The Break
by Annabelle Leigh [archived by 852_Prospect_Archivist]

Summary

A mysterious young woman helps Jim and Blair find their way back to one another.
Warnings: Supernatural stuff.
Archivist note: This story has been split into four parts for easier loading.
Chapter 1

Due to the length of this story, it has been broken into four parts.

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Notes: This is my first attempt. Apologies in advance for anything I got wrong. Special thanks to ane for the anthro research help and Tex for her invaluable beta reading. Feedback is greatly appreciated.

The Break - part one.

Jim didn't know when he was going to get over it. He hoped soon, but that was looking doubtful. Three months already and no sign of relief. It was like a physical pain, the way his heart lurched every time someone knocked at the door. And the thought that always flashed through his head. Blair! But it never was Blair, nor would it be anytime soon. Maybe not ever again. And then the pain would come, the crushing weight in his chest that was not a heart attack because he wasn't that lucky.

This time the non-Blair person was a young woman. Had she said something? Explained what she was doing standing at his door? He got distracted so easily these days. He could keep it together at work, but otherwise, his mind was somewhere else entirely.

Of course, it must be about the room.

"I didn't realize the ad had come out already," he said.

"Ad?"

"In the Gazette? For the room I'm renting out. I thought it would be in tomorrow's paper."

"Oh. Well, I got an advanced copy. Is that okay? For me to be here now?"

"Sure. Yeah. I guess I was expecting people to call first. But what the hell, you're here. Come on in," he said, stepping aside to let her in.

It was the first time he'd really focused on her, and he couldn't stop staring. No. It was not possible. Now he knew he had finally lost whatever shred of sanity he'd managed to keep after Blair left. There were times already when he imagined hearing his partner's voice, late at night, no distinct words, just a sorrowful sound, as if Blair were missing him just as badly. Of course that was only wishful thinking. And now he was seeing things. She couldn't really look like Blair, could she? No, not possible. Not possible.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" he could see she was waiting for an answer, an expectant look on her face.

"I was wondering if I could see the room. That I'd be living in. If I moved in."
"Oh, sure. Of course. It's this way. I'm afraid it's not very large, but..." He didn't know what else to say. So he stopped talking and let her look around. She smiled at him, not seeming to notice he was acting like a fool. Or pretending not to. She looked like the polite sort who would ignore a certain amount of eccentricity.

He watched her check out Blair's...the spare room, inspecting the closet, opening the drawers, looking out the window, testing the bed. Was it just her hair? So it was long and curly, and a little wild, like Blair's. So it bounced around her face like punctuation, underscoring everything she said and did. So it glinted in the sunlight. It wasn't the same color at least. A bright coppery red, instead of warm brown. Of course, Blair's hair did have auburn highlights. Oh, shit.

"Would you need the first and last month's rent and a security deposit?" she asked, twisting a strand of that hair around her finger, looking worried.

He tried to concentrate on what she was saying. Money. She was talking about money. Another student. Like Blair. God. Students were always poor. Money would be a concern for her. No, it wasn't just the hair. She had the same wide-eyed innocence. Blue eyes. Lighter than Blair's, but just as big and round. And that open, expressive face. It would show everything she felt, like her worry about the money.

"I don't think all that's necessary. Let's start with the first month's rent. If anything gets damaged, we'll work it out. I'd rather not bother with a lease. You can stay as long as you want. When you're ready to move out, just give me a reasonable amount of notice. Does that sound okay?"

"Well, yeah. Of course. So, you're saying...does this mean I can have the room?" Her face lit up. Oh God, just like Sandburg.

"If you want it. But there are a few things you should know first. Some house rules. If you're still interested, you can write me a check and move in whenever you want."

He catalogued all the house rules he'd ever tormented Blair with, throwing in a few new ones, just for good measure. He wanted her to know exactly what she was getting herself into. He didn't want to come home one day and find her gone, fed up with him and his difficult ways. Like Sandburg. Okay, so Blair hadn't just disappeared. So he'd gotten a really good offer to do field work in Madagascar, something that would do a lot for his career. So his leaving hadn't come out of the blue, since Blair had talked it to death, just like he did everything else, before accepting the offer. So Jim had had months to prepare for the inevitable. So? Blair was still gone. And knowing his nomadic ways, it was hard to tell when or if he'd ever come back to Cascade. And Jim could not stand being in the apartment alone anymore. He wanted the person who moved into that room to stick around for a little while.

Jim gave the young woman credit for patience. She listened to the whole diatribe very carefully, really taking it in, nodding at some things, looking a bit puzzled by others. She paid such close attention to what he was saying he could almost feel her concentration on his skin. He didn't know anybody who paid attention like that. Well, at least nobody who still lived in Cascade.

"I think I got it all," she said. "And I don't have any problems with it. It's just that there are so many details. I might forget some things at first. If you don't mind, you can just jog my memory from time to time."

Her earnestness made him smile. "I'll be sure to do that. So when do you want to move in?"

She looked funny for a moment and then said hurriedly, "I have my things outside. I was hoping I
could move in now. Actually, I don't have anywhere else to go."

He frowned. "Your family--"

She shook her head. She was alone. Just like he was.

"I'm sorry," he said. And he meant it. She was much too young to be all by herself in the world.

"Thanks," she said softly.

"Well, I guess today's the day you move in then. Go get your things."

Her face flooded with relief and gratitude. "Oh, thank you. Thank you so much."

She dashed out the door and returned a few minutes later with a large suitcase and a duffel bag.

"Can I help you with the rest of it?"

"This is it actually."

He knew his jaw must have dropped. It made him think of another student who'd been able to fit his entire life into a backpack. Oh, God. Maybe it had been a mistake, letting this girl move in when he couldn't look at her without thinking of Blair. He'd been acting purely on impulse when he offered her the room, and that was not at all like him. He didn't actually know anything about her. A complete stranger, and he'd invited her into his home. Just like that. What the hell was wrong with him?

And here she was with all her worldly possessions in two bags. So easy just to pack them one day and leave forever. Like Blair. Oh God, Blair.

The girl put her hand on his arm, just for a moment. "I want to thank you again. For taking me in. You won't regret it. I promise."

He didn't understand why, but that calmed him.

"Well, welcome then..." he hesitated, slightly embarrassed. "I'm sorry. Your name..."

She smiled, and it was luminous, alive with kindness and laughter. How he had missed that.

"It's Molly," she told him.

Molly sat cross-legged on her small bed, thumbs curved against her middle fingers, breathing in a slow and controlled rhythm, concentrating on the stillness at her center. Whenever Jim was away, she meditated, and this evening he was on a stakeout. She had been searching for answers, a way to break through the defenses for more than three weeks now, but there had been no change. Or possibly it had gotten worse. Not that she had ever thought it would be easy to make this her home, at least not the way she wanted it to be, her expectations were so high. But the resistance had come from an entirely unexpected quarter. Jim, she'd had no problem with. He'd accepted her into his house and his life with an ease and graciousness that still surprised her. Maybe it was because he was so sad and lonely. It had leapt out at her the moment he first opened the door--a gaping wound in his energy field, the slow leak of his life force. Since she moved in, she'd been able to cheer him up a little. He seemed to like having her around.

But the loft itself, now that was another story entirely.
The house spirits couldn't stand her. She had trouble even admitting it to herself. House spirits always liked her, if only because she was one of the few people who sensed them and took the trouble to make friends. But the loft wanted nothing to do with her. It had even taken to playing mean little pranks on her. So far, she'd lost three toothbrushes, a lipstick, and most upsettingly, the silver hairbrush her grandmother had given her. They'd all just completely vanished without a trace. Every time she did laundry, she ended up with more mismatched socks. God only knew where the mates had gone. And worst of all, whenever she was in the kitchen by herself some item of houseware flung itself off the counter or out of the cupboard, shattering into a million pieces. It had gotten so bad that Jim teased her about being a danger to herself and others, and soon she was going to have to buy him a whole new set of dishes.

It had taken a while to figure out what the problem was. She knew she hadn't done anything to make the spirits angry. They'd been hostile from the moment she arrived. It had finally dawned on her that maybe it wasn't about her. Someone else had lived here once, and the spirits did not want to let this person go. Not that this realization exactly told her how to fix the problem, but it did at least explain what she had sensed from the moment she first crossed the threshold. There was a strong and pervasive energy imprinted in every corner and on every object in the apartment. This had been his home for some time. His? She was pretty sure it was a man. It felt like male energy, gentler than most perhaps, but male nonetheless. And it was still very strong. What had Jim said when he'd shown her the room that day? *Sorry. It's a little dusty. No one's been in here for a couple of months.*

As she concentrated, she could almost hear this mystery man's presence, singing along the baseboards, collecting in deep wells in the shadows. Months. It shouldn't still be so palpable, especially after she'd burnt the sage. Energy dissipated over time, that was its nature. Even the house spirits couldn't have prevented it. But the presence seemed to be growing more powerful. That wasn't possible, was it? Unless. Oh, she said out loud. Love. It must be.

She concentrated on the love, looking with the special vision she'd always just known how to use. And suddenly she could see it everywhere. It filled the room like an ocean, whorls and eddies, crashing in a variety of colors, so many different kinds of love. A gentle yellow, warm and inviting--the color of friends, of partners, those who trust one another without reserve. There was also pink, pale and opalescent, signifying deep affection, an attachment of the heart. And swirling beneath that a bright amethyst, the color of family ties, those born of blood, as well as those freely chosen. But there was still more. She could see the red of passion, unacted upon, churning and seething, the energy of frustrated longing. And throughout everything, white light so intense it was almost too painful to look at, the purest of all connections, the bond of a common destiny, the love that would sacrifice everything for the beloved.

Molly felt something like anguish hit her in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of her, and she was surprised by the sting of sudden tears. There was something else here too, something dark and ponderous, cowering beneath the light. Fear. But of what? She concentrated. Fear of speaking the love aloud. Fear of consequences. Fear of the world's opinion and its danger. Fear for the beloved. Fear of the beloved, his rejection and anger, his scorn if the secret feelings should be revealed and go unreturned. And there was shame, too. She could smell it, a sour odor, the uneasy sense that there was no right to love, that to do so was wrong, not allowed, a betrayal of some sort.

She lay down on the bed, breathing raggedly, overwhelmed by sadness. She had opened herself up to the energy, and the loss felt like her own. She concentrated on bringing her center back to a place of balance. *No wonder there's such terrible damage to Jim's psyche.* She curled into a fetal position, rocking herself, grieving for her new friend's pain.

That was when it happened, so unexpectedly. She could hear the house spirits rushing and wailing around the room, their agitation making a sound that was almost language. She closed her eyes and
listened with all her senses. They were trying to tell her something, but it was still muffled and indistinct. She listened harder. There. A word. **Blair.** One agonized syllable, filled with the spirits' despair. And again, **Blair.** Stronger now. And there was so much more they wanted to say. Molly opened up her intuition as far as she dared and listened intently as they poured out the whole sad story.

On the floor beside the dresser something glittered in the orange glow from the lamp. It was her grandmother's silver hairbrush.

Blair didn't know when he was going to get over it. Not today. Okay. So that had been established. He was seriously freaking. His heart was so out of control and his breathing...well, he couldn't really breathe at all. Man, it was like his first day of teaching all over again. Only today his nervousness wasn't from being up at the podium. He liked teaching. After all, it was only talking. No sweat. Talking was like his best thing.

Except today. At least this was his intro class. Thank God she wasn't in his seminar. First-year students didn't know what to expect, but anthro majors would wonder what the hell was wrong with him. And if she were in one of his small classes, he'd never get away with staring at her like this.

God knew he obsessed over Jim way too much, but this was more than a little crazy. Jim was a big, tough cop, a seasoned ex-military man, with a buzz cut and shoulders that looked like they could carry the weight of the world. You couldn't get a better definition of masculine if you looked it up in the dictionary. There was certainly nothing manly about the young co-ed sitting in the third row. Small frame, long, curly hair, delicate complexion. A little vulnerable perhaps. So why did she so completely remind him of Jim?

Because he had finally lost his mind. Gone. Poof. Bye-bye. Adios to the last of his grip on reality. There were nights he laid awake tossing and turning, truly believing he would go mad from missing Jim. And now it had happened. How many times had he wished one of them were a woman so it might have all worked out happily? So he wouldn't have had to leave him. Leave the loft. His home. God, he missed that too. All of his life shifting from place to place, no permanence, no roots, no one and nothing to call home, and when he did finally find the place he belonged, it was complicated as shit and he couldn't stay. God, he couldn't breathe. Yep, this was a panic attack. Shit. He tried to get his breathing under control, inhaling for six counts and then exhaling in the same rhythm. In, out, in out. Yes, that was working. Okay. He could finish class. He could get through this. Really.

But she looked like Jim. Reminded him of Jim. Those eyes. A perfect sky blue. How often did that occur in the nature? And not just the color, but the steady, level quality of her gaze. How often had Jim watched him just like that? Thoughtfully. Evaluating. And the fine bones of her face, like she had been sculpted out of marble. And something beyond any physical characteristic, just her whole way of being. The way she sat there in his class, quiet and observant, self-contained, taking in everything but revealing little of herself. And still somehow leaving him with the feeling that there was so much more beneath the surface, a mind and heart and spirit that felt things deeply, a sense of honor and a purposeful intelligence, making him want to ask her a million questions, find out everything there was to know.

Oh God, who else affected him like that?

She was new to Rainier, a first year student, enrolled at the beginning of the second semester. When she'd come to ask special permission to take his Anthro 102 class without the prerequisite 101, he had not been able to take his eyes off her or even to speak coherently. It was as if the world stopped, just for a moment. Along with his heart. His reactions to her were all over the place. She seemed so familiar, as if he already knew her. But not her exactly. And then he realized it was the same intuitive
sense he had of Jim. The connection that allowed him to guide his Sentinel. His mind raced in so many different directions, he didn't even remember to warn her how difficult it would be to catch up or encourage her to wait to take both parts of the course next year. He had no idea what he'd said, or if he'd said anything at all. He'd just signed the form and stared at her in disbelief.

It was almost enough to make him wish he had stayed in Madagascar. Okay, so not really. Every moment he'd spent there had been a new agony. Too far away. God, Jim and his home and everything that meant anything to him had been so far out of his reach. Even his work had seemed remote. It wasn't enough to be an anthropologist anymore. He needed to be an anthropologist focused on Sentinel research. Those were the only insights and discoveries that gave him any real sense of satisfaction anymore. The expedition to Madagascar had been yet another chance of a lifetime, and he'd never been able to work up any real enthusiasm for it. The whole time away had felt like precious time misspent, taken from what was truly important.

Because the work that mattered most to him was being Jim's guide, his partner.

When he left, he'd said it was because Jim could get by without him, and that was technically true. But it didn't mean there weren't whole new realms of mastery Jim could acquire over his senses, subtle and refined skills they could develop together. There was no work more satisfying than that, even if he never made a dollar from it, even if he never published a page about it. The Mikea of Madagascar could not hold a candle to working alongside an honest-to-God Sentinel.

His Sentinel.

But not anymore.

He'd lasted a semester in Madagascar. It was supposed to be a year, at the least. Shit, he was going to develop a reputation for being unreliable, not jumping on opportunities when they came up. Especially after he'd already turned down Borneo. Oh hell, who cared? Every day in the island's western forests had been out-and-out torment. He couldn't stand it. If he couldn't be in Jim's life, sharing his work, living in the loft with him, he could at least be in the same city, knowing that Jim was somewhere close by. Coming back to Cascade had given him that measure of comfort.

Except Cascade wasn't the same without Jim. He'd never liked the cold, the way it settled into his bones and made him feel closed off forever from everything that was warm and comforting and alive. Outside the glow of Jim's company, the winter felt bitter and unremitting and hopeless. Sterile. Like his new apartment. He should feel lucky to have it. It was not a bad space in a neighborhood that was safe enough. It had built-in bookshelves, lots of them, more room than he'd ever had for his books in his life. The bedroom was kind of small, but he was used to that. The living room was comfortable enough, a good place to work. And he could afford it. All in all, it should have seemed like a god-send.

But it didn't.

And the luster had gone out of his routine around the university too. Reading his anthro journals and teaching his classes and working on his research dulled in comparison to his life at the station, despite all the paperwork. But he hadn't just lost his enthusiasm for work. He had a hard time getting interested in anything lately. Since he'd moved out of the loft and Jim's life. He had no appetite and had to force himself to eat. Sleep was impossible. God, he sounded depressed. Who was he kidding? He was depressed. And it was all his own fault. *He* was the one who walked away. *He* was the one who hadn't called Jim in the month he'd been back in town. He was the one who had let his feelings get away from him and take him to places he wasn't prepared to go. But then again, he hadn't really *let* it happen. It just had. He was powerless to go back and incapable of going forward. Staying away was his only real choice.
And now he was seeing Jim in the faces of his students. Well, just this one whom he found weirdly compelling, whom he couldn't take his eyes off. And he didn't want to be having these feelings about one of his students. People thought he was a hopeless hound when it came to women, but the truth was that he had very definite boundaries. And this young woman was strictly off limits. And she moved him, even though she was only a presence in his classroom, a pair of sky blue eyes watching him from the third row. And that was so not all right.

And she reminded him of Jim. And that wasn't even possible.

Simon couldn't believe Jim had managed to find himself a female Sandburg, but there she was, sitting in the chair by Jim's desk waiting for him to go to lunch with her, just like Sandburg used to, taking in everything with unabashed curiosity, fidgeting all the while, a veritable whirlwind of energy, barely restrained, just like Sandburg.

Lord help him, she even looked like Sandburg. Well, sort of. If Sandburg had been a pretty young woman, instead of a...well, pretty young man. He noticed that her attractiveness was not lost on the other members of the squad. Rafe had fallen all over himself to get her a cup of coffee. Brown was perched on the edge of Jim's desk, regaling her with war stories, being rewarded with a barrage of questions and a big smile. The high voltage kind that lit up the room. Another thing she had in common with Sandburg.

They'd all been wondering about Ellison's new roommate since she'd moved in a month ago. It had come as quite a shock to everyone that he'd decided to rent out the room again. Hadn't he just been doing Blair a favor, after his old place was blown up? Yeah, sure. That's why a temporary arrangement had lasted three years. Simon knew Jim missed Blair. Since the kid left, his best detective had once again become a pain in the ass to deal with. Blair had been a good influence on him. Simon hadn't given him enough credit while he was still around. But Jim must have gotten really lonely to let another stranger into his territory. Blair had left behind an emptiness when he'd gone, that was for sure. Hell, he even missed Sandburg. All that bouncing enthusiasm was pretty irritating at the outset, but it kind of grew on you after a while. Okay, so he liked the kid. No one was going to get him to admit it. And it was too late anyway.

