as he took out a small bandage and secured it over the top of my nose. "There. That should keep your nose from falling off. I'm just kidding, Detective!" He responded to my disbelieving glare. He saw my wrists and started to work cleaning and bandaging them, which was just peachy. Everyone was going to think I'd tried to slit them. "As for the pen, as long as he left it in place, it plugged the wound."

"Why remove it then?"

He shrugged. "It hurt? It was uncomfortable? Maybe he didn't realize how serious it was. Whatever the reason, once he removed it, it was just a matter of time."

"So it's all over?" Jim was surprised by the suddenness of it. Cases could be like that sometimes. And sometimes they could drag on forever. Six men dead. I thought of Gill's father. That we were sure of.

"All except the paperwork." Joel took the empty paper cup from my hand.

"And that's gonna take a while." I hauled myself to my feet. "Oh, well, no time like the present."

"Not you, Detective. You're taking it easy this entire weekend."

"We found blood on the stage, Chief."

"That would be mine. Something hit me in the face."

"There was one of those sandbags they use for weighting the scenery? It was hanging there. He probably nailed you with that."

"Just my luck."

"Okay." Doc packed up his kit. "I'm done here. You know you need to be wakened every hour during the night?"

"I know. Jim?" I was feeling too wiped out to be discreet.

"I'll take care of it."

The doctor glanced at the open panel in the wall. "What's down there... Has anyone called the coroner?"

"I'll do it," Joel told him. "May as well get Riley down here while we're at it. Come on, H."

We were alone for the moment.

"Can I have my gun back, Jim?"

He handed it to me, and I checked it unobtrusively.

"I put the safety back on."
"Thanks." I slid it into my holster. "How did you know I didn't have it?"

"Riley brought it back down. I went looking for you, but I couldn't smell you or hear your heartbeat, and I realized you weren't on the premises. That was when the call came in from the officer you'd left to wait outside the theater." Jim scowled at me. "It looks like I'll have to join the police force, if only to keep an eye on you."

"Do you mind, Jim?"

He came to me and put his arms around me. "No, Chief. I don't mind at all."

We stayed like that until he heard footsteps on the stairs leading to this office, and when Dan and Riley, Joel and H and a gaggle of uniforms entered, we were standing side by side, examining the miniature stage, which actually gave a birds-eye view of the theater below.

"I'll tell you, Chief. It scared the hell out of me when that bust of the Wicked Witch of the West came sailing out of the wall."

My laughter turned to a pained groan as pressure was put on my sore nose.

"Come on, Chief. Let's get you home."

Home. Where we were going to live happily ever after.
Chapter Summary

Old friends meet once again

The little church where Paul Richmond's funeral service was to be held was a few blocks away from where he had lived. It was packed with kids wearing their school uniform, with brothers and lay teachers, with friends of John Richmond.

I was in my dress uniform, and Jim wore a black suit that drew more than one glance.

We entered the small vestibule, and I removed my cap and tucked it under my arm.

John Richmond saw us and came toward us, his hand extended. "Detective Sandburg..." His eyes widened as they took in my bruised face. "Did... did he do that to you?"

"It's..." My voice was still a little hoarse.

"Don't say 'it's nothing,' Chief. You should see his throat."

"I was going to say, 'it's part of the job.' Mr. Richmond, this is my friend, Jim Ellison."

"Mr. Ellison. Thank you so much for coming, Detective. I really didn't expect..." His voice cracked, and he took a moment to gather himself. "Thank you for calling last night, too. It helped to know that monster was finally dead."

A short, blond man came to stand beside him, his hand on Richmond's shoulder. "Do we know why he killed all those men?" He took out a pair of glasses, put them on, and stared at me intently. Jim stiffened.

"We're still putting the pieces together," I said, a little distracted. There was something about the blond...

"Oh, please let me introduce you to my friend. This is Reggie..."

"Butch?"

"Curly?" He raised his hand as if to touch my cheek, then let it fall. "Your poor, poor face."

"I'm okay. But never mind about me. What happened to you? You just left... you never got in touch again..." I took his arm and pulled him aside. "Was it something I'd done?"

"No! No, I'm sorry. I..."

"Then why?"

"I felt like such a prized idiot."

"Because of us?"
"No! Never because of what we had together!" He gripped my arms, and his eyes seemed magnified behind their glasses. "That meant so much to me... I ... I never wanted to let you know how stupid... Mother found my journal. She never entered my room, so I didn't think to hide it..."