Jim never told him what happened, at least not the real story. He'd gotten the sanitized version, like everyone else. Sandburg had gotten restless, needed to devote more time to his anthropology, had gotten a great opportunity to do field research out in...where was it again?...Malawi, Madagascar, some M-country that sounded horribly far away. A once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing Sandburg couldn't pass up. Yeah, right. And Borneo hadn't been that kind of opportunity? Sandburg hadn't had any trouble staying put back then. But that was when he was still researching the Sentinel thing, Jim had insisted. Now he had enough material for ten dissertations. Simon sometimes wondered how stupid Ellison thought he was. As if Blair hung in there for three years, putting himself in danger time and again, just for the research. Not even Sandburg would put up with Jim's rotten temper day in and day out solely for the sake of scholarship.

Of course, Ellison had an answer for everything. Sandburg didn't want to leave while he was still having trouble with his senses. Now that they were under control and he hadn't zoned in recent memory, Blair had been free to go. Jim didn't need him anymore. Oh, yeah? Then how come Ellison went around looking like he'd just lost his best friend. Because he had. The idiot. He'd finally gotten fed up trying to talk to Jim about it. Lockjaw Ellison wouldn't budge. But he'd been keeping a close eye on his friend. He couldn't help feeling afraid for him.

Until Molly came along. He considered the pretty young woman sitting in his squad room. She looked like a nice person. Calm. Despite the youthful energy. That was good. Jim needed a calming
influence in his life. If not Blair, then Molly. He'd noticed a definite improvement in Jim over the past month. The desperate expression in his blue eyes had faded, the ice thawed. He still looked like a man with one hell of a broken heart. But then, that's exactly what he was. Or so Simon suspected.

He couldn't help laughing a little as he watched Ellison trying to look busy when he was actually watching Brown like a hawk. There was already plenty of speculation about the nature of Jim's relationship with his new roommate. Just like there had been talk about Sandburg. People always needed something to gossip about. Jim's behavior was only going to egg it on, just like it had with Sandburg. Of course, his co-workers didn't know he could hear every word of their whispered conversations. He could just imagine how crude some of the comments were going to be, and he didn't like to think about Jim's reaction. Not a pretty picture. He literally radiated overprotectiveness where Molly was concerned. Just like he had with Blair. Of course, that was a Sentinel's job. To protect.

He would never admit it out loud, but he also wondered about Jim and his roommates. He'd had his suspicions about Blair. He was intrigued by Molly. She was important to Jim, he could see that. Like they'd known each other all their lives, rather than just a month. And Jim definitely didn't appreciate the other detectives gawking at her. But was it jealousy? Somehow, he didn't think so. It looked more like a mamma bear protecting its young. Besides, Jim was a serious person, an honorable man. He wouldn't get involved with somebody so young and alone, if his affections were still engaged elsewhere. Plus, there just wasn't that spark. Not like there had been with Sandburg. Simon smiled to himself. Sometimes he wondered if he knew more about Jim and Blair's relationship than they did. Hell, he'd been a detective once and a damn good one too. He still had his instincts.

And they were screaming at him about the scene developing out in the bullpen. Jim looked like he wanted to beat Brown to a pulp. And now Rafe was back, making a production of giving Molly her coffee, staring at her legs with very little subtlety. He sighed. If he didn't pull Jim away soon, it was going to get ugly.

"Ellison!" he bellowed. "My office. Now."

He saw how hesitant Jim was to leave her there with the vultures circling. But she smiled and said something, and Jim managed to pull himself away.

"What's up, Captain?" he sounded pissed at being dragged away from guard duty. Simon could see he was keeping an eye on her through the window, although he couldn't imagine what he expected to happen in the middle of a police station.

"The Edwards case. Where are we?"

"The ME's report just came back. It's the same as the others. Pretty grisly. A ritual killing. Elaborate knife wounds, cut into some kind of pattern while the victim was still alive. Death by exsanguination. Probably over a period of hours."

"Any leads?"

"We have officers canvassing the area for anyone who might have seen something. The victim's family has put together a list of her friends and acquaintances, the places she frequented. Brown and Rafe are following up on it, looking for connections with the other two women. I sensed an odd odor at the scene. Something strong and herbal, like an essential oil. I thought I'd go down to the herbal apothecary. See if I can figure out what it is. Maybe that will shed some light on whatever this bastard is doing."

"Good. Keep me informed. Someone in this city is butchering young women, Jim. I don't have to tell
you the kind of pressure I'm getting from the Mayor to put this one down."

Jim nodded gravely.

"Oh, and Ellison?" he called the detective back.

"Yeah, Simon?"

"Just when exactly were you planning to introduce me to your new roommate?"

His friend stopped short, actually blushing. "Sorry. I guess I didn't think of it."

"Uh-huh. Well, don't just stand there, Ellison. Go get her."

When Molly returned with Jim, she shook his hand, a nice firm grip, while Jim made the introductions.

"Captain Banks, it's so nice to meet you. Jim talks about you a lot."

"Call me Simon, please. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Molly. To thank you for helping turn Jim here into less of a grump. He's lucky to have you."

He could see Jim start to protest and then his shoulders slumped. What could he say? Jim had to know his mood had never been more foul than since Sandburg had left.

Molly laughed. "No, I'm definitely the lucky one. Before I moved into the loft, I was pretty much looking at homelessness. It never occurred to me that every apartment in town would be taken."

"Starting mid-year can be hard. I take it you're not from Cascade."

She shook her head. "Back east. I was taking care of my grandmother until she died last summer."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"Thanks. You know, I just missed her too much to go on living in her house. So I decided it was time to make a change. Go back to school. Go west. Luckily, Rainier came through with a scholarship."

"That's great. And how do you like our city so far?"

"I love it. Jim's been great, showing me around and stuff. There's so much more to do here than in the little town I'm from. It's nice to have so many options."

"Well, you make sure Jim shows you everything. You hear that, Ellison?"

Jim only nodded, looking more embarrassed by the minute. He had to struggle to hide his amusement.

"Why don't you come to dinner, Simon? I love to cook. Only I have to warn you since Jim and I don't exactly see eye-to-eye on these things that I do believe food should have nutritional value. So if that doesn't scare you, maybe next Wednesday? Don't you have that night off, Jim?"

"He most certainly does. And I'd love to. It's been a while since someone made me a nice home-cooked meal. And I've never shared Jim's taste for Wonder Burgers. Should we say seven o'clock?"

She smiled. "Sounds good."
"That okay with you, Ellison?"

"Sure Cap'n," Jim mumbled, steering Molly toward the door.

"Nice to meet you, Simon," she said over her shoulder, as Jim hustled her out.

"You too, Molly. See you Wednesday."

With Jim's Sentinel hearing, he had to wait until they were safely out of the building before letting out a deep chuckle. Maybe she wasn't Sandburg, but she had Jim wrapped around her little finger just the same.

Jim wondered how he let her rope him into these things. He scowled, but not very convincingly. *Jesus, Ellison. She asked you, that's how. Your problem is that you just can't say no to her.*

Who did that remind him of? He sighed. No, he wasn't going to think about that tonight. It was Saturday, his well-deserved time off, and he was spending it with Molly, just the way he liked it. So he hadn't gone out on a date, had sex or pretty much even looked at a woman in six months. So he chose to spend most of his free time with his beautiful twenty-three year old roommate for whom he felt only the warmest platonic affection. So he was sitting here in the theater with his head already throbbing from the sound, even though he'd dialed down his hearing as far as he dared. So he was watching a film about gay men in a Nazi concentration camp, just because she had liked the play and wanted to see how the movie compared. So what? It might not have been anyone else's idea of a life, but it was holding him together.

Who would have guessed it when Blair moved out all those months ago? When Blair left him. Isn't that what really happened? The kid finally just got fed up or lost interest or whatever and took off at the first opportunity. Looking back now, he could see that he hadn't exactly made it enticing for Blair to stay. He'd been a pain in the ass a lot of the time. He guessed he'd always kind of hoped the kid would see through it. Would just know he was important to him. But how? He himself hadn't fully realized it until Blair was gone. God, he'd been completely unprepared for what a terrible loss it would be. He'd never had a friend like Blair before, never allowed himself any connection like that, not even with Carolyn. Blair had become essential in some way that she never had and all without his even realizing it. And then Blair was gone. Gone. No, he wasn't thinking about that now. Not tonight.

So Blair had left, but Molly had come along. Like a god-send. And he did thank God for her. He never imagined he'd have somebody like Blair to look after him, to care about what he ate and if he was sleeping, who'd make him talk when he didn't want to, even though getting through to stone-faced Ellison could be such a thankless task. And he certainly never expected there'd ever be another person who'd care about him like that. It was more than he deserved. He knew that. But he was keeping it anyway. He was keeping it this time, damn it.

He smiled, remembering the first time Molly had taken charge of him. It had been, what, her second day at the loft? His smile grew wider. That was Molly. She didn't hesitate to voice her opinions, and she was persistent as all hell. God, what was it about that personality he couldn't seem to resist? No. Not tonight. Remember? Just his luck though that he'd get another health freak for a roommate. She'd come out to the kitchen that morning to find him eating cold Chinese leftovers several days old right out of the carton.

"Now there's a breakfast of champions," she'd said, making a face, and she then had actually taken it away from him. Taken it out of his hands, tossing it in the trash, just like that.
His reaction had shocked him. He'd just sort of sputtered angrily. But he hadn't done anything about it. He hadn't gone to the refrigerator for more junk food. He hadn't yelled at her or thrown her out. He'd just stood there while she blended up fruit smoothies for them both, put the granola and milk on the table, sliced strawberries and bananas, brewed coffee for him, mint tea for herself.

"You don't really want to be the buffest dead guy in the history of the world, do you?" she'd asked as she sat down, gesturing for him to join her.

And he'd done just that. He'd sat down at the table with her and eaten her Sandburg-style breakfast and enjoyed it thoroughly. Just like he had with Blair. And he'd grumbled and complained the whole time, making faces at his delicious yogurt shake, calling the granola horse feed, refusing to admit he liked any of it, certainly not deigning to thank her. He'd given her the Sandburg treatment.

No wonder the kid had left. God, why did everything invariably come back to Blair?

It was not long after that he'd decided to do things differently with Molly. So he wouldn't drive her away too. If that meant going to movie he didn't want to see, well okay then. She was at least neater than Sandburg, and that took away a whole arena of contention. He never found her school books scattered around the loft. She never left a dirty dish in the sink. Actually she was the most orderly, self-contained person he'd ever met. More so even than he was. He never believed that possibility existed in the world. But honestly, he wasn't even in Molly's league.

Not only did she never leave anything out of place, but somehow she could put things back so it looked as though they'd never been disturbed in the first place. Even to his Sentinel senses. That was some trick. He'd come into the kitchen after she'd just been there, and there would be no trace of her left. No sense of her heat lingering on the things she'd touched. Not a whiff of her scent. Or air currents from her movement. Nothing. Like she was some phantom he'd dreamed up. But then he'd hear her singing under her breath to something she was listening to on her headphones while she studied in her room, and he'd know he hadn't just imagined her. It was like his senses had a blind spot where she was concerned. Not all the time, but often enough. He had no idea why. Maybe Blair could have figured it out. He winced. Could it really be this hard not to think about one person?

Well anyway, Blair wasn't there to untangle the mystery, and he didn't care enough to try. It didn't really matter that he didn't understand Molly or her weird effect on him. All that mattered was that he wasn't quite so alone anymore. He did still dream about Blair every night, but somehow it didn't make him feel quite as close to the abyss as it once had. He no longer took out the gun in the middle of the night when the pain and loneliness were at their worst. He had stopped sitting on the edge of his bed with the muzzle pressed against his temple, trying to decide if it was bad enough yet. It had to be unendurable, that was his rule. He was not a coward, except perhaps when it came to Blair, and he would not end his life out of cowardice. If there was any way to live, he would. And Molly helped. When he awoke frenzied and desolate from the dreams, he would reach out with his hearing, somehow in those moments he could always find her, and he would listen to her beating heart until the darkness passed. Her sound did not fill him the way his guide's once had. But it was still beautiful, so innocent, if that was something a human pulse could be.

And it was enough. The lovely and pristine music of her life gave him something to concentrate on while he fought the demons of his imagination. Now the gun stayed locked in the chest where it belonged. The question had been answered. The one reason to live had been taken away, but there was another. Not that it was the same reason or the same feeling or even something he could explain. Blair had been his partner, that was a bond he understood well. And while he knew Molly had become critical to him, he could not begin to describe the nature of that connection. He was not in love with her, of that he was certain. Just trying to see her that way twisted up his insides, making him terribly uncomfortable. No, it was more like a very close friendship. But even that didn't quite
cover it. Maybe he was learning to feel something entirely new in his middle age. He was quite sure both Molly and Blair would think that was a very good thing.

He could feel her squirming beside him, and it startled him. *God, did I zone out there?* The movie was well underway, and he really couldn't remember much of what had happened. *I didn't have that drifting feeling though. Must have just gotten lost in my thoughts.* He stretched his legs out into the aisle and tried to figure out what was happening on screen. There was a crowded train car, prisoners being shipped off to a concentration camp. The German soldiers had singled out two men who were lovers.

"Ooh," Molly said, grabbing his arm and held on.

He turned his attention to her and grew alarmed. She was deathly pale, pupils dilated. Her heart sounded like it was going to explode in her chest, and she was on the verge of hyperventilating. *Damn it! Of all the times to tune out his surroundings.* He took her hand. It was shaking and icy. On screen, he watched what had to be one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of torture and murder he'd ever seen, the guards forcing one of the men to take part in killing the other. Molly broke out in a sweat. He could smell her panic.

"Jim, let me up. God, please hurry."

He didn't move fast enough, and in her desperation, she climbed over his legs, nearly running out of the theater. He followed, on full protective alert, only stopping at the ladies room door. *Oh, hell! She needs me.* Thankfully, the bathroom was empty except Molly. He found her doubled over the toilet, retching, the sharp scent of bile filling the air. She had thrown up everything in her stomach, but the muscles were still heaving. Her shoulders shook too, and he could hear very soft sobbing. He knelt beside her, pulling the hair away from her face, rubbing her back, murmuring reassurances, kissing the top of her head.

"You're all right now," he said. "Just relax. Keep breathing. Slow and steady. Like when you're meditating. It's okay. I promise. Everything's all right."

The tension slowly eased from her body, the tremors subsided. She sat back, and he wiped her mouth with toilet paper. He could still feel her shaking, but her pulse and breathing had slowed back down to normal levels.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

He took her tear-streaked face gently in his hands. "Why? For not being able to watch the kind of brutality that turns even an old cop's stomach?" "I'm not good with violence. Other people's pain is too real to me. If I'd known the movie was going to be so explicit, I wouldn't have dragged you to it. The play's not like that. Still sad, still scary. But that whole scene happens off stage. You don't have to watch characters you care about being tortured, being forced to witness and commit atrocities to save their own lives. I just couldn't sit there and watch that. Because I didn't even have the luxury of telling myself it's only a movie. Because it's not. It happened. To lots of people."

She started to cry again, and he hugged her to him, stroking her hair comfortingly.

"That's my worst nightmare," she said, softly enough to tax even his Sentinel hearing. "To watch people I love suffer and be powerless to do anything to help them. To live in a world where people are tortured and killed just for being what the Spirit made them."

Jim didn't know what to say to that. It was pretty much the same as his worst nightmare. He would have loved to reassure her that the world was a safer place than that, but if he couldn't bring himself
to believe it, he'd never be able to convince her. So he stayed quiet and just hugged her tighter.

She sighed heavily and pulled away. "I'm okay now. I don't think I can go back in there though. Is it all right if we just go home?"

"Sure," he said, helping her to her feet. "Just one thing though. Next time, I pick the movie."

She smiled, looking more like herself again, and he felt relieved.

The ride home was quiet. He had bought Molly a soda before they left the theater, and she sat curled up in her corner of the truck, sipping her Coke, staring out the window. It suited him. He was always more comfortable with silence. Molly's heart was back to its normal relaxed rhythm. She seemed serene once more, and that put him at ease. There was nothing that needed saying.

Back at the loft, Molly went to brush her teeth. He knew her stomach would be empty and sore. He searched the cabinets and refrigerator, looking for something he could make her.

"My guts hurt," she complained, joining him in the kitchen.

"Not surprising. You need to eat something."

"Don't think I can."

"How about a smoothie?" he asked, reaching for the yogurt and fruit, "That would be light."

She laughed. "Let me get this straight. Are you offering to make me...what did you call it again? A crunchy granola excuse for a milkshake?"

"Hey, as long as I don't have to drink it," he said, smiling. "How 'bout it?"

"Sounds good. Do you want me to--"

"Go sit down. I've watched you make the stuff every morning for two months. I think I can figure it out."

Jim set up the blender, spooned in the yogurt, cut up fruit, poured in juice, added ice, hit the button to liquefy. He put it in a glass and brought it over to Molly, sitting down with her.

"Mmm. It's good. You're a quick study."

"That's what they tell me."

She smiled and covered his hand with hers. "Thank you. For this. And at the theater."

Jim shrugged. "That's what friends are for."

He could see she was pleased, and that made him happy. They both lapsed into silence, while Molly drank her smoothie.

"Molly? Can I ask you something?" he said, his voice sounding thunderous in the silent apartment, at least to his sensitive ears.

Jesus, he didn't even know what he was going to say next. Whatever it was, it felt like life and death.

"You can always ask me anything, Jim."
"I know the movie really upset you. And my God, it should have. It was horrible. To see things like that done to people. Nothing like that should ever happen to anyone for any reason, ever," he paused, not sure how to continue. "But are you sure...do you really believe...two guys can...love each other?"

God, where had that come from. It just leaped out of him.

"Sure. Don't you?"

He shifted in his seat, growing more uncomfortable by the second. He couldn't believe this was what he wanted to know, that he'd been the one to bring it up. He didn't want to consider why it suddenly seemed so important to him.

"I have to be honest here, Molly. I was raised to believe homosexuality is wrong, plain and simple. Disgusting. Not to mention unmanly."

"Yeah," she said, sipping her smoothie. "I guess that's what a lot of people were taught to believe. Sometimes I forget the way I was raised isn't all that typical. My grandmother was...well, I'd guess you'd have to call her unconventional."

Jim flashed briefly on Sandburg's mother and wondered if Blair and Molly had been separated at birth or something.

"My grandmother wasn't exactly religious, not in an organized sense at least. But she had a philosophy about how things work. It had room for all sorts of love in it. The things she taught me, they just make sense to me. They seem right. I look at the world through her eyes, and there are fewer contradictions. More things are beautiful."

"Tell me about what your grandmother believed," he said, his heart leaping with a sudden hope he couldn't yet examine.

She looked surprised he was actually interested. "Well, she taught me that being a man or a woman, that's just a physical thing. It doesn't really define who we are, not our essential selves at least. Souls don't have gender. We go from life to life, changing sexes and ethnicities and every other circumstance you can imagine, looking for the souls who have been important to us in the past so we can work out with them all the things we left unfinished before. Not that we have the same relationships with each another from one life to the next. The soul who was once your mother may now be your son. Or husband or sister or best friend. So you can see how homosexual or heterosexual wouldn't really matter. It's the connection that counts."

"So you're saying that if two men feel something for each other, it's because they knew each other in a past life?" he asked, unable to keep the extreme disbelief out of his voice.

"Possibly. Or it might be that they share a common destiny in this life. Everyone comes to the world with a mission that's unique to them. And a particular way they can best accomplish it. Some people are meant to work alone. Like me. I find my power in solitude. But others need to be part of a group. Maybe the government or an institution of some sort or just a bunch of friends. While others find their centers in family. And some in partnerships, whether business or love or both. They can only accomplish their goal if they find that other soul who's on the same mission."

Jim swallowed hard at that, but didn't interrupt her.

"Or two men may love each other simply because they do. That's their way in the world. The trick is to figure out what your course is and stick to it. And that's why the movie upset me so much. No one
has a right to tell you that your way is wrong. Sure, it might not be right for them, but then they don't have to do it. There are as many paths as there are people in the world, and the Spirit intended them all."

Something about what Molly said resonated with him. There was so much to consider, and he got lost in plotting all the angles. When he came back to himself, Molly had finished her smoothie, washed her glass and put everything away. He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there, but once again she'd managed to make everything look as if it had never been touched. She held out a beer to him and put her hand on his arm. "How 'bout we see what's on TV?"

He nodded, still feeling disoriented.

They settled on the sofa. He drank his beer and watched her flip channels. His mind was filled with questions, doubts, new possibilities, but for the first time in six months, he didn't feel agitated. A strange lassitude hung over him, which might almost have been peace. He let his senses go a little, relaxing into the comforting blur of television, night sounds, traffic, Molly's vital signs. As he drifted off to sleep, he had the realization that the world might not be quite as bleak a place as he had thought.

Blair shifted uncomfortably in his seat and put down the newspaper, trying to absorb what he'd just read. Three dead college girls in three months. God, that was horrible. He hadn't known any of them personally, but still he felt a profound sorrow for their families and friends. He knew enough from his own experience working with the police that the story in the paper was just the tip of the iceberg. The authorities never released the most gruesome details of a crime to the media, out of respect for the victim and the people left behind. Just reading this one had turned his stomach. He didn't want to think about how bad it must really be. Surely this was one of the worst cases of ritualized serial killing ever to hit Cascade.

And Jim was the lead investigator.

He felt a little guilty that this was where his attention kept turning, rather than to his regret for the young lives so brutally taken. He couldn't help it. His Jim was involved in a very dangerous situation, and that sent his guide instincts into overdrive. Hold on a second. *His* Jim? Yeah, hardly. And the depth of the bitterness he felt at this simple truth surprised him. Jim had never been his and never would be. To pretend otherwise would be to live in a fantasy world.

It was also useless to pretend that the only impediment was on Jim's side. True, he was terrified by how Jim might feel. Half the reason he left was because he expected Jim to figure out his secret any day and throw him out on his ass. It wasn't all that easy to hide things from a Sentinel who monitored your vital signs just as a matter of course. And it would have shattered him to watch Jim's reaction: shock giving way to anger giving way to disgust giving way to the icy remoteness Jim used to shield himself from intolerable truths. Just thinking of Jim raising those defenses against him made his insides hurt. Hell, Jim wouldn't have had to kick him out. He would have run screaming.

But the other half of it was that Blair was freaked out by his own feelings. Way freaked. Geez, he knew people sometimes got the wrong idea about him, what with his long hair and earrings and his offbeat interests and hippie free love attitude. But he'd always been totally and completely and in every other way straight. He hadn't even experimented or had a crush on a best buddy in junior high. Not that he'd ever been in one place long enough to have a best buddy. Or any friends at all, really. Until Jim.

And that was something else that tortured him. Maybe what he was feeling was actually an intensely strong and emotional bond of friendship. There were many ways to love people, he knew that. He
also realized that he was a novice at each and every one of them. He made lots of casual connections and tended to stay in the shallows where everything was uncomplicated and comfortable and no one would be seriously hurt when things ended. But not with Jim. With Jim, he dove head first into the deep end. And sure, part of that was because he was Jim's guide. But it wasn't all of it. He loved Jim. That he knew for certain. And it was easy to get love and sex confused. Maybe he'd just misinterpreted the intense care and affection he had for his partner.

That would be nice to think. He just loved his best friend. Nothing wrong with that. He could call Jim today and move back into the loft. Return to the life he loved so much and missed with every fiber of his being. The problem was that he was full of bullshit. Naomi would not be proud of him. She would not understand how she'd managed to raise such a hung-up son. She'd taught him to be accepting and open to alternative lifestyles, and so he was, as long as it wasn't his life. Just imagining himself with Jim messed with his self-concept in so many ways he couldn't count them all. Even if it did also excite him beyond belief and fill him with wild longing. Still. He was not gay. And he didn't want to be gay either. But he did want Jim, and he didn't know how to sort out that contradiction.

It was obviously no coincidence he'd fallen in love with the straightest man in America. God, he was so messed up.

He had to laugh at himself sometimes. Only friendship, my ass. He'd nearly fainted with sensual shock seeing Jim naked in the shower on the oil rig. That did not happen if a guy was only a friend and you didn't want anything more than that. In fact, he could remember every time he'd been treated to the sight of Jim's smooth bare skin. Every time Jim had come out of the bathroom with nothing more than a towel around his waist. Every time he'd come to breakfast in his boxers. Every time.

Who was he trying to kid? It wasn't just being face-to-face with a real live Sentinel that had made his heart race during their first encounter in that hospital room. It was being faced with Jim himself, the missing piece of his life he hadn't even known he was searching for.

And after he'd found it, he had fled to Africa. How much more ungrateful could he be?

And now Jim was in the middle of the most dangerous case of his career, and he didn't have his guide beside him. That gnawed at Blair's conscience. He would never forgive himself if something happened to Jim. How could he? A Sentinel protected his guide, that was hardwired into every instinct. But it was a two-way street. A guide looked out for his Sentinel as well. And he'd deserted his. God, how could he have done that? Jim would never have abandoned him in a time of need. And all because it got hard and he was hurt. What about how hard it was for Jim to deal with his senses all by himself?

Not that he'd seemed too concerned about it when Blair was deciding to go to Madagascar. He'd just slapped him on the back and said whatever he wanted to do would be fine with him. Of course, Jim wouldn't have asked him not to go. Just like with Borneo. That wasn't his way. He wouldn't have wanted to hold Blair back, and it was very difficult for him to admit he needed help. With anything. Shit. Maybe he had completely misread the situation. Jim had just seemed to take it all in stride. Blair had assumed it didn't really matter to him whether he stayed or went. But then again, Jim said the least when he cared the most. Maybe Jim had wanted him to stay all along?

And if Jim hadn't come clean about that, what else hadn't he told him about? Like maybe problems with his senses. Maybe he should call Jim and let him know he was back in town. Or he could just go down to the station. He felt sure his observer status hadn't been rescinded. Simon would have seen to that. He could just go down there right now and start back to work. With Jim. Take up where they'd left off.

Or maybe it was all just wishful thinking. Maybe Jim really didn't need him. And maybe all his
doubts and struggles over his feelings made him an unsuitable guide anyway.

Shit. He really didn't know what to do.

"Blair? Is this a good time? Or should I come back later?"

A curly red head peaked around his office door. Molly. His favorite student. He motioned her to the chair beside his desk. Well, at least there would be one bright spot in his day. Half way through the semester and she'd never once missed stopping by during his office hours. Whatever strange reaction he'd had to her at first was under control now, and he could just enjoy her company, appreciate her intelligence and delightful curiosity. That was the best part of being a teacher after all.

"I wanted to talk to you about my paper."

He smiled. "Okay, but you know it's not due until the end of the semester."

"Yeah, I know. But I don't like putting things off. Plus, I've been thinking about it already. So I figured I might as well get going."

He had to laugh. This was the kind of youthful enthusiasm people were always accusing him of. Like Simon. And Jim. Shit, he just couldn't seem to stay away from that subject.

"So what are you thinking of writing about?"

"I'm really interested in taboos," she said. "I just find it so curious that aside from a few very primal taboos like incest, ones that have a basis in biology, what's forbidden actually varies a lot from one culture to another. Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

"Well, yes and no. No, because some taboos arise out of historical experience that may not be the same from one group to the next. But yes, because there are so many taboos that we really can't explain. What makes one group of people fearful of a woman's menstrual blood and another see it as something powerful? We don't know. The human mind is a macabre place. And that's why it's so cool to be an anthropologist."

He watched her smile. He couldn't help doing a little advertising for the field. She had a real gift, and he hoped she pursued the subject further. Maybe she'd even go to graduate school, get a Ph.D. He would be pleased and proud to count her among his colleagues some day.

"You know which taboo I find the most fascinating and difficult to get a handle on? The proscription against homosexuality. Because the role of biology is kind of indeterminate there. I mean, some people argue that a society condemns gay sex because it has a vested interest in men and women getting together and creating offspring. But in certain animal species there is homosexual behavior, as a way to control the group's population and ensure its survival. And there are certain cultures in which homosexuals hold a sacred position within the group. With all these contradictions, I'm hoping there's a paper topic in there somewhere."

She was watching him expectantly, waiting for a response. God, why this of all possible subjects? It was some kind of horrible take on Murphy's Law. You try to avoid thinking about what's tearing you apart, but it just keeps coming up in new and innovative ways.

"Yeah. I definitely think you have something there. Just need to narrow it down some. Did you have a particular approach in mind?"

"Well, I don't know what you'll think of this. Maybe it's too political. But I get very upset by how narrow-minded our culture is, like we can't quite decide that everyone's rights should be protected no
matter who we sleep with. So I wanted to do a cross-cultural comparison of American attitudes about homosexuality versus cultures that are more gay-friendly. To kind of bring some of our fears and prejudices into sharper focus."

Geez, he could be a case study for her paper. Not a happy thought.

"That sounds really interesting. I look forward to reading it."

Her face lit up. "Great! I'm so glad you like it. Actually I have to admit I've got an ulterior motive for writing it."

Oh God, was she going to come out to him? If it were under any other circumstances, he would be more than happy to listen and counsel her. And it would have been easy. Anyone she loved would be lucky to get her. But he didn't think he could deal with someone else's sexual identity crisis on top of his own.

"You see, I've got these two friends. Two guys. And they're really in love with each other, but they're both too terrified to admit it. They're kind of manly men, these two, so it really fools with their perceptions of themselves, this wanting another guy thing. The saddest part is that they used to be best friends, but they're not really in contact anymore because of the attraction and how scared that makes them. And I keep wanting just to point out the truth to them both, but I'm afraid they won't be able to hear me. Too threatening. So I thought if I got them to read my paper, they might be able to understand how they feel in a different context and maybe that would help and they'd get back together. Because they are so miserable apart. It really breaks my heart."

Blair just stared at her. If she had read his mind, she could not have summed up his life more accurately.

"Well anyway, thanks for listening to my idea. I'm gonna go to the library and get cracking on that research. See ya."

He watched the door close behind her and felt pieces of a puzzle trying to fall into place. He had the same sensation every time she came to see him. He hadn't figured it out yet, but he would. He felt confident. It was just that she sometimes seemed like two people. The one who was what everyone saw when they looked at her—the sweet, smart girl who listened carefully in class and took notes like a demon. He had to smile at that. But the other self, he was allowed only a fleeting glimpse of her every now and then. He saw something ancient and mysterious in her. A lone figure walking a deserted path beneath a cloudless sky long since past. The lush undergrowth of a primeval forest. The smoke from incense and candles rising back to heaven. He had no idea why these images came to him or what they had to do with Molly. But he would figure it out. Human mysteries were his life's work.

And every time she came to see him she stirred up thoughts and feelings about Jim. What kind of coincidence was that?

Still. Their talk had jolted his imagination. He went back over everything he knew about homosexuality in other cultures. She was right. There were many ways to think about it. Not every culture viewed homosexual behavior as a threat to masculinity. In fact, in certain warlike tribes in New Guinea where manliness was especially prized, homosexual relationships were encouraged as part of a boy's coming of age, a way of ensuring his masculinity.

He also remembered reading accounts from British and French missionaries traveling in North America during the eighteenth century of Native American men who took on women's roles within the community and had men as sexual partners. They were called berdaches and were often
respected, even revered, within the tribe, becoming shamans and healers. Shamans...and there were some of Burton's more arcane references about the Sentinel-Guide relationship. He should have thought of that before. Maybe he just hadn't been ready. And maybe he wasn't the only one feeling these things. Maybe whatever this thing was between them...maybe it was meant to be.

Maybe he really should call Jim.

Continued in part two.
Chapter 2

Due to the length of this story, it has been broken into four parts.

The Break

by Annabelle Leigh

Continued from part one.

The Break - part two.

The moon was full and very beautiful, incandescent in the midnight blue sky, with just a sprinkling of stars visible in the heavens. Molly knelt on the rush mat she'd spread out on the terrace floor. She listened to the musical night, the wind and water and city sounds, feeling the familiar stirring within her. She was a moon-ruled person, and this was her special time in the month, to celebrate, to make carefully considered requests, to focus her power and use it for a worthy purpose. Since she'd moved into the loft, it had been the same mission each time--the most worthwhile goal she could imagine, the giving over of her energy to the two men who had become the most important people in her life, to help them heal their wounds and find a way back to each other.

It was very late. She had waited until Jim had been asleep for hours. He had put in a long day and would not wake up unless he heard her. And he would not hear her, she would make sure of that. From earliest childhood, her grandmother had taught her how to control the impression she made on the physical world--how to leave behind no trace of herself, no sound or vibration, no scent or heat--a skill she called ghostwalking. It had become second nature to her by now. She could shield herself from Jim's awareness without even trying.

She still had no word to give Jim's special ability, although she had sensed it from their first meeting. And it amazed her, so unlike anything else she'd ever experienced. The first time he used his enhanced senses in front of her, she could feel the energy coming off him in waves, could see it, the vortex of his concentration, could sense a whole complicated tangle of instinct and emotion and destiny. All in response to a strange noise coming from outside the loft door, a banging that turned out to be a neighbor moving in some new furniture. And she could have sworn she saw a black jaguar pacing up and down the living room, giving her the once over, and even more weirdly its seeming approval, before flicking its tail and disappearing into the wall like a phantom.

Though she could not name Jim's ability, she had seen into his soul and understood its nature. He was a guardian spirit--there were so few any more--human beings dedicated to the protection and care of others. In Jim's case, that meant the entire city of Cascade. It was a huge responsibility, but then again, it explained why he was such a good cop. Since she'd come to live with him, he had taken to watching over her too, keeping track of her sounds and vital signs and scent to make sure she was all right--something she suspected he'd also done with Blair. It meant Jim counted her as one of his own, and that was something she'd never had from anyone other than her grandmother. Her parents had been gone too soon for her to feel a sense of belonging, and there had never been anyone else in her life, no other family, no friends, not even casual acquaintances. She had always been different, and her grandmother had encouraged her to stay apart.

She had never fully understood how absolutely alone she was until that aloneness had receded, and now she felt a richness she could not adequately describe. She felt connected, part of the web of life,
in a way that made her feel really and truly safe for the first time. Now there was Jim and Blair and Simon and her classmates and the other guys down at the station. And the world felt larger and more kindly, warmer and more embracing. She still had a perilous path to walk in life, she had been preparing for it from first memory, but now she would not have to do it in isolation. Now there were other souls who were making their own difficult journeys, people who would not think her a freak, people who would understand.

It made her want to give something back, some part of herself. So she relaxed her control around Jim when she remembered. She let him track her, especially at night when a sense of her helped him sleep. Tonight though, she would need to stay cloaked--hoping that he didn't wake up and panic when he couldn't find her. Tonight she would need to keep secrets from him. She knew that's why she found it comforting that he had secrets of his own. It made her feel less guilty. And it was nice to know she wasn't the only one with an inner life that defied simple explanation. Maybe when the time came, it would help him understand why she had stayed silent so long. Maybe he would understand that sometimes people were forced into secrets, even when they would have preferred nothing so much as the truth.

She spread out before her the objects she had chosen for the ritual-- all things symbolic of the moon. Her grandmother had taught her to listen to her own intuition, to find the words and actions and symbols that felt most reverent to her. The details were not important, only the intention, the focusing of her own energy, the connection forged with the universe. She never prayed in quite the same way twice, varying the ritual according to season and mood and need.

She took off her robe, folding it neatly, laying it on a nearby chair. She was shielded, no one would see, and the moonlight on her bare skin would make the invocation more powerful. She had prepared her body earlier, purified it with a hot shower, anointed it with jasmine oil, the fragrance of sleepy flowers that opened only at night to release their heady scent beneath the shining moon. She lit a single white candle, representing the light of truth and wisdom, and burned sandalwood incense to call down the benevolent presence of the Spirit. She laid out a single, snow white iris on the makeshift altar, a symbol of love, peace and beauty. She held up a set of bracelets, silver like the Moon, handmade by her father, calling down the Spirit's blessing on them, before sliding them high up onto her arms. In the same way, she blessed the pearl and moonstone her grandmother had given her and held one in each hand, palms open, the stones helping to conduct her energy.

She calmed herself, breathing rhythmically, slowing her pulse down by degrees, opening and clearing her mind, until she felt at one with the night, the stars, the wind, the universe. She held an image of Jim in her mind, carefully painting in the details until the picture felt real and palpable. She could see his physical self and the color of his aura, a deep and rich red, strongly charged energy of a physical nature, a powerful force active on the Earth plane--with the dark, ragged place where he was once joined to Blair, somewhat smoother now, slowly healing. She thought of all the things she admired about him: his sense of honor, his courage in the face of daily danger, his dedication to justice, the tenderness he felt for her and Blair when he'd been sadly starved of that kind of care in his own life, how badly he wanted to do what was right.

She let a feeling of love for him build inside her chest, warm and pure and prayerful, and then she focused her will, enveloping the mental image of him in the pink energy, sending him calm and well-being, hope and happiness. It was all she could offer. To do more would be to cross the line, interfering in his freedom of will, a form of black magick, a treacherous course she had been warned away from all her life. She held the image for several seconds, before setting it out of her mind to keep from draining away the effectiveness.

She sighed. She had not thought it would be so difficult to get the two men back together when she'd made the promise to the house spirits all those months ago, not after the depth of the love she'd seen,
not to mention the karmic ties. Okay, so she'd known it would be an uphill battle with Jim. Blair's
leaving had gouged an old, old wound that had never properly healed, that had left him feeling as
vulnerable as the little boy who's mother left for work one day and never came back again, who's
father had never given him a kind word or a loving gesture.

She had to breathe deeply into her center to calm the anger there, letting it bubble up to the surface of
her mind and out with her breath. She moved her thoughts to consider Jim's father and the reasons
he'd done what he had, his limitations, the pain he did not know how to express, only to pass on. She
let herself feel a sadness for him, to understand him, to feel compassion. Anger clouded her vision,
understanding cleared it, and the point was to understand Jim's pain, not to condemn his father.
Better. She could see how deeply Jim believed he was unworthy of love, that his trust would always
be betrayed, that he would always be left. And how he pushed people away to make that prophecy
come true. He had not understood that he could have kept Blair from going simply by asking him to
stay. And even if he had seen it, he would not have been able to say the words. He did not know he
had the right to need and have those needs met. He did not even guess how much he was loved and
needed in return.