"You wrote about us?"

"Yes." He looked away, a gesture so reminiscent of the young boy I had loved that I waited for my heart to turn over with wrenching regret for lost years, but it didn't happen. "Living with her... My journal - reading again and again what we had done with such affection - that was all that made life bearable. But when she found it... I thought she was going to have a stroke! She said we had to leave, that she could never go about in the neighborhood with her head up ever again, knowing what I was, that I was a disgrace, and a freak, and a... She made it dirty and sordid and perverted."

"Oh, Butch, I'm so sorry."

He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, then put them back in his breast pocket. "We went to Kansas."

"Kansas?"

He shrugged. "Maybe she felt there were less queers there. I don't know. Once I turned eighteen, I left. I couldn't stay, not there, not with her."

"You should have come stay with Naomi and me."

"I was underage. Mother swore she'd have you arrested. Oh, you mean when I left Kansas. So many years had passed. And... I was too mortified, Curly. I couldn't tell you a stupid, stupid action on my part was what led to this whole thing."

"You're here in New York now."

"Yes. I'm a gypsy. I dance on Broadway."

"That's fantastic! What musical are you in?"

"Right now? Man of La Mancha."

"I'll get tickets and come see you. I'll... I'll bring my partner."

"Your police partner?"

"No. My life partner. Jim Ellison. He's standing next to Mr. Richmond."

Butch blushed. "John is my... my partner."

"Are you happy, Butch?"

"I'm Reggie now, Blair. I haven't been 'Butch' since the last time you called me that."

"Are you happy?"

"As happy as..." This time he did touch my cheek, and he smiled, a small, quivering lift of his lips. "I would have loved having Paul for a brother, but... but I have John, and he has me."

"You'll always be part of our family, Butch. Naomi's and mine and Jim's."
"Thank you, Curly." His eyes filled with tears, and we embraced, and I kissed his cheek. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jim, and I turned to meet his eyes. He had grown tense, but then his nostrils twitched, and he relaxed.

Afterwards, after the service and burial, after we returned home and stripped, after I watched as he prepared himself, then straddled my hips and lowered himself onto my cock, after he'd ridden me to a gentle orgasm, and he'd caught his breath, he said, "Y'know something, Chief? You've got way too many nicknames."

But there was a contented smile on his face. He knew that the only one that mattered to me was 'Chief'. 
Goin' Courtin'

Chapter Summary

Having been a working boy for so many years, Jim can't believe good things will happen to him. With the murders solved, Blair takes the time to show him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the day after young Paul Richmond's funeral, and two days after Christopher Gill was killed at the theater named for his mother and the case wrapped up.

Gill, on a self-imposed crusade against the gay men of the City, had strangled Paul Richmond, as well as Randy Beautiful, the man who had once kept me before I got out of the business and became a security guard for Simon Banks.

Blair Sandburg - my lover - was the detective on the case, and he had taken the murder of the teen, who hadn't had the chance to discover if he was gay or not, personally. In defending his own life, he'd driven the fountain pen I had given him into Gill's thigh, puncturing his femoral artery. When Gill, for reasons known only to himself, had pulled the pen free, he had bled to death.

I left Taggert and Brown, the detectives who worked with Blair, to make sure Blair would be okay. I wanted to get my hands on Gill, to beat him to a pulp for daring to hurt my lover. When I found him, he was already dead.

I had gone home with Blair. I couldn't stay in my own studio apartment on East 14th Street, not after that maniac had pawed through my things. I'd known he had, had been able to see that clothes hadn't been put back in the drawers in the same way, even though no one else might have been able to tell.

The next day, Blair had insisted on going to the funeral, and who should be there but a friend from his childhood, his first boyfriend, who looked as if he'd have liked nothing better than to take up with Blair where he'd left off.

Not on your life, sunshine, I'd growled under my breath. He'd left Blair broken-hearted, and he wasn't getting another chance.

Once back at Blair's apartment on East 53rd Street, I'd stripped off my clothes, carefully removed Blair's dress uniform, and made love to him for the rest of the day.

But that night, my sleep was tormented by nightmares - my father sending me away because I'd been caught kissing the box boy behind the local grocery store, my brother Steven turning his back on me, his lip curled in disgust, Jack Pendergrast cradling me in bed, whispering in my ear, "I love you, Jimmy," but then fading into the Peruvian rainforest...