Blair hadn't been any easier to reach. Maybe that shouldn't have surprised her so much. It had
occurred to her early on that Blair seemed more open than he actually was. His intense curiosity gave
him an interest in everyone who crossed his path. That's what made him such a good anthropologist.
But in his intimate life, he shied away from deeper connections and long-term commitments.

It was the curse of charm, that's how Molly thought of it. He would never want for company,
whether for romance or friendship. People would always seek him out for his bubbling energy and
keen ability to listen and sparkling conversation. In all that commotion, it was easy for people to miss
that Blair asked a lot of questions but didn't offer much about himself in return. And if things got too
close, he could always just move on. There would always be more people who would find him
intriguing, who would want to spend time with him. He did not need to cultivate any one
relationship. Until Jim. Molly could just imagine how Blair felt. It must have terrified him. All of it.
That Jim needed him. That he wanted to stay. That nothing between them would ever be casual or
simple. The terrible fear that he might not be able to do it, that he might not be equal to the intensity
of their connection.

And there was a commitment beyond his tie with Jim that he had yet to fully understand and
embrace. Blair had his own complicated inner world. Like Jim, he had been called for special service
in this life, to mediate between this world and the next. He had the mark of Shaman upon him.
Unmistakable. But he was only just beginning to come into his power. Much of his history was
obscured from him, so he did not understand that he was part of an ancient lineage. He had not had
anyone to teach and guide him, like her grandmother had done for her. He did not know how to take
the next step or even that he was at a crossroads where he must choose to unfold his true nature or
turn his back on it forever.

She pictured Blair in her mind, just as she had with Jim, all the physical details, as well as the
mandala surrounding him, a sunny yellow showing the glow of intellect, turning shimmering and
golden around the edges, the intelligence turned toward spiritual concerns. Sadly, it was marred by
the same raw darkness as Jim's, where he had pulled away from the connection. She winced at the
wound. But it made her smile to think of all the things she loved about Blair: his joyous heart, the
way his face lit up when one of his students asked a particularly insightful question, how doggedly
he pursued knowledge, his gentle voice that promised understanding, his never-ending patience. She
willed the love to him, a hopeful prayer for healing and reconciliation, and then put it out of her mind
when it was done.

She said a final prayer, thanking the Spirit for its attendance and blew out the candle. She pulled on
her robe and gathered together the objects to take inside. Back in her room, she snuggled into her bed and opened herself to Jim's perception once more. If he woke up now, he would know she was safe and sound and drifting off to sleep.

No matter how many miraculous things she witnessed, she never stopped being amazed by how strangely fate unfolded. She had come to Cascade to find the fulfillment of a prophecy. It had led her to Jim's door. There were to be three. She was one. Jim was another. Then the house spirits had sent her in search of Blair, and she had never expected him to be the third. But he was. She had barely been able to string two words together when she'd asked permission to take his class. She'd gone in the hopes of matchmaking. She'd come away with insight into destiny. Later, she had second-guessed herself. Maybe it had all just been wishful thinking. But sitting in his class, she knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he was the final piece of the puzzle. He, Jim and she were the three. And it made an odd kind of sense. The connections ran deep. And someday soon she would be able to share it with them both, to tell them the whole story, and hopefully, they would find joy in it, as she did.

Surely they would. It had been foretold. The Prophecy of Three. The Spirit made the two as one/The third to stand alone/But in their time of gravest need/The chosen ones become the Three/The one who guards by night and day/The one who guides the way/The one who bears the Spirit's mark/The Three who come to banish dark

The thought chilled her. Sometimes she got lost in her happiness at finding Jim and Blair, but she could never afford to lose sight of the task that would soon be at hand. The darkness was gathering. She could feel it. It would follow her to Cascade. To Jim and Blair. Please, please, please. Don't let anything happen to them. I couldn't stand it if it turned out like before.

Her mind flashed on the jagged, long-ago images, tilted and confusing and still fraught with fear. It was not like a movie. It was wordless and discontinuous, a little girl's half-formed impressions of terror. The stiff leather straps on her wrists and ankles. The hard, cold stone beneath her bare body, making her shiver. Long, clammy fingers that brushed along her skin, tracing ritual patterns on her body with some kind of oil, sending a wave of violent energy through her, a burning, sickening feeling like electrocution. And his grotesque voice, chanting words she didn't understand, filling her with repulsion and dread. Evil. She hadn't had the language then to call him that, but child that she was, she recognized in him every dark thing her grandmother had ever warned her about. After that, the memory got chaotic. He was moving toward her. There was a glinting in the candlelight, the flash of something metallic, a knife blade, long and serrated and deadly. And the world seemed to collapse into slow motion, as she lay there waiting to die.

Then there were sounds--scuffling and banging, an agonizing howl of pain and hurried footsteps. And then there were hands on her, strong and familiar, beloved hands, her grandmother tearing off the restraints, lifting her from the table, cradling her in her arms. Over her shoulder, she could see her father crumpled on the floor, eyes wide, blood pooling on the floor, the knife buried in his chest. And then there was more screaming. Only later did she realize it was her own voice, wailing in grief.

Her pulse raced, and there was a sharp pain in her chest. She couldn't breathe. The years went by, but the pain remained just the same, neither lessening nor receding. That last image of him was always with her--her sacrificed father lying on the hard, comfortless ground, dead so that she might live. No matter how long she lived, she would never, never be able to forget it.

And now that same darkness was circling, getting nearer, hunting her like prey, threatening the people she loved yet again.

"Molly?"
She nearly jumped out of her skin. She hadn't heard him, and if he could sneak up on her, anyone could. She had let her guard down way too far.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Just a bad dream."

"You need anything?"

"Uh-uh. But thanks."

Jim seemed hesitant to go, probably sensing her unease. He stood at the doorway, not quite in, not quite out.

"I'm okay, Jim. Really. I'm sorry I woke you up. We should both try to go back to sleep."

"All right. But call if you need me."

She smiled. "I will. Thanks."

She turned over and pulled the covers up around her shoulders. She really was so lucky to have found Jim and Blair. She wished she could tell them everything and clear the air, and there was no burden of danger that went along with it. She wished to God that this nightmare really was just a bad dream.

The dead were strangely vulnerable. No matter how many homicides Jim investigated, he never quite got over this feeling. Even though he realized it was a mistaken perception. The dead were gone, in the truest sense of the word. That's what you saw when you looked into the vacant eyes of the body left behind. Nothing. The person it had once been was out of reach now, beyond everything--outside of suffering and harm and regret. Still, there was always something horrible about the lifeless way a body lay sprawled where it had fallen, like an ungainly rag doll, the hapless skew of arms and legs, a jarring reminder that the person would not be getting up again.

It made it worse that the latest murdered girl had been dumped in the most desolate surroundings Jim had ever seen. It was a wayside on the outskirts of town--once envisioned as a place where tourists could stop for a picnic lunch on their way to the national forest north of the city. Unfortunately, the designers hadn't thought the concept through very well, and it was too far off the road to attract many visitors. As a result, it had the air of a ghost town--dilapidated picnic tables rotting in the moist climate, grills rusted and unusable, everything wildly overrun by weeds and trash that looked years old.

He had to walk to get to the body, which had been found in a small gully in a circle of trees several hundred yards beyond the parking lot. With his Sentinel sight, he could see the naked form lying face down in the deep mulch, arms and legs splayed. He could make out the delicate line of a back, the long curly hair. He froze. Curly red hair. A spike of adrenalin slapped him across the face. No! Don't let it be. Please God. Please. He ran. He could see Simon standing over the body with a look of...God, what was that look on his face? Please don't let it be her. Please, I'll do anything. Just don't let it be her. His heart hammered, and he could not catch his breath. He kept running.

The world spun away from him.

"Jim!" He could feel Simon shaking him by the shoulders. "Jim! Listen to me. It's not her. It's not Molly. Can you hear me? Damn it, where the hell is Sandburg when I need him?"
And then the world spun back again. He was gasping for air, but he was at least inside himself once more. "It's okay, sir. You can stop that now."

Simon let out a deep breath and released him, looking more than a little relieved. Jim knelt down by the body.

"Are you sure?" It came out soft and trembling, despite his best efforts to regain control.

He felt the pressure of Simon's broad hand on his shoulder. "Yes, Jim. When I first got to the scene, I had the same concern. I had the people from the ME's office turn her over just enough to make sure it wasn't Molly."

He hid his face in hands that still shook. Not her. Not her. Thank God. He looked over at the small, defenseless body. But it could have been. God, it could have been her. His Sentinel eyes fastened on the victim's hair, dulled and matted from exposure to the earth and elements. In his mind, he substituted the deeply familiar image of coppery curls alive with warmth and light. And the sweet, shining face that laughed at his bad jokes, asked him a thousand questions, listened between his words for what he was really trying to say. And the clear eyes that grew wide with wonder when he told a story, that watched him with unfaltering compassion even in his ugliest moments. And he saw all that beauty and possibility crumpled on the ground at his feet, lifeless and empty, abandoned in this bleak and comfortless grave. And he could not stop shaking, caught up in a spiral of imagined loss.

"JIM! Don't you dare do that zoning thing or whatever Sandburg calls it. Do you hear me? JIM! Snap out of it, Detective!"

He hadn't lost control of his senses in a long time, and he'd forgotten how painful it was when he jolted back to awareness.

"Sorry, Captain."

Simon helped him up. "It's okay. I know you can't help it. You just had me worried there for a minute. But don't go checking out on me like that again. I'm not Sandburg."

He couldn't help wincing.

"Sorry, Jim. I shouldn't have said that."

He shrugged. It was the truth, after all. No one else could ever be Blair. No one else could ever be Molly. It had taken him all these months to grasp that simple fact. He'd thought Molly's friendship could fill the hole Blair's absence had left in his heart, but that loss was still a loss. And now, Molly had her own place in his affections, one that belonged to her and no one else. And if he lost her like he'd lost Blair, nobody would ever be able to fill that empty, broken place in him where he loved her-anymore than anyone could ever fill the empty, broken place in him where he loved and missed Blair.

He felt Simon move closer, his observant eyes boring into him. "Why don't you call her?"

He shook his head. "She won't be back from school yet."

He could feel Simon's breath as he let it out in a frustrated sigh. "Go home, Jim. We can take it from here."

"But--"
"Do it, Detective. You won't be good for anything until you see for yourself that she's okay."

The professional in him wanted to protest, but the rest of him was weary. And worried. And teetering on the edge of something too emotional to be of any use at a crime scene. He nodded and laid his hand on Simon's shoulder in a silent thank you and trudged back to his truck that now seemed much further away than he remembered. He gunned the engine and the sound felt oddly comforting. He put the truck into gear and felt a rush of relief so intensely physical he thought for a second he would not be able to drive. It was like stepping away from the edge of a precipice. It was like waking up from your worst nightmare and realizing it was all just a dream. It was like getting a second chance.

Back at the loft, he ran up the steps two at a time and listened for her heartbeat, although he knew it was silly to expect to hear it above the wild jackhammering in his own chest. At the door, he fumbled with the key and cursed his clumsy fingers. The suspense was so terrible it felt like it would break him. He summoned every bit of command he'd ever had and re-exerted control over his body, just the way Blair had taught him, regulating his breathing, subduing his runaway pulse. He opened his hearing, and there it was. The rhythmic ebb and flow of blood in her arteries and veins, the tidal beating of her heart. Serene, untroubled, lulling. Alive. He had to blink back the tears. There was no reason why she wouldn't be home, why she shouldn't be safe, and he felt enormously grateful anyway.

He found her sitting on the terrace, beneath a blanket, warming her hands with a mug of tea. One corner of his mouth turned up. It was too hard to actually smile. Okay, so there were many ways in which she was completely opposite Blair. She wanted to be outside all the time, even in the rain. She never seemed to mind the cold. She adapted to any weather. She was ecstatic when it was sunny, but she took joy in all the seasons.

He didn't know whether to speak or not. She seemed lost in reverie, staring up at the sky as if she expected to find answers in it. He didn't want to startle her, so he eased into the chair beside her with the quietness only a Sentinel could manage.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said, sounding dreamy and far away.

"The sky?"

"And the light. It's actually silver. Not grey or white or pale blue. I've never seen that anywhere else. It makes everything look still and mysterious and just a little bit sad."

He'd always thought of the Cascade sky as opaque grey, but when he tilted his head back, he could see what she meant. There was subtlety he'd never noticed before, so many shades and variations, one flowing into the next, so many patterns, like an ever-shifting tapestry. And the light was silver. And it hung on the landscape like a halo. And it filled him with a silvery kind of sadness the way life was just sad sometimes.

And he had no idea when he started to cry or why or how he was going to stop.

"Do you want to tell me?" she asked, her voice soft and low and soothing, a pliant vine twining itself in his thoughts, like Blair's when he used it to guide him.

He shook his head.

"Do you want some tea?"

He didn't have the energy to shake his head again. She put her hand on his arm and left it there and
went back to studying the sky. The quiet grew until it became a sound. And he could feel the stillness flowing into him and becoming part of his body, and only then did he realize how tired he was. Not the tired of a long day or an ambitious workout or even the aftermath of a really bad scare. It was the kind of weariness that went to the bone, that followed him everywhere, that had taken the place of his bones. It had been with him since Blair walked out the door. And long before that. It had been with him as long as he could remember. He had worn himself out carrying around a weight of silence. He had exhausted his strength trying to keep a lid on all the parts of his spirit his father had thought were of no value: the tender, joyous self that loved and felt wonder, the darkness he didn't want to admit even to himself, the wounded places he was too frightened to touch. He didn't know what it was to be Jim—the fully realized, spontaneous, whole Jim. The Jim who had no false constraints. The Jim who did not have to close away his feelings in a tight, locked box.

The Jim who cried and could not guess the reason.

He smiled ruefully. Things were certainly changing. He was changing. In the past, this thought would have panicked him, but it didn't now. He felt peaceful at long last. The doors were flung open and the ghosts rushing out and the dread was gone. Molly’s presence surrounded and comforted him. It was as if her serenity flowed through her hand and into him. It was powerful, like what he felt when his Guide touched him, but different too. With Blair, the touch melted all the boundaries between them, merging them, until he could not differentiate Blair's hand from his own arm, could not begin to guess where he ended and Blair began. Molly retained her separateness. He could feel what was hers coming into him, her vital essence steadying him, giving him the calm he needed to finally look at the ghosts of his memory. It was her gift to him, and he was grateful.

Somehow it did not surprise him that the ghosts were all pain.

In the truck coming home that afternoon, his mind had not been able to let go of the crime scene. The image wove itself into his worst fears and replayed over and again in his mind with technicolor detail. Sometimes it was curly red hair wet and matted with weeds and sometimes it was curly brown hair. Either way, it was excruciating. It could have been her. For that matter, it could have been Blair. If not this time, then some other time, with some other deranged monster. The world was nothing but danger. Blair could catch some god-awful plague in the jungle. Molly could die in a freak accident crossing the street. There were no guarantees. Everything ended. That was something even a Blessed Protector couldn't do a blessed thing about. It was the everyday reality of loving people. It was the pain of being alive.

And it scared him. He could admit that to himself at last. It scared the living hell out of him. That's why he had stayed so solitary for so long. Even during his marriage, he had held onto aloneness like it was a shield. He thought it was his nature, but really it was his father's perverse idea of what his nature should be and his own fear getting in the way. Fear did not become him. He cringed whenever he thought about what he had been before Blair. A hard ass with no life outside the job, rigid and emotionless, with an attitude the size of Mt. Rainier. He remembered slamming Blair against the wall that first day in his office at the university, even though his every instinct registered the younger man's sincerity, even though he was a trained cop and much bigger than Blair, even though he had no right. Back then, he had been an explosion waiting to happen. He had been a scary man. He was not proud of that.

Blair had never held it against him though, not any of it. He was the very incarnation of generosity. He had offered up his wonderful sweetness without any expectation of having it returned. He had poured out his care and kindness, bringing life back to the desert. It was only fitting that Blair had become a shaman. He performed miracles.

And he loved Blair with everything he was. He loved Molly, too. Differently, but no less deeply. He
had turned into a man who could love. Nothing in his past had prepared him for that. There had been no love in his father's house. Maybe that's why his mother had left. Another ghost, more pain. He couldn't even remember her very clearly anymore, like an old photograph that had long since faded. For most of his adult life, he had not thought about love. Carolyn had been his first attempt and he'd failed and they'd both been miserable. And then Blair had come along. And now Molly. And it was overwhelming. Watching Blair tuck a strand of hair behind his ear could make his heart stand still. He had an absurd fondness for the laptop and backpack and the big, dusty tomes and every other object Blair owned, just because they were Blair's. And the same now with Molly. Whenever he touched her sweater or scarf or books, he could feel her presence clinging to it, her unique energy, and it was enough to bring tears to his eyes.

And God, it was just as frightening to be loved as it was to love. Wait. When had he realized that? That he was loved. He couldn't pinpoint it. He only knew how it made him feel--kind of weird and abjectly grateful and more alive inside than he'd ever imagined.

It was good, very good, although sometimes it seemed like life in the deep freeze had been simpler. He'd certainly held out as long as possible, resisting connection for all he was worth. Sometimes, that still seemed like the safer course. Don't get involved. Don't get hurt. But there was no going back now, and he wouldn't have wanted to even if it were possible. Blair had thawed him. He hadn't fully realized that before. The ice was gone, and he craved warmth. He craved Blair. He wanted to hear the beloved voice, let it wash over him like a balm. He wanted to feel the living pulse that anchored him to the world. He wanted to smell the unique tangle of scents--apple shampoo and sandalwood cologne, warm sweat and Blair essence. He wanted to see his Guide as he'd never before been brave enough to imagine him--gloriously naked, stretched out like a feast on his big bed, eager for his loving. And then he wanted time to stand still, so he could learn the braille of his love's body and that tactile bliss would be his universe and there would never be anything else.

But he had let Blair leave. Like a moron. It was the single most monumentally stupid decision of his life, and that was saying something considering his marriage, his renegade days in Vice and his entire youth. If he'd just asked Blair to stay, he would have. He could see that now. All it would have taken was that one word. Stay. Only the briefest intimation that Blair was important to him. It's about friendship, that's what Blair had said when he turned down Borneo. God knew he wished he'd been a better friend in return. He hadn't even thanked him properly. His terror at the prospect of losing him had frozen in his throat and even his gladness that he was staying could not dislodge it. He'd become more afraid than ever to let himself love him.

So he'd done what he always did when he was scared, he'd withheld himself. And it pained him now. It made his chest hurt when he considered how little of his feelings he'd shared with Blair. And if he didn't tell him, how would he ever know? He wouldn't. He would think Jim didn't need him and didn't care whether he was around or not, and he'd go off to Africa and never know how profoundly he was loved and missed. That was not a kind or loving way to treat the person who had given him back his life and sanity. And all because he was afraid. Blair deserved much better than that. He always had.

Of all the regretful emotions, shame was the worst, and Jim wished it were literally a bad taste in his mouth so he could spit it out.

If only he could have a second chance. He didn't know how to pray, but he had some familiarity with begging. Please. He'd do it differently. No matter how hard it seemed or how inept he felt with words, he'd find a way. He'd tell Blair. He'd tell him all of it. And even if Blair didn't return his feelings in the same way, they could work it out. There was nothing cruel or closed about Blair. Even if he couldn't be Jim's lover, he would still be his Guide. He would still love him. He had been a fool not to see that before, not to trust what he knew so well about his friend. No matter what, there
was a part of Blair that would always belong to him. Just as there was a place in him that only Blair could fill. If only he could have another chance. If only Blair would come back from Africa. And step back into his life, where he had always belonged.

When he opened his eyes, the light had faded, and he could tell it was hours later, even though it felt like minutes. He was covered up with Molly's blanket, and he could hear her in the kitchen making dinner. He stretched in the chair, slightly stiff, but not as cold as he would have expected. He got up, and it was strange...he felt lighter. The odd calm was still with him. He folded the blanket and carried it inside.

Molly smiled at him. "I was going to come get you in a minute. Dinner's almost ready."

"I'm starved."

"I hope you're in the mood for chicken."

He went to stand beside her. "Smells good."

She took one of his hands in hers. "Not too cold. I wasn't sure if I should leave you out there, but you seemed to need it."

He held onto her hand. She didn't try to take it back. Somehow, he knew she didn't just mean rest. She was watching him in that careful way of hers, with clear eyes that saw everything. There was no point in hiding, and he didn't want to anyway.

"You know, it would unburden you to tell me. At least the part that has to do with me."

"How--"

"Just the way you looked at me when you got home. So what happened today?"

He hesitated for a moment. The protective part of him did not want to tell her. The wise part of him knew it was pointless not to. "I saw something...upsetting."

"At a crime scene?"

He nodded. "The same serial killer, the one I warned you about. Another dead college girl. I was walking through the trees. To get to the body. And from a distance, all I could see...I thought for a moment that it was you."

"Oh, my God. How horrible," she said, grabbing his arm, her face filled with compassion.

"She was about your age and your size. She had your same hair color and it was long and curly, just like yours. And she was face down, so I couldn't tell," he said, feeling the trembling start again. "And even after Simon told me it wasn't, all I could think was it could have been. It could have been you."

She took his face in her hands and looked deeply and deliberately into his eyes. "You had a terrible scare today. If I'd been in your position, I would have felt exactly the same way. But it wasn't me out there. I was safe and sound all day long, at school and then here at home. Nothing happened to me and nothing is going to. You don't have to worry."

He nodded. She was right. Of course, he couldn't not worry about her, that's just what he did. But this danger had passed, it was never real. He could let it go. He hugged her and for once, he forgot the differences in their size and strength. He crushed her against him with all the emotions of the day-
-the fear and the pain, the relief and the love and the joy of second chances. She was alive and well and safe. And he felt the burden of all those weighty emotions lift.

"I just wanted you to know..." he stumbled, but he had to say it. "Nothing would ever be the same...I just couldn't stand it..."

She pulled back and smiled up at him, touching his face. "You're important to me, too."

He hugged her again, before letting her go back to cooking dinner. She handed him plates and silverware, and they set the table together, teasing each other about who could do it more neatly. And the world resumed its normal rhythm.

Molly took the elevator up to Major Crimes, nodding to the people she recognized as she went. She'd thought carefully about how and where she should get Jim and Blair together and had decided on the obvious choice of the loft and as soon as possible. Just one last pretense, that's all it would take and hopefully they'd be able to figure it out from there. She'd laid the groundwork. She'd given them things to think about. If they loved each other half as much as she suspected, they'd find a way to make it work.

"Hey, Molly," Brown greeted her, as she came through the door into the bullpen.

"Hi, Henri. How are you?" she smiled.

"Real good. It's nice to see you."

"You too."

"Molly! To what do we owe the pleasure?" Simon called out to her.

"Hi, Simon. I was hoping to catch Jim. Is he out on a case?"

"No. Just had to go check something in Forensics. I expect him back any minute. You're welcome to wait at his desk if you like."

"Thanks," she said, taking a seat.

She hoped Jim would take her up on the pretense she had in mind. A party would be an ideal way to reunite them. There would be alcohol. That would be key. And other people, so they couldn't make too much of a scene when they realized what she'd been up to. And hopefully, there would be enough hormones in the air to give them the right idea. If nothing else, it would at least be fun to have her fellow anthropology students over for a little end-of-semester soiree.

The whole thing seemed pretty foolproof. She felt certain that once she gave Blair the address he would come, if only out of morbid curiosity about her living arrangements with Jim. She didn't like the idea of letting him believe there was anything romantic between her and Jim when nothing could be further from the truth. But she knew that was where his mind would leap. And she'd make use of it. After all her futile efforts to get them reunited, she'd had to adopt an ends-justify-the-means type of approach. It didn't exactly please her, but it did seem necessary.

She felt sure Jim would agree to the party, since he never actually said no to anything she wanted. The problem was that he'd plan to be anywhere else that night to avoid having his senses blown out. She'd also have to give him an incentive to show up. She was always telling him how interesting her anthro class was and how much she liked her professor. Now, she'd just have to drop the professor's name in casual conversation.
Easy.

Maybe too easy. She was beginning to worry about her character. But the duplicity would be over soon. No more plotting and matchmaking. No more half-truths. No more secrets. Everything would be out in the open, for better or worse.

She really hoped it would be for the better. She knew something had happened to Jim the other day while he was out on the terrace--some demons faced, some decisions made. When he'd come back in, he had been clearer, unburdened, more at peace with his own feelings than she'd ever seen him. That's why the time was right. Jim was finally ready to see Blair again, to face him, tell him, love him, welcome him back home and back into his life. He just didn't know Blair was already in Cascade, that a second chance was well within his reach.

And that's where she and her plan came in.

"We still haven't been able to fully identify the oily compound," Jim was telling Rafe as they came back into the bullpen. "It's mostly rosemary oil, with traces of several herbs, mugwort, angelica, sage, along with something else that the lab hasn't been able to...Molly, hi. I didn't remember us having lunch plans. Did I forget?"

She shook her head. "I just needed to ask you something. But it's not urgent. I can talk to you later if you're busy."

"No. That's okay. Is here all right?"

"Here's fine," she said.

He put down the handful of photographs he was carrying and sat down behind his desk. "So what's up?"

"Well, I wanted to ask you a favor. I was thinking it would be nice if..." She stopped, the pictures on his desk catching her attention.

They were autopsy photographs of a young woman in her early twenties, with wounds cut into her body in some kind of grotesque pattern. She felt a terrible wave of sickening energy coming off the pictures. Her vision blurred along the edges, and everything began spinning. Time tilted, and she could feel the shivering cold on her body, slick fingers marking her, could see the flash of metal in the ominous dark, could sense the blackness stealing over her.

When she regained consciousness, she was in Simon's office, where Jim had carried her. She struggled to pull herself together, feeling the worry literally radiating off him.

"Don't sit up too quickly," he warned. "It'll make you dizzy again."

"I'm okay. Really."

"Do you remember what happened?" Simon asked.

She shook her head slightly. "I guess I fainted. The pictures on your desk caught my eye. And Jim, you know how squeamish I am."

"Before you passed out you murmured something about the ritual. Do you know what you meant by that?" She could feel Jim watching her closely.

"I'm sorry. I don't really remember it. I must have already been on my way to passing out. But I
guess I was filling in the blanks of what I read in the paper. You know about the serial killing. Those pictures...they were really gruesome."

Jim shook his head. "I'm sorry you saw them. I should have been more careful."

She smiled ruefully. "It's not your fault. You know how I get. Even the movies can put me off my stomach."

Jim patted her shoulder. "You're sensitive."

"I'm kind of a baby. But it's nice of you to call it sensitive. Anyway, I'm really sorry to come down here and faint on you and cause a big scene and then run. But I've got to get going. My ride is coming to pick me up to take me to class."

"But you're still pale," Jim protested.

"Maybe we ought to take you to the emergency room. Just to make sure it's nothing more serious than a little squeamishness," Simon suggested.

"I'm fine, guys. Really. A little embarrassed, but physically fine."

Jim put his hand on her forehead. "I don't know if you should be going to class. Maybe I should just run you home."

"No," she said firmly. "I'm all right. Really. Except that I'm late. I'll see you later."

"Molly," he called after her.

"Yes, Jim?"

"What did you want to ask me?"

"Oh," she said, needing only a moment to redirect her plan. "My friend has to go to work after class. Do you think you could give me a ride home? I could take the bus, but I'd feel better if..."

"Just tell me where and when. I'll be there."

"3 o'clock. By the north quad. I'll meet you in the parking lot."

Jim nodded. "See you then."

"Thanks, Jim."

If she weren't a master of controlling and masking her physical responses, Jim would never have let her go cheerfully on her way. He would have sensed her terror and the cold sick feeling curling in her stomach. And he would have known she was lying about the photographs. He would have forced her to tell him everything, and it wasn't quite time yet. Oh, God. She tried to breathe, tried to stay calm, but the dark thing had found its way to Cascade. It had been performing the ritual, testing it, perfecting it, biding its time, preparing to strike.

And she had not even managed to get Blair and Jim back together yet, much less ready them for what lay ahead. Just this morning she had thought there would be more than enough time to let things unfold in a natural way. Now she was possessed by a dire sense of urgency. It would have to be today. All of it. They would have to see what they were to one another. And they would also have to see what she was to them. Today. Three o'clock. That would give her all of fifteen minutes after Blair's afternoon class to get him in the right place at the right time and stall him until Jim
showed up.

And hopefully there would still be enough time to prepare before the darkness descended.

Blair gathered up his notes and books, answered a few last questions from the after-class stragglers and headed back to his office. Outside the day was level and clear, the sun a bright yellow-orange, a welcome change from the usual drab and drizzly spring days in Cascade. He settled the heavy pack more comfortably on his shoulder and started making a list of all the things he needed to do before the end of the semester. As usual, it was a long list.

"Hey, Blair! Wait up."

Molly ran across the quad to join him, her riotous red curls bouncing around her face. She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, no jacket, making the most of the good weather while it lasted. Her face was as sunny as the spring day. He smiled, happy to see her.

"Hey, Molly. How's it going?"

"Great! The sun is finally shining and that puts me in a very good mood."

"Me too. Man, April in Cascade really is the cruelest month."

"Tell me about it. Hey listen, I wanted to invite you to a little get-together I'm having. Last day of class celebration for us anthropology geeks. I really hope you can make it."

Her face was open and expectant and hopeful, and he felt a rush of affection for her. Somehow when he hadn't been looking, she had settled into his heart. He had given up telling himself he was just a proud teacher with a gifted student. He treasured her friendship and hoped it wouldn't end with the semester or when she left school or ever.

He smiled at her. "I'd love to come."

"Great! Let me give you the address. It's 852 Prospect Avenue, #307."

His whole world turned upside down in that single moment. No, not possible. Jim must have...no, he wouldn't do that, would he?

He realized Molly was watching him closely and that he probably looked as stricken as he felt. He must have heard her wrong. It was another apartment in Jim's building. Still a weird coincidence, but it was a small world, right? He tried to make his voice light and breezy to cover up his misery, "Let me just make sure I got that. 852 Prospect Avenue, #307?"

She nodded, and he felt a stab of pain so intense it was almost physical. It took everything he had to keep up a friendly conversation. "Hey, nice neighborhood. Must be one heck of a scholarship you're on."

"Don't I wish. No, I have a roommate, a real person with a real job and a steady salary. A cop, of all things. I rent out his spare room. Fortunately for me, he doesn't seem to know much about Cascade property values. And I'm certainly not going to tell him how much he's undercharging me."

For one terrible moment, he feared he was going to be sick. Actually throw up right on the quad. That was so not cool. His mind raced, desperate for some explanation other than the obvious. Was it possible Jim could have set this up just to make him jealous? He almost laughed out loud at the thought. Bitterly. And maybe the second shooter from the grassy knoll was alive and well and
shacked up on a tropical island with Amelia Earhart. And they were living down the street from Elvis. Who was he kidding? Jim would have an aneurysm if he knew Blair even thought about him that way. And he'd been so worried about how the big guy was getting along without him. Pretty well, he could see. He'd probably been waiting for Blair to move out for years so he could find some pretty young thing to take his place.

And he liked Molly, god damn it. No. He loved her. Obviously not the same way Jim did. God, that hurt. But as a friend, a fascinating mind, a kindred spirit. She'd been one of his few sources of comfort during the past months without Jim. That made him even more bitter. He was being deprived of what he had every right to enjoy, hating the woman who had taken Jim from him. Oh God, what was he talking about? Jim never was his. Molly had every right to him, if that's what Jim wanted. He'd even try to be happy for them. Really. He loved them both, cared about their welfare, wanted the best for them.

"So what's it like? Living with a cop?"

What the hell was he doing? He should make up an excuse, go hide in his office and cry his eyes out. What he most certainly should not do was pump her for the gory details of her private life with Jim.

"I didn't know what to expect really. A cop and all. But he's nice. I like living with him. Not that he wasn't a little off-putting at first. He's got a very cool, cop kind of exterior. But he's a wonderful person once you get to know him, and he's been very kind to me. I don't have any family, and he really took me in and made me at home."

Family. Home. That didn't sound particularly sexy. At all. It sounded...fatherly, almost. Jim being his usual protective self. Maybe he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. She was awfully young after all. And vulnerable in some way. Or so he'd always thought. Jim would never take advantage of that. Maybe...God, he had to know the truth.

"So will your cop be there? At the party. I mean, are you guys like..."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that," she reassured him, "I don't know yet whether he'll make it to the party. He might have to work. But we're just friends in any event. He's quite an attractive man, but I just don't have those feelings for him, you know? It's more a family thing. Besides his heart is so totally broken over somebody else that romance is the last thing on his mind. I think he just likes to have me around for the company."

"He was in love with somebody?"

She laughed out loud, "Don't look so surprised. Even cops are capable of tender feelings. Not that he's ever said anything about a break up. He's pretty closed mouthed. It's just a feeling I get sometimes. The way he looks around the apartment like something's missing. I think he used to live with someone and it didn't work out."

Blair felt his heart race and his breath quicken. Jim in love with someone he used to live with? Was that possible? Oh God, maybe he'd colossally misread the situation. Maybe all those months in Madagascar and then back in Cascade had just been needless suffering. For both him and Jim. Maybe all the nights he had lain awake wracked with unbearable longing, Jim had been missing him just the same, just as badly. Well, almost as badly. No one could possibly want anyone as much as he wanted Jim.

"Hey, Blair. You still with me?"
"Sorry. I...um, just thought of something I have to do. Kind of an emergency."

"Oh, okay. So let's say eight o'clock for the party?"

"Sure. I'll be there. And Molly, thank you." He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her cheek.

She smiled sweetly, almost knowingly. "Oh, you're welcome. Hey, there's my roommate now. Why don't you come say hello?"

Blair froze. He watched her wave, like it was happening in slow motion, a moment from a bad dream. When he looked in that direction, he saw Jim standing by his truck, taking them both in, watching with sky blue eyes the exact shade of Molly's, Sentinel eyes, scrutinizing them. What else had those Sentinel senses witnessed? He felt a blush creeping up his cheeks. And he was supposed to be in Africa. Shit! He didn't need enhanced sight to see how hurt Jim looked.

An insistent tugging at his sleeve pulled him out of his panic. Molly. He looked down into her face, and it was completely changed. Quiet and serious. Not the bubbling coed from a moment ago, but the wise woman he had always sensed in her.

"Come on, Blair. You and Jim need to talk. And I have things I need to tell you both."

Jim got to the university a little early. He didn't want Molly waiting around for him, not with a serial killer targeting female students. His unshakable dread the other day at the crime scene and Molly's odd reaction earlier at the station had pumped up his protective instincts even more than usual.

He sat in the truck, waiting, scanning the crowds of students for a familiar face. And then he found one. At first, he couldn't take it in. It was like seeing a ghost...no, it couldn't be. But it was. Blair. Just walking across the quad like he'd never been gone. His beautiful hair shining in the sun like an angel's halo. Jim tightened his grip on the steering wheel, emotion clenching his throat. Blair was back. He had another chance. Thank God. Thank God.

And then he saw her. Running to catch up with Blair. And oh God, the way Blair turned to her, his face lighting up like the Fourth of July.

The luminous smile that haunted his dreams. And her face was shining back at him, full of the sweetness and laughter he loved so much. Blair and Molly. One the love of his life, the other the light of his days. Together. He watched the way they leaned into one another, their smiles warm with affection, the comfortable touching. He would have listened in on their conversation, but the shock had knocked his hearing offline. He cursed and closed his eyes tightly against the pain. No! He had a sudden vision of his own future, cold and dark, outside the radiance of the two people he loved the most, who it now appeared loved each other.

He was out of the truck in a flash and losing his lunch in the nearby shrubbery. He straightened up just in time to see Blair kiss Molly. His mind screamed. NO! Blair was his. His friend, his guide, his partner, his mate. The last part jolted through him like an electrical charge. But it was true, all true. God, what an idiot he'd been! He'd thrown it away. He'd let Blair leave, rationalizing that it was for his own good, too afraid to tell him, too terrified to even admit it himself. He hadn't even asked him to stay. His Blair, who belonged to him and no one else.

And now Blair was with Molly. His Molly. His...whatever she was to him. How much worse could it be? Okay, so he knew Molly didn't actually belong to him. She belonged to herself and no one else, and he found that indescribably beautiful. God help him, he never wanted her to be anyone's, ever. He loved her young innocence and the way she was so many things at once and her beautiful
self-sufficiency. And he never wanted her to change, not ever, not in any way.

He didn't know how long he stared at them before Blair noticed him. The much-loved blue eyes were large and filled with emotion, stricken, almost terrified. But why would Blair be afraid? He caught Molly's eye, and she held it, almost as if trying to reassure him. She took Blair's arm and pulled him along after her, in his direction. Oh God. Oh God. He didn't know if he could handle it. He didn't want to hear their story. He wanted to get into his truck and drive away and never have another feeling as long as he lived.

"Jim. Thanks for coming to pick me up."

He only nodded and then stared at her helplessly and then at Blair. "Chief, I thought you were in Madagascar?"

"I was. But I'm back now, Jim."

"When?"

Blair hesitated, "Beginning of the semester."

His throat closed. "You didn't call."

Blair's voice got very quiet. "I'm sorry."

"Molly, look..." Jim had to explain to her. He hated the idea of her being with Blair, but he didn't want her hurt either.

"There's something we have to..." Blair chimed in.

"Tell me. I know. We all need to talk. There are some things I haven't told you either. Important things. And you guys obviously need to have a long heart-to-heart with one another."