And worst of all, Randy Beautiful, his beautiful face twisted into a disdainful sneer. Whatever made you think that anyone could love you? You're a hustler - no matter what you do with your life, no matter how much time passes, you'll always be a hustler!"

"NO!" I woke with a start, Randy's words echoing in my ear. No, that wasn't true! I reached for the
man who had somehow gotten within my defenses and caused me to fall in love with him. I needed to
hold him, to reassure myself that he...

I was alone in bed.

I glanced at the clock. Blair should have been sleeping in - it was a Sunday, after all, but instead he
was up, and I could hear him humming something as he puttered around in the kitchen, in spite of the
fact that the kitchen was on the other side of the apartment.

Blair said I was a sentinel, that my enhanced senses were a genetic throwback to when tribes needed
the advantage of having someone with the ability to track game, weather patterns, the movement of
enemies. I'd thought I'd been losing my mind, and it was a relief knowing there was an actual
physical reason for what was happening to me. He'd come up with a way that helped me control my
senses, and I was grateful.

But I couldn't help recalling what had happened when I'd moved in with Randy Beautiful. Was I
ready to take the step to move in with Blair?

I knew Blair liked me well enough, but once the novelty of my enhanced senses wore off, would his
attraction for me wear off as well? I'd worked as a hustler for years, enough years to know that
nothing lasted for long.

The bedroom door was bumped open, and Blair came through the doorway, holding a tray. On it
was a carafe of coffee and two cups, a plate piled high with pancakes, two small pitchers, one of
milk and the other of syrup, and a saucer holding neat pats of butter. In one corner of the tray was a
bud vase with a yellow flower from the other night, when he'd had me over for dinner, and in the
other was a tall glass of orange juice.

I could tell all this from scent alone, and I wasn't overwhelmed by the odors.

"Room service!" he sang out, his grin jaunty. "Good morning, Jim."

"Good morning, Chief."

"Naomi is spending the day with Gus, so we have the place to ourselves, but I thought it would be
fun to have breakfast in bed."

"You didn't have to make all that. I'll never be able to finish it."

"It's for me too. I hope you don't mind sharing?"

"I don't mind." Not food, at any rate. There had been too many years where I'd had no one, and now
that I had him, I didn't want to let anyone else near him. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to keep
him.

"I don't have bacon. Sorry."

"That's okay, Chief. Should you be up though?" He'd taken a nasty blow to the face a couple of days
ago, courtesy of Gill and a sandbag at the theater, and his nose, while not broken, was still swollen.
As for his eyes, they gave the appearance that raccoons ran in the Sandburg family.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Besides, if I don't make breakfast, who will?"

"I would have, Chief." I turned to fuss with the pillows so he wouldn't see how that hurt. I was
nowhere the cook he was, but I hadn't given myself food poisoning yet.
"Jim?" He put the tray down on the night table.

"I... I feel like a guest in your house."

"You are a guest."

A guest. That implied impermanence. It was like taking a blow to my chest. I'd known it wouldn't last, but to be over already... It was a good thing I hadn't moved all my clothes here. It would save having to pack them all up and move back. I was pretty sure Richie Delvecchio, the manager of 852 East 14th, might have an apartment I could use.

I reined in my senses, dialed them down to what would be normal for people not cursed with my ability. I had grown used to the sound of Blair's skin against his trousers as he shifted to ease the constriction as his cock swelled. I'd come to ground myself in the scent of his arousal. If that was no longer there, I didn't want to know.

I forced a smile to my lips. "It all smells great, Chief."

Blair gave me a puzzled look but didn't say anything. He poured coffee for me and added the exact amount of milk I took with it.

My throat burned and ached with unshed tears. He was so perfect for me. Why wasn't I good enough for him?

He kept stealing glances at me, but he wasn't the one with sentinel senses, so there was no way for him to know the cheerful front I was putting up was phony from the getgo.

I cleared my throat. "So what did you plan on doing today?"

"I know this small movie house in SoHo."

"What's playing?"

"This weekend?" His expression was innocent. "They're showing Plan Nine From Outer Space and Reefer Madness."

"That sounds good."

"Jim! I was kidding!"

"You were? Oh. So, what's playing?"

He sighed. "In the Heat of the Night and Guess Who's Coming to Dinner."

"That still sounds good." I'd missed them last summer. "What time is the show?"

"It starts at 6:00. It's such a beautiful day, I was thinking I could show you around the city, we'd have some lunch, find a way to pass the afternoon."