He looked at Blair, and they both stared at Molly like she was insane. He watched the same recognition that was forming in his own dim brain dawn on his partner's face. She knew everything, and somehow she was responsible for bringing them together again.

"Yes. And I can explain. I'd just rather not do it here," she opened the truck door and slid in to the middle, "Can we? Please."

He watched Blair shrug, just as confused as he was, but following her anyway. Okay. If Blair could do it, he could too. He took his place behind the wheel and started the engine. Once en route, he kept his eyes glued to the road. It gave him something to concentrate on, and he was transporting the two most important people in his life. No one spoke. Molly had her hand on Blair's arm, to steady him. At a light, she made him look at her. He stared into her face for a long moment, seeing it filled with compassion and love for him. Somehow that made him let go of the panic he'd felt ever since he saw the two of them standing together on the quad. It suddenly felt right to him, being in this place with these two people. Something glimmered before his eyes for a moment. Hope.

Continued in part three.
Due to the length of this story, it has been broken into four parts.

The Break

by Annabelle Leigh

Continued from part two.

The Break - part three.

This was the moment Molly had been anticipating, working for, dreaming about for months. And much longer than that. She had been moving toward it, slowly, by degrees, her entire life--every step, every choice leading to this place, these men, the revelations she was about to make. She never imagined she would feel so much like throwing up. At the university and even during the truck ride home, she had thought only of the necessity of what she was about to do and that had been calming. But now back at the loft, the realization that there would be no turning back struck her full force, and whatever confidence she'd had deserted her. She had the terrible sensation that her life was about to unravel in her hands, and she was powerless to stop it. She could not look at the loft hard enough, the familiar space and furnishings, the particular angle of daylight as it streamed through the windows. Home. She could not stop staring at Jim and Blair. Her family. Please, please, please, don't let this be the end of everything.

Blair paced back and forth between the living room and the kitchen. She could tell he was weirded out to be back in the loft, especially under these circumstances, and he wasn't ready to alight in a particular spot, his unease coming out as usual in excess energy. Jim's expression had changed since they'd reached the apartment. In the truck, he had seemed bewildered, even frightened, but he had still looked to her for reassurance and comfort. Now, his eyes narrowed while he watched her, and they had turned hard and glittering. She knew she was in trouble.

"Okay Molly, time to explain. Like who you are, for instance. Who you really are. And how you know about Blair and me. That we were partners," he added quickly. "And why do I suddenly feel like there's a lot you haven't been telling us?"

She heard the dangerous edge in Jim's voice and knew he was at the end of his patience. She could almost see him kicking himself. He'd trusted her, and now he was afraid it had all been misplaced. And what could she say to that? She had not told him everything, and the things she'd withheld were major. If she lost his trust, she knew, would be just to blurt it out, end the suspense once and for all, put Jim and Blair out of their misery and hope to God for the best possible outcome. But there were too many emotions gathering in her throat, and the words got stuck there. She couldn't get them out.

"I need something to drink," she said, hurrying to the kitchen, opening the refrigerator for the mint iced tea she'd made yesterday. "Anyone else?"

Blair shook his head distractedly, Jim glared at her. She turned her back to them while she poured. She didn't want them to see her hands shake. Taking a swallow, her mouth still felt like the Sahara. She was having trouble getting her breath. A lifetime of learning to control her physical reactions fell away from her. None of her training helped. Oh God, oh God, oh God. I didn't think it would be this
"I need answers. So spill it."

The low growl of Jim's voice propelled her into complete silence. It shocked her that Jim could actually scare her. She was so used to his affection and his protectiveness. She slumped back against the kitchen cabinets. Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

He took a step toward her. "NOW!"

She made a small noise and shrank back from him.

"Jim!" Blair's voice was sharp and rebuking, as he put a restraining hand on his friend's arm. "Molly, I know it's hard. Take your time. Do it your way. But please, we really need to know."

"I know. I'm sorry. And I want to. But I'm scared."

That seemed to defuse Jim's anger. He sighed heavily. "There's no need to be afraid. I'm sorry I snapped at you. It's just been one wild roller coaster of a day. I can't take too much more. Please, Molly."

Blair came to stand beside her, resting a hand comfortingly on her shoulder. "We're all friends here. Whatever it is, you can tell us."

She nodded. They were right. There was no putting it off. She walked past them, to stand in the middle of the living room. She took the leap out into nothing and let down her guard, letting them see her, everything, for the first time. It was not a simple act. It flew in the face of a lifetime of careful preparation and training, everything she had ever learned from her grandmother, every instinct of self-preservation. She let it all go. She hid nothing. She allowed herself to be more vulnerable than she ever thought humanly possible. She offered up her essential nature, naked and defenseless, to the two men watching her. She prayed they would see her with compassionate eyes and understand what she found so difficult to say in words.

"Look at me very closely. Both of you. Who do you see in me?"

Stunned recognition dawned on both their faces. "Blair!" Jim gasped. "Jim!" Blair said, no less surprised. The whirled around to each other, unable to believe they'd both yelled out the same crazy thing at exactly the same moment. As one, they turned to Molly, their eyes begging for an explanation.

"A little over twenty years ago, two very lonely people came together, quite briefly, and offered each other the only kind of comfort they could manage. The woman was getting older, and she was very afraid there was nothing ahead for her, except the same regret and shame she'd been living with for years. She'd walked out on two young sons, leaving them with a man who ought never to have had power over children's lives. She never forgave herself for that. The man was younger, but he couldn't find a foothold in life either. He drifted here and there. He got into trouble, with drugs, with the law. There had only ever been one person important to him, and he'd managed to lose her and the son he never knew he had. So you can see how these two people would have recognized themselves in each other. That's what drew them to one another. They even made a baby together. But you can also imagine how fragile their connection was, and it wasn't long before it ended. And all that was left was the child. Me."

She watched them process the information, realization slowly seeping in.

"Oh my God!" Jim gasped.
"You're Jim's sister. That explains the eyes," Blair said.

"No Chief, she's your sister. She's always reminded me of you."

"As weird as it may seem, you're both right. Jim, you and I share the same mother. Blair, we have the same father. You're both my brothers."

They stared at her, mouths open, unable to say anything. She began to feel a horrible wave of panic building. She felt stupid. Her fantasy of this moment had been so naive and unrealistic. There had been no shocked silence, no misapprehension, no anger. She knew they both cared for her, so in her imagination, her confession was met with nothing but joy. Of course, real life would be more complicated than that, harder, with more room for ambivalence. She was conjuring up ghosts of the past, ones they would probably have preferred to leave buried. She was the living reminder of their parents' failures. She was the sister they had been living without for twenty three years and would have never known about if she had not interfered. She closed her eyes, her hands clenching and unclenching, as she waited for the end of a dream.

It did not come. Instead, warm arms went around her. It was Blair. "Don't cry," he said. She hadn't even realized she was. She reached for him, and he hugged her fiercely. The tears had a will of their own though. She had only meant to relax her control, but now it felt like it was gone for good. There were times when she felt immeasurably old, wise, privy to secrets most people could not even begin to guess. Sobbing her heart out, she felt like a very little girl. She cried for her lifelong loneliness and her absent parents, all the lost years, the missed opportunities and many other things that had never been properly mourned, free at last in the safety of her brother's arms to weep for them all.

"This was so not what I was expecting. But it makes such sense. I feel connected to you. I always have, since the first time you came to my office. And I'm so glad. I've always wondered what it would be like to have a sibling, but I never thought I'd get a chance to find out. It's just so cool, Molly. And I'm so glad it's you, that you're my sister."

His face was filled with tenderness and light. He really was glad, and she felt so relieved her knees almost buckled. His arm went around her more tightly, holding her up. He brushed the stray hair out of her face and wiped away the remaining tears.

"Thank you." Her voice sounded as shaky as she felt.

He led her over to the sofa, and they sat down together, still holding hands. She couldn't tell how Jim was doing. He was sitting on the opposite sofa, elbows on his knees, holding his face in his hands. She shivered slightly. At least I have one brother who accepts me. But she wanted Jim too. Damn it, she didn't care if it was greedy. She wanted both her brothers in her life.

"I have so many questions," Blair said. "How long have you known about us?"

"Since my grandmother died last summer. She was our father's mother, your grandmother too. Growing up, I never really knew much about my mother or her family. We just didn't talk about her. I guess my grandmother thought it was better that way. But when she knew she was dying, she told me everything she could remember. It wasn't that much, but enough to begin looking. I did some searching and found out about Jim and his brother Stephen. That's why I came to Cascade."

"But then how did you find out about me?"

"Completely by accident. I looked you up because of your relationship with Jim and when I saw you, I just knew."
She felt him stiffen. "Wait. So our grandmother and father never mentioned me? So how can you be sure..."

"I just am," she said, gripping his hand harder. "I'm not sure I can explain how I know, but I am certain. We can have a DNA test if you like. But I'm positive what it will say."

He relaxed and smiled again. "No, I believe you. I mean, I feel the same thing. I guess I just wish my father had..."

"Acknowledged you?"

He nodded, tears welling up in his eyes.

"I don't think he knew about you, Blair. Not on any conscious level, at least. If he had, he would have told me about you or my grandmother would have. They wouldn't have held something like that back."

"Yeah, I guess that's possible. My mother always said she didn't know who my father was. I don't think she would have lied about it. So if she didn't know, she wouldn't have been able to tell him, and he would never have known."

"Still, I do think he sensed something. I was really little when he died and this is all just my perception of things, but it always seemed to me like he knew something was missing. He may not exactly have known about you, but in some way, he felt your absence."

"He died?"

"Oh my God!" she clamped a hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, Blair. I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean to just blurt it out like that."

"No. It's okay. I mean, I kind of figured. That your parents were dead. You know, just from the way you talk about your grandmother raising you. It's just...I don't know, it feels different to know that it's my father too and he's dead."

"I'm so sorry, Blair," she said, watching his eyes fill with tears, feeling herself choking up again, reaching out to comfort him. "I'm so sorry you never got to know him. God, for that matter, I'm sorry I didn't get to know him."

They held onto each other for a long moment, grieving for a man who would always be a mystery to them, the outline of a stranger they would fill in with second-hand knowledge, guesses and their own wishful thinking.

"My mother is dead?" Jim's voice, halting and filled with pain, brought her back to herself.

"Oh no, Jim" she said quickly. "No. She's still alive."

"But she left you too, like she left us?"

She nodded.

"Bitch."

"I don't want to sound like I'm making excuses for her, because she definitely did the wrong thing. But she was really, really scared, Jim. She didn't understand what was happening to her or how to control her abilities. She thought she was going crazy. She didn't have anyone to tell her differently
or guide her through mastering them. She felt like a danger to her children. She didn't see any other choice but to go."

"Abilities?" Blair asked, the gleam of scientific curiosity lighting in his eye. "You mean...Jim's mom was a sentinel?"

"Is that what you call Jim's gift?" she asked and Blair nodded. "That's a fitting name. Yes, she had abilities like that, though less powerful than Jim's. They only came out when she had children. And the only way she could get rid of them was to leave."

"Do you know how amazing that is? It's a whole other way that the Sentinel senses contributed to the survival of the tribe. So there was one member of the tribe who had extremely heightened senses and was the guardian of the entire group, like Jim. But some of the women also had the ability, in a smaller way and only in reaction to childbirth, as a way to protect the offspring and make sure they reached adulthood so they could have offspring of their own and the tribe would thrive into the next generation. It makes sense that the ability would fade if the mother weren't still with her children, since it was in direct response to their needs, like a woman's milk dries up when she stops nursing."

"Chief?" Jim interrupted.

Blair's expressive hands stopped mid-air. "Oh sorry, man. Sorry. I got kind of carried away there. But it's your mom we're talking about. Oh man. Sorry, Jim."

Jim shook his head, brushing it off. But Molly was worried about him. He was pale and his hands were shaking. It had been too emotional a day for them all. But Jim was taking it the hardest of all. The scene at the university had shaken him, believing that she and Blair were having an affair. Then the waiting had been terrible. She was sorry she'd put him through it. And now, it was as if the spirit of the woman who'd abandoned him all those years ago had come crashing back into his life, turning everything upside down, destroying the peace he'd made with it. She was afraid he was going to close off, put up the barriers, and then she'd never be able to reach him.

"How old were you when she left?" he asked.

"I was just born, days old."

She could hear him swear under his breath. "And you don't hold that against her, Molly? Because I sure as hell do. You were a tiny, defenseless little baby, and she just ran off and left you. That's one hell of a mother we have."

"I understand why you're angry. And you have every right to be. But it's not like she left me on the poorhouse steps. I had my father and grandmother. They took care of me and loved me. I'm not saying she did the right thing by you and your brother. Or me, for that matter. But I do know that she did the best she could under the circumstances, given her limitations. She never meant to hurt any of us."

"Bullshit! And I don't know how you can sit there so calmly and make excuses for her. What? Is that something your grandmother told you to make you feel better?"

She shook her head decisively. "No. Like I said, my grandmother never really spoke about her. Probably to spare my feelings, as you suggest. But she would never have made something up. Lying wasn't her way. She wasn't capable of it. It may be hard for you to understand, but I've always just known things about our mother. The way I just know things about you and Blair and people I pass on the street. I have a gift, too. My grandmother's theory was that with my abilities and my mother's we were probably able to communicate while I was in the womb. That's how I know she loved us."
Jim looked thrown for a loop, but not ready yet to accept what she was saying. "If she loved us so much, then where the hell has she been all our lives? And what the hell was she doing having more kids when she walked out on the two she already had? She was a careless person, Molly, who didn't give a shit about what was good for us."

Molly sighed, "I know it feels that way. Really, I do. And she never meant to have more children. She was in her 40s, she had symptoms of menopause, and she thought her child-bearing days were over. She never intended to get pregnant. She knew she couldn't handle it."

"That's no excuse for not taking precautions."

"I know." She could hear the tears in her own voice. "But Jim, she was so lonely and sad. She just wanted some comfort. She just needed to feel loved. She'd never felt loved in her whole life. I can't help but feel sad about that. I can't help feeling sorry for her."

Jim's eyes were rimmed with silver, and she didn't know how to read his expression. It wasn't closed against her and that was a relief. It was almost as if he were seeing her as a little girl and feeling the same sadness he'd experienced during his own childhood, only this time for her. Silence fell and grew, as the three of them regrouped, trying to make sense of all that had happened in such a short space of time.

"How did my father die?" Blair asked, finally breaking the spell.

Molly felt the old pain come rushing back to her chest and the icy coldness and the phantom fear. "He was killed. Murdered."

"How? What happened?"

"It was my fault." Her voice cracked and Blair laid a hand on her back, steadying her. "This man, this very bad man, took me. He wanted my abilities. He thought he could take my gift the way people rob banks. He didn't understand that it doesn't work that way. My father and grandmother came for me. But the man stabbed my father in the heart and he died right there in front of me."

Blair gasped and moved his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"It was not your fault." Jim's voice was a low growl in the back of his throat, savage anger directed at the man who'd butchered her father while she watched.

"Jim's right, Molly. You were just a little girl. The only person to blame is the man who killed him."

The tears spilled over. "But he died saving me. He sacrificed himself for me."

Blair stroked her hair. "You were his daughter, and he wanted to protect you. That's what parents do for their children. It's natural. There was nothing you could do to prevent him from coming to get you back or to keep that man from hurting him. It was a terrible, terrible thing, but it was not your fault, not in any way."

She sobbed, "He really struggled in his life. He made some bad decisions. But my grandmother always said that everything got better when I was born. He wanted so much to be a good father. And he was. I always knew how much he loved me. He used to call me Senorita Molly-cita. And when we played 'Mother May I,' he called it 'Molly May I.' And I really, really loved him. I miss him every day. And it never gets any easier."

She buried her face in her hands. She felt Blair wrap his arms around her, rocking her, letting her cry it out. She could feel Jim watching, concerned.
"He was a good man, Blair," she said softly. "You would have liked him."

He nodded. "I know I would have. I mean, look what a great daughter he turned out. You know, I think I knew when it happened. How old were you?"

She looked at him curiously. "Four."

"Then I was nine. Was it in June?"

She nodded.

"Late at night?"

She nodded again.

"3:23 a.m. It woke me up, this terrible pain in my chest, right where my heart is, and then this just...awful feeling coming over me. It was so not like anything I've ever felt before. I've always remembered it."

"It makes sense actually. The men in our family often have an empathic gift. Our father did. It's especially strong with blood relatives and the people we love. That's probably why I seemed familiar to you when we first met. On some level, you recognized me. It's a highly developed sort of intuition. It's what helps you guide Jim. And enables you to be a Shaman."

"How do you know all that? That Blair's my guide. That he's a Shaman." A slight suspicion was returning to Jim's voice.

"I just do, Jim. That's my gift."

"Are you a Sentinel too?"

She shook her head. "No. Not in the way you mean. I have unusual perceptive abilities, but the way I see or hear or taste things is no different than the average person's. It's just that I can also perceive things outside the physical realm. I can see energy. I can read it. That's how I know things. To a certain extent, I can also control and channel energy. But that's harder and takes more effort."

"Is that why I can't sense you sometimes?"

Blair sat forward in his seat. "Wait, man. You mean your senses don't work around Molly?"

"Not exactly, Chief. It's more like they don't work on Molly. But only sometimes. Sometimes they work fine."

"You can shield yourself?" Blair turned to her.

Molly nodded. "My grandmother called it ghostwalking. It's a protective mechanism, so people like the man who killed my father can't find me. I try to remember to stop doing it around you Jim, so you can track me with your senses the way you like to. But sometimes I forget. It's a hard habit to break."

"You still lied to me," he said.

Molly nodded, pulling her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them, getting as small as possible.

"To my face too. Down at the station, you said you reacted to those pictures just because they were so grisly. But you saw something, didn't you? You recognized that ritual. It's the same man who
kidnapped you when you were a little girl."

"It's what I said before about sensing things. I didn't see anything in those photographs that was familiar. But I got this strong, very bad feeling from them. And I'd overheard you telling Rafe about some oil you found. He drew on me with oil, some kind of ritual pattern. When I saw the knife wounds on that girl, I knew that's what he intended to do to me if my father hadn't stopped him."

Jim went ashen at the implication. "Oh, my God. He's been..."

"Practicing," Molly finished the thought for him.

"That means he's coming after you again."

Molly nodded. This time she was prepared for the consequences, and she was not wrong. He exploded off the sofa and stalked over to the terrace doors, staring back at her with blue rage.

"Damn it, Molly," he yelled. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this sooner? You've been in danger...how long? The whole fucking time you've been in Cascade? Do you know what it would do to me to find your body the way I found that last girl, dumped like so much trash in some godforsaken part of nowhere? Or if I couldn't find your body at all and had to wonder the rest of my life if you were even dead or if he had you alive somewhere torturing you and you needed me and I wasn't there for you? Do you KNOW what that would do to me? But of course you do. Because I told you what happened to me at that crime scene. And you didn't see fit to tell me the truth?"

"Wait. What crime scene? What happened to you, Jim? What am I missing here?" Blair asked, completely puzzled.

"One of the murdered women, the last one, reminded Jim of me."

"She looked JUST like you, damn it. And you didn't bother to tell me that you're the one the fucking psychopath is really after?"

"But I didn't connect the two until I saw the photographs down at the station," she protested feebly.

"I'm a COP, Molly. If you even suspect your life is in danger, you fucking tell me, so I can protect you. And you know what REALLY pisses me off? Even after you'd seen the pictures, you still didn't tell me. When I specifically asked you what was wrong, you fed me some bullshit story about just being squeamish. Shit, Molly. We don't know how this guy operates. He could have been watching you all these months. He could know where you live, your routine, every God damned thing about you. He could have grabbed you from the university this afternoon or anytime he wanted. ANYTHING could have happened. And I NEVER want to go down to some morgue to identify your body. Do you understand that?"

All she could do was nod. She knew she'd messed up and badly, and that knowledge made her feel shaky. He turned away from her, staring out the terrace doors, and she could see the anger in the set of his back. She didn't want him mad at her. But she understood why he was. She'd seen the power of his protective instincts, and she'd flown in the face of them. She'd denied him his spiritually ordained role as guardian. She'd had her reasons, but she knew it was going to be hard to make him understand.

"Jim," Blair said tentatively. "Don't you think maybe you're being a little too..."

"Don't 'Jim' me, Chief." He sounded tired and defeated. "You didn't see what this butcher is doing to these girls. I did. I don't understand, Molly. Whatever else we are to one another, we're friends, right?"
She nodded, holding his eye, willing him to believe it.

"So why didn't you just tell me? Why didn't you trust me?"

"It wasn't time yet," she tried to explain. "You would have just gone after him on your own."

"Damn straight I would have, Molly. That's my job."

"But he can't be defeated that way."

"Thanks for the confidence."

Molly felt a growing sense of irritation at Jim's hard-headedness. "Jim, that thing, I can hardly call him a person, is EVIL. He practices black magick. Do you really understand what that means? The whole Cascade police department could go up against him, and you'd all fail. He can manipulate unseen forces and use them against you. He doesn't play by anybody's rules but his own. And he's only gotten more powerful over the years."

Jim stood there like a wall of stone, arms crossed over his chest, not giving an inch. She couldn't tell if he was even listening, his face was that expressionless. He was a stubborn man. Oh, God. She had the sudden flash of him going after the killer even after she'd warned him away from it. The image tilted and spun in her mind, until it was a moment from long ago, blood seeping into a dirt floor, only this time it was Jim's blood. All the color drained out of her face.

"What?" he demanded, watching her closely.

She could only get it out on a whisper. "I don't want you to end up like my father. I don't want anything to happen to you and it to be all my fault again."

She hadn't meant to cry. But she had already lost so much. She could not bear to part with Jim or Blair. She wouldn't. She just wouldn't. She hid behind her hands and cried as if her heart would break. She felt Jim sit down on the other side of her, his large, warm hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. Don't. Please. I didn't mean to make you cry. Please stop."

She wanted to, but she couldn't. The hand moved in comforting circles over her back.

"What happened to your father was not your fault. You had no control over what that sick bastard did. I'm just so, so sorry that you had to see it. No child should ever have to live through something like that. I would give anything if I could change it, if I could go back in time and take away all that pain." His voice broke and he gathered her against him, hugging her hard, hushing and comforting her.

"I know I should have told you. I'm so sorry." Her back heaved with final sobs as her crying tapered off. "I was just so afraid something would happen to you or Blair. It just seemed safer not to tell either of you."

He smoothed her hair, rubbed her back, making reassuring noises. "I know."

"I'm sorry I kept so many secrets. Can you forgive me?"

He wiped away her last tears. "Yes. But I still need to understand. Why didn't you at least tell me we're related?"

She sat back and sighed, "I don't know exactly. I intended to when I first got here. And then you
mistook me for someone answering your ad. And I could see you were going through a hard time, and I didn't want to make things more complicated for you. And I thought maybe I could help, if you trusted me. I wanted to be part of your life. A lot. And then as time went on, it just got harder and harder to say anything, and I felt worse and worse about not telling you the truth from the start. I kept thinking that if I could bring the three of us together then that would be the right time. And that turned out to be harder than I expected."

Jim looked embarrassed but managed to smile wryly. "Well, I guess I can understand that. But you have to promise me one thing, Molly. No more secrets. From now on, I get all the information up front."

She nodded wildly, beginning to feel hopeful. "So...are we still friends?"

He hugged her, nearly crushing her with affection, and his voice shook as he said, "Of course we are. Family too. Little sister."

Her heart leapt at the words and the look in his eyes, the amazed tenderness, the sheer delight. She looked over at Blair, and he was watching them, getting teary. She held out her hand to him. She wanted to hold on to the moment and remember it forever. It was a dream so long in the making, and it had at last come to fruition.

"A sibling is something I've always wanted that I never thought I'd get," Blair said, beaming.

"Me too," Molly said happily.

She felt Blair tense beside her. "Hey Jim, you still with us? Don't go zoning on us, man."

"I'm here. It's just a little overwhelming. Having my family here with me."

She watched Blair's face change, doubt creeping into his expression, followed quickly by hope, and it reminded her of what else needed to be done.

"This has been the most emotional day of my life, and I am dead tired," she said. "I don't think I can keep my eyes open. I'm going to have to go to bed. We can talk more in the morning."

"It's five o'clock," Jim said.

She shrugged. "I'm tired."

"Come on, Molly. You can't just take us through a big emotional family reunion and then go to sleep," Blair protested.

"Actually, I can. Besides, I'll still be here in the morning, and we'll always be family."

"But that man's still out there. He's still after you. We have to do something about that," Jim protested.

She nodded. "Yes. But it can wait for the morning."

"There's more to the story, isn't there?" he asked.

"Only a little. It's about how we can stop him. It's going to take all three of us. But that can also wait. There are more important things to do now. Good night."

She kissed them both and retreated to her room. She curled up on her bed. Being tired had been a pretense, but now she realized it was also the truth. It was not long before she was asleep, with
visions of her new life, one that included two wonderful brothers, brightening her dreams.

Blair couldn't remember if he'd ever watched it grow dark before, at least not with such intense concentration, noting each shift in the strength and quality of the light, the way it looked like dust settling onto the landscape, flaring up one last time, a pyrotechnic coda to the day, before finally fading, ever so slowly into dusk and then darkness. It gave him the most peculiar feeling. He had never been more calm or open or emptied out, the turmoil of his emotions settling with the daylight, every superfluous thought chased away, until he was left standing on the bedrock of his essential self, alive to his true nature. The closest he'd ever come to this sensation before was during meditation, but even that had not been remotely as powerful.

Jim was utterly still beside him, caught up in the same mesmerizing experience. After he was certain his Sentinel was concentrating and not zoning, he was content to let him be, to allow him the same freedom to get lost in the moment. It was enough that Jim was beside him. It was all he'd ever needed. He could see that now. The terrible mistake of the past months was walking away from Jim without a fight, believing he could continue the journey alone. Now he realized that discovering Jim was the journey, not just finding him there in that hospital room or helping him develop his abilities or even walking beside him as Shaman, but learning the intricacies, the blind alleys, the Byzantine curves, the full stops and green byways of this man's soul. For this, he was alive. For this, he was specially created.

The loft was dark and still now, as if time and the kinetic universe had actually stopped, ever so briefly, just for them. He felt a sudden, intense longing to see his friend's face, but it was obscured in shadows. He could not decide what to do, torn between the desire to be by Jim's side always, not wanting to move from him even for the instant it would take to turn on the light, afraid of breaking the connection, but also feeling a nearly overwhelming need to drink in the sight of the beloved features. The longing to see his friend grew, and he reached as slowly and quietly as he could for the lamp.

"Don't. Please," Jim said, his voice low and urgent, shattering the loft's silence like crystal.

"You've got me at something of a disadvantage, big guy. I can't see in the dark."

"I just don't want..."

Jim wasn't able to finish the thought, but then Blair didn't really need him to. He knew. He didn't want to break the spell either.

"I've got an idea," he said, getting up to go to the kitchen.

"No," Jim reached out for his hand.

"It's okay, Jim. I'll be right back," he promised.

He found the candles and matches in the kitchen drawer, just where they'd been when he'd left. That made him smile, a gentle warmth unfolding in him. Jim was still Jim, everything in its proper place. Living his life beside this man, he realized, had been his first experience of true orderliness. It had been as simple as always knowing where his things were. It had been as complicated as understanding at last where he belonged in the world.

He lit the votive candles and scattered them around the living room, bathing everything in warm radiance and soft shadows.

"This reminds me of old times," Jim said, his voice mellow and fond with memories.
He smiled, the same sweet wave of recollection washing over him. It felt so peaceful to be in the loft again, the joy and relief of homecoming like a physical burden removed from him, easing body and soul. It felt so right to be sitting on the sofa with Jim like he'd never been away. It felt so good to be able to look at his friend with hungry eyes, Jim's beautiful and well-loved face an architectural wonder in the candlelight. He was staring, he knew, but Jim wasn't looking away, so he wouldn't have to either. He felt a simple gratitude for that. He wanted nothing more than to linger, to drink in every feature, every sensory detail. He'd never been free before to look at his friend as intently as he wanted, as unabashedly as he was doing now. It made him giddy with the luxury of it. He mapped Jim's face with his eyes, the unique topography of line and curve, slope and slant, ridge and hollow. He admired the pristine way each aspect flowed into the next, coming together to create a picture of beauty and strength, honor and tenderness, intelligence and power, all adding up to the man he loved.

And he wasn't the only one staring. Jim was devouring him, using Sentinel sight to map him on a minute level. And that was the single most thrilling sensation of his life.

"You seem older," Jim said softly. "Grown up."

He heard so many things in Jim's voice--surprise, pride, regret, fear. And it made him feel so many things in response. Wistful and pleased and sad and proud. No one else had ever affected him in such a way. That's what he had been missing all those months in Madagascar. Not that he'd been without company. There had been other people, even a few who went out of their way to spend time with him, to get to know him. But everyone paled in comparison to Jim, too finite, too easy to figure out. Jim was so many things, layer after layer of subtle mysteries, and he had a treasure-seeker's joy in discovering each one of them.

"You look the same," he said. "Good. Really good. The place too, man."

"I'm afraid Molly gets the credit for that. She's been keeping me and the loft together since she moved in. It was pretty damn empty before then. Without you."

He didn't know what to say to that. He wasn't sure Jim had ever said anything quite so emotional about him before. It took his breath away. He felt Jim's hand, warm and broad, on his shoulder. "I missed you, Blair."

Jim missed him. Jim. Hope unfurled in his chest like a flower. The warmth of Jim's hand on his shoulder felt so good. He'd always known that Jim's touching connected them, but now he realized how it grounded him in his own experience, secured him to life, tethered him to the world. Before Jim, that kind of connectedness had never seemed important. He'd lived the same gravity-free existence as Naomi, and it had felt perfectly natural. Just the possibility of a long-standing commitment had seemed like an unmanageable burden. And it wasn't as if his feeling for Jim wasn't weighty. It was, like the pressure of Jim's hand on his shoulder, but there was nothing burdensome about it. It made him more than he was. It gave him substance, volume, layers, like Jim.

"I missed you too," he said.

Jim smiled his delight, and Blair had to reach for him. He took Jim's hand and held it between his own. Jim's skin was so warm, alternately rough and smooth, pulsing with life. It was amazing, how the physical fact of another person's hand could so overwhelm him. He didn't know how Jim could withstand the intensity of such touching enhanced by Sentinel senses. It would have undone him completely. He stroked Jim's hand reverently. Hands told such much about a person's life, their strengths, the quality of their character. He'd always thought Jim's hands so beautiful, with their wide palms, long, capable fingers, prominent knuckles. Hands with the mystique of strength, that's how he'd thought of them, wondering all along in some corner of his mind how they would feel touching
him. And now he was touching Jim, at long last, caressing and exploring and learning him, after all the watching and wanting. And it felt so good, so right to be able to indulge his longing. No knowledge had ever seemed so important as this simple tactile truth, cataloging the length and breadth of the trusting hand, feeling the slight rise of veins on the back of it, the structure of the underlying bones, the hollow of its palm, the slight callous on the thumb. The universe had been reduced to this one hand cradled so tenderly in his own, and he was filled with wonder and thanksgiving.

And the expression on Jim's face blew him away all over again. For a moment he had trouble accepting that this was the same James Joseph Ellison he'd left behind those many months ago. The grim, stoic cop was gone, and in his place was a Jim Ellison who leaned back against the sofa cushions in an attitude of perfect relaxation, his eyes large and dilated, half-lidded in concentration, mouth softly parted. He knew this man too well not to realize that Jim had dialed up his sense of touch to enjoy every sensation of the gentle exploration of his hand.

"You've changed too, Jim," he said.

Jim smiled wryly. "Yeah. Probably a little worse for wear."

He shook his head. "No. The different thing, it's good. I mean, you're so...open. I've never seen you like this before."

"It's interesting how that works sometimes, Chief. Good things can come out of bad situations."

He watched Jim's face change to reveal yet another side of him he'd never been allowed to see before, the lines around his eyes and on his forehead suddenly deepening. And there was an expression in his eyes, something that was literally exhausted. He gasped as he realized there had been wear. His friend was worn out, on some profound level, deep in his psyche. And there was something else too, something like...could it really be grief?

"For me?" he asked, unable to believe his leaving could have had such a far-reaching effect.

"When I said I missed you, Chief, I meant it. Every day, every minute, every second."

"At first, right? But it got better?"

He felt something very full unfold in his heart as he watched Jim shake his head. "No. It was never better, Chief. Not until now."

He found it difficult not to cry and then stopped even trying to keep it back. It was too late to withhold anything, and he let the tears slide down his cheeks. The thought of Jim hurting pained him deeply, and it reminded him of his own dark months in Madagascar and then back in Cascade, how unnecessary it had all been. But it also moved him. It shifted the outline of who he was in a way he never expected. Before Jim, his life had been a constant parade of new faces, starting back in childhood, always a new school, yet more stone-faced kids to try and win over, the endless revolving door of Naomi's boyfriends. He'd learned to make himself agreeable, to cultivate easy charm, to keep things airy and casual. He walked with light footsteps. He had learned to fit in anywhere, but had always longed for a place where he fit naturally. It bothered him that he'd never burrowed into anyone's heart, that he did not feel cherished, had never become crucial to anyone's sense of well-being. When he left a place, he could not help but feel that he was not missed, not really. Not until now. Not until Jim.

"I felt the same way," he admitted, a little shaky.
Jim frowned. "Wasn't it good on the expedition?"

Somehow he and Jim had been inching closer to one another the entire time, imperceptibly, by degrees, until their knees now brushed. The contact jolted him. Jim reached out to touch his hair, sweetly, communicating his concern. It was just one light touch, but it unraveled him, devastatingly sensual and comforting, all at once. All those months, lying awake at night in his tent, the hard ground beneath him like a reprimand, the unyielding sky above him a taunt, this had been his dream, his insatiable hunger, this one simple gesture, from this one man. And Jim wasn't repelled by his need, wasn't pulling back, wasn't moving his hand. He rested his head against the sofa cushions, eyes half closed, leaning into the stroking hand as it explored each curl, an overwhelming sense of well-being, warm and peaceful, taking him over. And Jim was watching him like he was the sun and the stars and everything in between, and he clasped the hand he was holding that much harder.

"It was awful. I hated it. Every day, every hour, every minute. It was just...agony."

"I'm sorry."

"No. I'm sorry. I'm the one who left. It was my decision. I'm responsible."

"Listen, Chief. We both know you wouldn't have gone if I hadn't been too much of a coward to tell you how much I wanted you to stay. I'll always be sorry for that."

"Or I could have told you how much I wanted to stay. Let's face it, Jim. Neither of us is exactly blameless here."

Jim chuckled. "I guess we're really quite a pair, aren't we?"

"I like to think so," he said softly.

He watched Jim blink back the threat of tears. "Me too, Chief. Me too."

With that, he knew it was really going to happen, everything he'd wanted and wondered about and hoped for and been scared to death of. It was already happening. Jim knew it too. It was in the way he touched him and watched him and spoke. Realizing it, he felt something grow calm inside him. He did not want to rush. He wanted to savor every step, every advance, every glance and further touch, every precious second of their first loving. After all, they were not teenagers. This was not some anonymous groping in the dark between strangers. They were best friends. They needed to take their time and see each other through, supporting one another, as they always had, in everything, since the moment they'd met. It was what their friendship demanded, and it was this intense friendship that would always be at the heart of their bond, this pure and deep and unshakable connection, this soul love that would last the rest of their days. Tonight was only the beginning. They had all the time in the world.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked, running his fingers up and down Jim's arm, enjoying the feeling of smooth skin and crisp hairs.

"Oh God," Jim said, seeming almost embarrassed, his stomach grumbling loudly on cue. "It's been a while. Breakfast, I guess."

"Me too. We need sustenance, big guy. To keep up our strength."

"That might be the most exciting thing I've ever heard said about food."

He smiled broadly. His friend was flirting with him. And he really, really liked it. "Let's go scavenge."
He was not willing to give up his connection with Jim, and Jim didn't seem to want to part with him either. They walked the short distance to the kitchen hand-in-hand. He had to let go of Jim to work on dinner, but he couldn't tolerate any more separation than that. He felt compelled to stand in Jim's space, glued to his body, and Jim seemed to welcome it, leaning into him, occasionally wrapping an arm around his waist to pull him closer.

"Molly made some soup the other day," Jim said, opening the refrigerator. "There should still be some in here. And stuff for sandwiches."

"Mmm. Sounds good. Should we see if Molly's hungry?"

He watched Jim reach out with his hearing. "No. She's sound asleep."

He smiled. "And I thought that was all just an excuse."

"Knowing Molly, I'm sure it was. But it's been a pretty rough day for her. It probably got to her more than she figured. I mean, look who the poor girl just inherited for brothers," he said teasingly.

Blair couldn't help smiling fondly. "You really love her, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Me too. Long before I knew she was my sister. You know, I think I always loved her, from the moment she first came to my office. I was not too happy when I thought I was having some kind of inappropriate reaction to a student. Really freaked me. But now looking back, maybe I knew on some level who she was. Maybe there really is knowledge in our genes. Maybe we can sense who has ties to us, who belongs to us."

"Or maybe it's just that some things are meant to be, Chief."

He felt his throat go dry at the expression in his friend's eyes. "Oh most definitely, Jim. Some things are absolutely meant to be."

They could not tear their eyes away from each other for a long moment, but there was still the need for food, pressing on their attention.

Jim smiled. "Maybe we ought to concentrate on dinner."

He nodded. If they didn't, it would never get done. He worked on making sandwiches, turkey and swiss, Jim's favorite. The soup bubbled in the pan on the stove.

"That smells great," he said.

"Yeah. And low fat too. Plus there's fiber," Jim laughed. "You know, she really is so much like you. She really kept me going while you were gone. Without her, I don't know..."