We could stay in this bedroom to pass the afternoon, but obviously he didn't want to do that. I'd been living in the city for a long time. If he wanted to show me the sights... "That's fine with me, Chief."

"And maybe after the show, we could have dinner in Chinatown. There's this little restaurant where they make the best sub gum beef chow mein. And their egg foo young is pretty fantastic too."

"Sure. I'll just take a shower and get dressed," I said as I finished the last of my coffee.
"Give me a minute to bring this into the kitchen, and I'll join you."

"That's okay, Chief. I won't be long." It would be better if I started distancing myself from him now.

"Well... well, okay."

A week and a day. That was how long it had lasted, taking into consideration the worst twenty-four hours I'd ever lived through when I thought he'd cheated on me and it was already over.

Blair came to me for consolation after he'd found Paul Richmond's body, but I didn't know that. All I could smell was another man all over him, see the way this other man had marked him, and I reacted without thinking, lashing out and hitting him, giving him his first black eye of the week.

I was miserable the next day. Pat, the man who worked bank security with me, noticed it.

"Girl trouble, Jim?" he asked. I gave a weak grin and shrugged.

I hadn't been home long when Richie barreled up the stairs and pounded on my apartment door. "You gotta see this!" He dragged me down to his apartment.

The little black and white television in his living room was on. The police commissioner, the chief of police, and the captain of the 15th Precinct, Blair's precinct, stood facing the cameras, one face grimmer than the next.

"... and in light of these new circumstances, Detective Blair Sandburg has been relieved of his duties and taken off this case," the commissioner was saying. "His unfortunate lapse yesterday is indicative of how he has allowed this to become personal, and while we feel that Detective Sandburg is generally a capable detective..."

Talk about damning with faint praise. I wanted to kill him for denigrating my... And then I realized that Blair was no longer my lover.

"... we also feel that it is in the Department's best interest to remove him from this case. Lieutenant Dawson will be taking over. Now, if there are any questions, Captain Haines will be happy to answer them."

The Captain didn't look pleased to hear that he would be answering questions, but he stepped up to the microphone.

I felt myself turn cold. Blair loved his job, and to be so publicly humiliated... I shut out the rest of the news conference.

"Thanks, Richie. I have to go." All I could think was that Blair had needed me, and I'd responded by punching him in the face. I had to see him, had to try to make amends.

I didn't know what to expect when he opened the door. It certainly wasn't the bruised, discolored eye. Oh, god, I'd hit him so hard.

"I'm sorry I hit you. I didn't mean to, but you have to understand... when you turned up outside my door, just when I'd been thinking about you, wondering how you'd feel if I turned up outside your door... This was the first time I've ever been in a... a..."

"Relationship? I told you that was what I wanted with you. Was I too subtle?"
"I just... I couldn't believe... "

"I wouldn't cheat on you - I'm a one-man man."

Blair hadn't cheated. A former client - Blair had worked as an escort at one time during college to finance a trip to Peru - had hugged Blair enthusiastically enough to leave his scent all over my lover.

We made up, the case was solved...

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... and now here I was in the shower, wondering how much longer I'd have with him.

It was beautiful outside, although there was still a chill in the air. I wore jeans and a turtleneck sweater under my leather jacket. Blair was dressed pretty much the same way.

We took the ferry to Liberty Island and climbed up inside the Statue of Liberty.

"I was here with my fifth grade class," he said. "We planned on sneaking up the stairs to the torch, but Mrs. Wilson had eagle eyes and stopped us."

"I've never been here." Johns didn't want to go sight-seeing, and I'd never thought to go on my own time.

"Then I'm glad I'm the first one to take you." He rubbed my arm. Why was he acting like this? It was only a matter of time until he broke up with me; why make me suffer like this? "I'm glad Simon was able to get you the day off too."

I'd been working security at the Museum of Modern Art on Sundays. "Rafe owed me for working his shift at Macy's during the holidays when his wife had the baby." I shrugged.

"When are you going to tell Simon you'll be quitting?"

"I'm quitting?"

"You did say something about joining the Force to keep an eye on me." He batte his lashes at me.

"Oh. Yeah, I did." After I'd found him in Gill's office on Friday, with blood all over his face. I felt him give me another look.

"You'll have to go to the Police Academy, but I don't think you'll have a problem with any of the classes."

"If you say so, Chief."

He was silent until we were back at the pier. "Jim, I'm not a wealthy man. I can't give you a mansion and a yacht."

"I don't need that, Chief." I'd had that with Randy Beautiful, and it had been like sawdust in my mouth.

"Come on. I want to show you my limousine."

"Huh?"

"My limousine."
I followed him to the curb. He stuck two fingers into his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. A yellow taxi pulled up.

"Get in."

I got in. "I hate to tell you this, Chief, but if someone's told you this is a limo, you've been rooked."

"I never get rooked, Jim." He settled himself beside me. "59th and 5th. The Plaza," he told the driver.

He was taking me to a hotel? Maybe things weren't as bad as I'd thought.

"Chief," I kept my voice low, "the Plaza doesn't like their guests to only stay an hour or so. Believe me, I know."

"So do I. When I was working as a... working boy... " He winked at me.

The cab let us off in front of the hotel. I reached for my wallet, but Blair put his hand on my arm.

"I've got it." He paid the fare and tipped the driver. As soon as we had a green light, he grabbed my sleeve, and we crossed the street.

So. No hotel.

Along the curb a long line of hansom cabs waited for tourists or lovers who wanted an old fashioned carriage ride.

"Wait a minute! **This** is your limo?"

He grinned at me. "You bet. Hold on a sec." Near the corner was a pushcart selling popcorn. He bought a bag, and offered it to me. I took a handful and followed him down the row of black cabs.

"Hi, Leo."

"Well, hi, there, Detective Blair." The driver, a grizzled black man who looked to be about a hundred years old, smiled down at Blair and touched his hat with his whip. "Want to go for a ride?"

"Yeah."

Leo got down, removed his horse's blanket and folded it, then climbed back up to his seat and placed the blanket by his feet.

Blair walked up to the horse. She was brown with irregular patches of white on her back, sides, and neck. "Hello, Peony." He rubbed her nose and chin, and a long, pink tongue swept out to lick his palm.

"'Peony,' Chief?"

"Leo names all his horses 'Peony'. Come on and climb in. Once around, Leo, and take the scenic route. We've got plenty of time this afternoon."

Leo waited until we were settled, with a coach blanket over our laps. "Get up, Peony!" He snapped his whip in the air.

The horse nodded her head and stepped out at a leisurely walk.
Under the blanket, Blair's hand found mine.

"Chief..."

"Shhh. Enjoy the ride, Jim." He held the popcorn toward me. "Help yourself. My hand's kind of occupied."

He was making it so difficult to distance myself. Well, there was time after the ride. I fed him and fed myself.

And the whole ride around the park, his fingers made love to my palm.

****

We walked through the Central Park Zoo, watched the hardcore skaters at Rockefeller Center, stopped in at St. Patrick's, had hotdogs from a corner stand.

When we got to SoHo, it was to find the movie house shut down. Apparently it was closed for renovation, and had been for a number of weeks. How could Blair not have known?

"Well, there's another movie house just down the street. We'll go there, okay, Jim?"

"Okay."

"You don't mind that it's a musical, do you?"

I looked up at the marquee. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.* "No, that's okay." My fingers were starting to get cold, even tucked into my pockets, and my nose felt as if it was about to freeze off. I just wanted to get someplace warm.

It was warm inside, and I unzipped my jacket. Blair went to the concession stand and bought a tub of buttered popcorn and two large Cokes.

He looked around and spotted a staircase. "Let's go up to the balcony, okay?"

"I haven't been in the balcony of a movie theater since I was in school. We snuck out one Friday night after Taps to see *The African Queen.* Man, did we get in trouble!"

"Was it worth it?"

"Oh, yeah. I loved it when Bogie asked the German officer to marry him and Katherine Hepburn because it would mean so much to her. You could see it would mean just as much to him."

"Why, Jim! You old romantic, you!"

I cleared my throat, and he rubbed my arm.

"I love that you're romantic, babe. Let's go. It shouldn't be too crowded."

"On a Sunday night in March? With Ed Sullivan coming on in a couple of hours? Take a peek inside. This place is practically empty!"

"Wait a second! I'll bet you've counted the heartbeats!"

I had. "There are seven people in the orchestra, and the balcony is empty."
"All right! Let's go!"

We sat in the last row of the balcony.

"Oh, good, the coming attractions are just starting."

A woman's voice began to wail about the heat of the night.

"That's interesting," I said. "This theater is going to show In the Heat of the Night next week."

"How about that!" Blair started laughing. "We'll come back, okay? It'll be fun watching something where the murder gets solved in a couple of hours."

Coming attractions were shown for The Bandwagon, The Professionals, and The Sound of Music.

And then the MGM logo filled the screen, and music started.

"Oh, shit, is this too loud for you, Jim?"

I couldn't help myself. I leaned over and kissed him. "I've got the dials turned down."

"Phew. I should have thought of that." He put his Coke on the floor, took mine and put it down as well, then took my hand.

I was sitting in a movie theater, holding hands with the man I loved. How could I give him up?

Well, hell. I wasn't going to! I was going to fight for him! I tightened my grip on his hand.

"Want to ease up a bit, big guy? You're cutting off the circulation."

"Sorry." What had I been thinking? I started to release him.

"Hey, I just said ease up, not let me go." He held onto my hand and ran his thumb over my knuckles.

Howard Keel - Adam - rode into town looking for a bride. Enter Jane Powell - Milly, a pretty, feisty young woman, who caught his eye. We in the audience knew what was going on, but Milly thought he'd fallen in love with her at first sight, just as she had with him.

"Would you go with him, Chief?"

"Maybe. He's a big guy. I like big guys." In the light cast by the movie, I could see his smile. "I'd have to show him who the boss is though."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Bend him over that buckboard and ride him hard."

Hearing his words caused my dick to twitch. They turned him on too. I could smell his arousal.

I licked my lips and forced my attention back to the movie.

Adam and Milly married, to the displeasure of the townsfolk, and he took her back to his spread on the other side of the pass.

She found out he'd deceived her, that it wasn't going to be just the two of them. He had six brothers living with him as well, and it would be her responsibility to feed them, wash their clothes, and keep the cabin clean.
"That has to be a disappointment, thinking you're getting this gorgeous hunk to yourself, then learning you'll have to share him."

"That's true. I wouldn't like sharing you." I freed my hand and had some popcorn, then offered it to Blair. He frowned but took some. I took his hand again, licked the salt from his palm, then wound my fingers in his. His smile came back in full bloom.

While Adam went off to do mountain man things - huntin' and trappin' and such, Milly laid down the law to his brothers. She made them wash and shave, put on clean clothes, and show some manners at the table.

And when it was time for a barn-raising in town, where they would see the girls they'd been dreaming of, she told them how to go about winning those girls. Goin' courtin', goin' courtin'. Oh, it sets your senses in a whirl.

I recognized the song that Blair had been humming in the kitchen that morning.

Goin' courtin', goin' courtin'. Dudin' up to go and see your girl...

Blair cleared his throat. "Actually, to see my guy."

"Tell me something, Blair." I leaned over and whispered, mindful of the people below. "Would it bother you if we didn't see each other again?"

"What? We've just... You're not serious!"

"I am serious. How would you feel if we never saw each other again?"

He was breathing heavily, and his voice was so low no one else could have heard him. "I'd hate it like hell."

"Okay. That's all I wanted to know."

"What?"

The people in the orchestra turned around. "Shhhhh!"

"Jim!" His voice was sentinel-soft. "What's going on? You've been acting strange all day."

"I was afraid I was going to lose you."

"Baby, I've just found you. I'm never letting you go!"

"No, you're not." I went back to watching the movie.

"Jim."

I smiled but didn't say anything. He took the popcorn from my hand and put it on the seat on my other side.

It was a good thing the balcony was empty.

He turned my face toward him and kissed me. I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him back.

It had occurred to me what Blair had been doing all day.
He'd been courting me.

Chapter End Notes

The authors mentioned wrote *Tarzan of the Apes* and *John Carter of Mars, Doc Savage*, John Kenton who sailed the *Ship of Ishtar*, and Alan Quartermain who searched for *King Solomon's Mines*. The first line of the story Blair reads is taken from *The Moon Maid* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. "Monday, Monday" was written by John Phillips and performed by The Mamas and The Papas. The Greta Garbo Home for Wayward Boys and Girls is courtesy of Manfred Mann. "There's a holdup in the Bronx, Brooklyn's broken out in fights, etc." is the theme from *Car 54, Where are You?* The Dr. Seuss book Mrs. St. Paul is reading is *Horton Hatches the Egg*. (kinda makes you wonder what's going to happen, doesn't it? ;-) )

Thank you to PattRose and Lisa for allowing me to split this in two, to K-9 for more great cover art, to Kat, Tony, and to the NY Public Library for help in finding the census for Manhattan Island for 1968. And, as always, many thanks to Gail, who is a beta par excellence.

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