He felt himself freeze. What? Jim couldn't be saying what he thought he was saying...could he? He searched Jim's face, stared deeply into his eyes. And saw the ghost of an unbearable pain.

Jim's voice was gravelly with emotion. "It got really hard, Chief. I just wasn't too sure sometimes..."

He grabbed Jim's arm and held on. "You have to promise me. Never. You'll never do that. Never, never even consider it. If I can help it, we'll never be apart again. But if something happens that we can't control, you have to promise me you won't give up, that you'll keep going. Please. Promise me, man. I really need to hear you say it."
He watched Jim consider carefully. "Yes. I promise, Blair. But only if you swear that you'll stay with me. I just...I need you. I do."

"Oh yeah, man, yeah. Of course. I promise. God Jim, I need you too. Don't you know that?"

Jim wrapped his arms around him and hugged him harder than he'd ever been hugged before. "God, I'm glad you're back, Chief."

"Me too, Jim. Me too."

Finally Jim let him go, and they finished making dinner quietly, shaken by the strong emotions. What they felt was too difficult to say in words. It could only be communicated in touch. Blair kept his body lightly in contact with Jim's as he finished assembling the sandwiches. Jim could not help reaching out to him, to hug him, squeeze his shoulder, pat his back, anything to maintain the physical connection.

When it was ready, they took their dinner to the table and sat down together. Blair scooted his chair a little closer to Jim's, and Jim draped his arm across Blair's back, leaning in to be nearer. They ate quickly, more hungry than they had realized, stealing food from one another's plates, the way they always had, the rhythm of their previous intimacy seamlessly restored, as if Blair had never left at all.

"God, I can't believe I have a sister. And she's your sister too. Pretty cool, huh? I've never had any family besides Naomi. And you, man. I mean, I've always considered you family, Jim. But to find a blood relative at this point in my life. It's just amazing."

"I know what you mean, Chief. I finally have one I like. And feel close to. You know, I meant what I said before. It really does mean a lot to have both you and Molly here with me. The two of you are my family. The only one that really counts."

He cupped Jim's cheek, a little teary. "Thanks, man. I feel the same way. I'm really, really glad to be here."

They stared into each other's eyes a long moment, seeing all the things they'd been hoping to discover--need and commitment and permission.

Finally Jim said softly, "How 'bout I snag us some beers, Chief, and we take this party back to the sofa?"

He smiled. "Sounds good to me."

He curled up on the sofa, and Jim soon joined him. They sat together, as close as possible, entwined, Jim holding him tightly in his arms, his cheek resting against Jim's shoulder.

"You know we haven't really talked about this yet, Chief. I mean, I just need to know...are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You?"

He watched Jim nod, and it made him feel so many things--relief and longing and freedom. He leaned closer, so close his breath caressed Jim's skin. With shaking fingers, he stroked his face, tenderly, reverently, a celebration of everything that was good and true and alive. He lingered a trembling moment before closing the distance between them, so that he would always remember the exquisite anticipation, the way his whole life seemed to stretch out before him in a sensual vista. The first touch of their lips was light and friendly, warm and soft, and he knew that if this were his last moment, he would end in perfect contentment. The next kiss was dewy and honey-touched, a sweet
blossoming, shared nectar, all he would ever need of heaven. And the next was cataclysmic, wild fire
and runaway desire and furious hunger, the kind of torment that demanded more of the same.

There was an ocean pounding in his ears, and he followed its lead, stroking and tasting, teasing and
touching in time to its tidal beat. The touch was everything, its own concentrated universe, and all
that existed was the man in his arms. Jim, who was bedrock and timber and green field. His Jim, with
his warrior's heart and peaceful hands, panther's growl and tender kisses. Being with Jim in this
moment was the culmination of all his wildest hopes. It was starlit dreams and operatic longing,
bright joy and secret whispers, quiet contentment and passionate heat.

There was no hesitation now. They moved effortlessly in their love, giving and taking, ebbing and
flowing. Together they wove a spell of enchantment, a sleek double knot of murmured endearments
and heartfelt silence, sweet sobs, soft sighs. Their communion was deep and sheltering, and they
needed no words when it came time to move into the next realm of their passion. As one, holding
hands, they rose from the sofa and walked to the stairs that would lead them upwards, to sanctuary.

Shedding their clothes felt like losing the present, opening a door and stepping into a natural past, the
land of instinct and need. Finally there were no barriers. After all the wondering, here was Jim
stretched out before him, at long last revealed, without secrets. Jim, who was his heart and his life,
partner and love, brother and friend. No imagining could have predicted the feast before him, the
sheer beauty of the physical revelation. Jim, tawny veldt and downy smoothness, Jim, warm expanse
and sweet shadows, Jim, corded strength and tender hollows.

Jim.

As he joined his love on the big bed, he couldn't believe he'd ever hesitated, ever worried what it
would be like to give free rein to his love for him. Finally, he felt easy in his own mind, carefree in
his body. Nothing had ever been so right. Moving as one, they dove into the bottomless pool of their
longing. And in the infinite grandeur of the moment, they were the only two people ever to exist.
They were the first, the chosen, the alpha and omega, born into the sensual garden, and their coming
together was the beginning of all that would ever be. At last, there was no doubt, no trepidation, no
fear of consequences. There was nothing but warm skin and loving connection and original pleasure.
It struck him that he had never made love before without some sort of reserve, some part of his
enjoyment, his enthusiasm, his heart held back, saving it, for something, he hadn't known what, until
here, now. He had withheld from all the others, so that he would have something virginal to offer his
love, his Jim. This sacred offering was no less than his whole self, all that he was, all that he would
ever be.

And now he was more open, more attuned to the man in his arms than he could ever have imagined,
ready to give himself up with total abandonment, to sink into the depths of his love with complete
fearlessness, advancing with infinite patience toward the moment of ideal bliss. There was no
calculation in it, no measuring out what should be given in order to take what was wanted. He was
inflamed equally by the desire to possess and the need to surrender. Jim's desire was his own. Jim's
pleasure sang along his skin and throbbed deep inside him. The sound of Jim's satisfaction echoed in
his own throat. In giving, he also received. In taking, he made a gift of his love.

The night was theirs, and they possessed it, taking the measure of each other's flesh, again and again.
They nipped and played, nuzzled and danced, licked and gasped, kissed and celebrated. They
dwelled lushly in one another, hungry but unhurried, having waited too long to rush, unwilling to
sacrifice even a moment of joy. They moved together in love and need, communication and mutual
exchange. It was a gentle current, sweeping them in and out on a tide of pleasure. It was a primal
rhythm, building inside them, thunderous chanting need, demanding more. It was an abyss and the
raging swell that carried them up and over, into star-splintering darkness, the awe-filled stillness at
the center of the Universe, the fractured consciousness of release, the damp shore of satiety. It was all they had dared hope for and so much more.

Afterwards, when the world had regained its axis, he felt Jim's arm curve around him, settling him into the hollow of his body, a warm nest where he fit perfectly. Jim's mouth skimmed his hair, kissed a fluttery path across his forehead, lightly brushed his ear. He heard a low murmur, something that could have been Blair or Chief or Sandburg or mine. Something that sounded like love. He took the sound, like music, into his dreams and let it lull him into peaceful sleep.

The dream was always the same. The nightmare. There were hands on her, slithering over her skin with evil intent, hands that made her sick with revulsion and fear, greedy hands, trying to take what was hers, hands that would stop at nothing to get the gift she'd been born with, even though it was not something that could be taken. As always, the worst part was feeling so completely powerless. In her dream, she was utterly paralyzed, unable to move or scream, just as she had been all those years ago, bound to the table, a gag in her mouth, nearly choking her. And the smell. Who could have ever imagined that evil had its own particular odor? A sickening combination of rot and cloying sweetness and char.

Smell? The realization jolted her awake. The smell wasn't part of her dream. It was something she remembered from that long ago night. And now, it was in her room. Terror constricted her throat. The man, the monster, the evil thing glided over to the bed and bent over her, running his hands up and down her body, over the fabric of her white cotton nightdress. She wanted to scream. She wanted to hit and bite, kick and scratch. She wanted to jump up from the bed and run to her brothers for safety. But her arms and legs felt like a leaden weight. She was frozen, couldn't move. Oh God, what had he done to her? Need. To. Scream. Jim! Blair! Have. To. Yell. Help! Please!

But she couldn't make words. She couldn't push the sound out of her body. There was no breath in her lungs. The dark one turned her over onto her stomach, roughly, pulling her arms behind her back, binding them with duct tape.

"You can't scream, and they're not coming, little witch," he murmured, his foul mouth close to her ear, disgusting and tormenting. "Nobody to rescue you this time. You're mine now, little girl."

He yanked her up by the hair. She could see his eyes, glittering black pools in the dim room. What she found in them made her tremble harder, the accumulated darkness of many misspent lifetimes, unmitigated evil. He would never be content with just taking her life. He wanted her soul. And she grew cold with a new terror. It was the first time she had ever doubted any of her grandmother's teachings. *My soul's my own. My soul's my own.* So her grandmother had always said, and so she desperately wanted to believe. *My soul's my own.* She chanted it in her mind, trying to have faith in her own mantra. He could not take her soul from her. No. Not possible. Not possible. But looking into his dark eyes had been like falling into cold, black water. Drowning. The most lost she'd ever been. And now she wasn't so sure anymore, about anything.

*It can wait until morning.* That's what she'd told Jim. So wrong. Oh God, how could she have been so wrong? Maybe the man had found out about her reunion with her brothers. He would also know about the prophecy of Three. Maybe he'd decided to strike before they could properly join forces. There had to be a reason why he would make such a bold move, coming to her own territory for her. Oh God, who was she kidding? He'd gotten so much stronger than he was the last time. Why should he fear her? She'd been no match for him so far. He'd come into her home, uninvited, broken through her protection, hidden from her sensory radar, immobilized her and taken her under his control.

The man pulled off another strip of tape, tearing it with his teeth, pressing it across her mouth. "Just in case my magic isn't enough to keep you quiet. There's nothing wrong with making sure your
mouth stays shut the old-fashioned way."

He blinded her with yet another piece of tape across her eyes and then pulled her to her feet. Blair. Jim. Her mind felt so hazy. It was hard even to focus her attention. Blair. Jim. She could barely even call their names in her thoughts. Her knees felt weak, her legs rubbery. Her head swam. The dark one jerked her sharply to keep her on her feet. God, she should never have looked into his eyes. It had scared her down to her bones. Even blindfolded, she could still see that cold, reptilian expression, the sum of every vile thing that had ever crawled the earth. And her own fear had given him even more control over her. She was succumbing to his influence. It was interrupting her ability to think, confusing her mind, making her head hurt too much to concentrate. Jim. Blair. But they couldn't hear her thoughts, and she couldn't manage to speak. He was too powerful. She was getting so tired, so weak. She just wanted to give in, sleep, let it all be over.

"It's a good thing your brothers didn't wake up, little witch," he whispered, pulling her silently toward the door. "I'm sure you remember what I did to your Daddy when he got in my way."


And suddenly she felt all the years of stifled rage unleash in her chest, traveling through her, burning in her blood like a hazardous chemical. Finally, he had made a mistake. He had mocked her pain, and no one did that. No one made light of her father's murder, particularly not the monster who had committed it. The fury cleared her head instantly, leaving a faint metallic taste in her mouth, determination and the lust for vengeance.

She knew at once what she had to do. She had already let down her guard so Jim could sense her, but she needed to go even further. She had to do the absolute opposite of everything she had ever been taught would keep her safe. Now strength and salvation would be found only in utter vulnerability. Instead of hiding, she needed to broadcast her emotions, all the rage, fear, dread, revulsion, the need for revenge, everything she felt. If she could give off a strong enough signal, Jim would be able to smell her, and maybe with that he would be able to track her. And he would need Blair to guide him, so they would both come for her. And maybe, just maybe, if the three of them were together, they would be able to fulfill the prophecy and end this particular darkness forever.

The man pulled her to the fire stairs and dragged her down them. She stumbled and sagged, keeping up a facade of disorientation to distract him. Believing he'd already won, he was not paying such careful attention to her now. He did not sense that beneath her woozy surface she was gathering her strength. She focused, moving inward to the quiet place, exerting her will, turning her emotions out into the world with all the force she was capable of. The man did not stir or pause, not noticing. A sense of thankfulness spread through her. She knew she was still in very grave danger, but at least, she was leaving behind her own version of a bread crumb trail. Please, please, please find me, Jim. Please, please, please come for me, Blair.

He pushed the fire door open and dragged her onto the sidewalk. She could hear night sounds, crickets and faraway sirens and the distant hum of traffic, but nothing even remotely nearby. It was maybe three o'clock in the morning and a weekday, so the chances of anyone being out were slim at best. Not that it would have done her much good anyway. The dark one was far too powerful for a good Samaritan to stop him. With the effectiveness of his shielding, someone could pass right by them and never notice a thing.

"I've waited such a long time for this, little witch," he purred in her ear, making her stomach clench.
"I've dreamed about it. And now I'm about to make all my dreams come true."

He grabbed her by the neck, and she could hear the sound of a van door sliding open. He lifted her and dumped her onto the hard, cold metal floor, slamming the door behind her. She tried not to think about how final it sounded. A moment later there was another slamming door and the gunning of the engine. When they began moving, her heart froze, and she felt the panic rising again. She had the terrible sense that he was carrying her away from the scene of her brightest joys toward a final darkness.

It took a supreme effort of will to tamp back down the fear and dread. If these were the last moments of her life, she wanted to spend them with the people who were dear to her, and she turned inward to commune with them. Father. Mother. Grandmother. Jim. Blair. She retreated into her love, letting it hold and comfort her. She felt a wave of gratitude for all that she had been given in life. She felt the sting of greed, not ready to give it all up just yet. It was not that she feared death. She truly knew there was no end. Even if she died, she would continue, in some form, always. But she was not finished here. She had so much more to do in this life. She felt it in her heart and bones and blood. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to leave. Not yet.

Please, please, please, she begged the Spirit, over and again.

Concluded in part four.
Chapter 4

Due to the length of this story, it has been broken into four parts.

The Break

by Annabelle Leigh

Continued from part three.

The Break - part four.

Jim woke with a start and slide silently out of bed, reaching for the gun. Something wasn't right. He could sense it. He crouched against the wall near the stairs and extended his senses, sweeping the loft, searching for the source of the threat. But everything was still and tranquil. No danger. He breathed a little easier, his protective instincts settling back down. There was no one and nothing foreign in his home. His family was safe.

It was that realization and the cold metal of the weapon in his hand that brought him fully back to his senses. He was very glad no one else was awake to see him in full attack mode, ready to have it out with an imaginary enemy, more than a little ridiculous. But shit! That had been one hell of a dream. Nightmare was more like it. He couldn't recall the exact images. Everything had been blurred and unfamiliar, even while the dream was going on. There had been soft lighting, candles maybe, and an old building and someone else was there, although he couldn't see them, only sense a presence. And there was a dirt floor. That he remembered clearly. But what really stayed with him was the bad feeling he'd gotten from it all--cold and desperate and menacing.

He put the gun back in the nightstand drawer and returned to bed. Blair made a soft sound beside him, searching for him in his sleep, curling against his body, sighing unconsciously, a sweet sound of contentment. He pulled him closer, careful not to wake him. The dream had jarred him, and he doubted he'd be able to go back to sleep again. But with Blair in his bed, he would have no problem keeping occupied. He could spend an eternity just watching his beautiful guide lying beside him.

He touched his own lips softly and smiled with great satisfaction. He could still taste his love. It was every delicious flavor imaginable--honey and spice, tang and zest, salt and savor. It was Blair. When he concentrated, he could still feel Blair on his skin, all the varied textures of Blair's tender body pressed against his, the resonance of those gentle hands stroking and teasing and worshipping him. In his mind's eye burned a perfect picture of his beloved, writhing beneath him, the beautiful features luminous with affection and pleasure. He had not understood before how much he'd longed to see his best friend's face in orgasm. But now he had and now he knew. Ethereal. That was the only word for such unearthly grace. And he had been the one to lift Blair to those heights. He had been the one holding Blair in his arms. It had been his name Blair screamed out of sheer joy. He had been the one who had given him that pleasure, his mouth and hands, tongue and fingers, cock and ass that had brought him to ecstasy. And he had never known a fuller, brighter joy.

He lightly touched Blair's curls, loving the way they fanned out over the pillow, the striking contrast of white cotton and silken darkness. It seemed difficult to believe that only a few hours ago he had been desolate, contemplating the prospect of losing the two people he loved most. And now his life was more intertwined with theirs than he could have ever thought possible. In the parking lot at the university, watching and misunderstanding their relationship, he had stared into a void so profound...
that he had really not known how it would be possible to go on with his life, irretrievably lost without them.

But instead, he had gained them as family, different from anything he'd ever known before, complicated bonds of love and blood and sympathy that would keep them together, always. Always was important to him. Losing them was his terror. Hell, it wasn't even paranoia. Loss and aloneness were the overriding themes of his life. Until now. Not now. Not ever again. Now there would be no more void. Now the people who were most important to him were with him, under his roof, under his protection. It was a kind of satisfaction perhaps only a Sentinel could fully appreciate.

He thought of other nights when bad dreams had awaken him, the despair he felt without Blair by his side, the disconnection that threatened to overwhelm him. It had nearly driven him mad. It had nearly killed him. The loneliness was a white room without contents, doorless, sterile, seamless, no edges, no sound, no sensory input of any sort, nothing and no one, the worst sort of desolation. That was his life without love, without Blair, his mate. That was his life without family, without Molly, his little sister. The two of them together had banished the pale silence, once and for all. And now he was surrounded by such sweet music. He listened to Blair, the burbling sound of his life, the beating of his heart, the blood in his arteries and veins, the breath rushing in and out of his lungs. It anchored him in the here and now, filled him with a deep peacefulness. He wondered what it would be like to hear both Blair and Molly at the same time, a symphony of his loved ones. He reached out his hearing eagerly, anticipating the chorus of beautiful life. But he didn't find it. He couldn't sense Molly.

It must be the ghostwalking thing. Except that he'd been able to find her earlier. Something prickled along his skin, and the dream plowed back into his consciousness. Molly had been in it, alternately an adult and a little girl, and someone else had been there too, hiding in the shadows. There were candles and a dirt floor and something glinting in the dim light. A knife. God. The red glowing numbers of the digital clock caught his attention. 3:23 a.m. Wasn't that when Blair's father...shit! She wasn't ghostwalking. She wouldn't have woken up just to shield herself. She always let him sense her when he was sleeping. That meant...oh God.

"Blair, baby, wake up." He gently shook Blair's shoulder.

His lover rolled over and stretched, like a sleek, contented cat, the sheet sliding down around his hips, making his heart stand still. Blair reached for him and began stroking his thigh, pressing closer, sighing contentedly.

"Come on, Chief. You have to get up. Now."

He pulled out some clothes and threw them on hurriedly. The sense of urgency in his voice had communicated itself to Blair, and he was sitting up, still looking very sleepy but also a little alarmed.

"What is it?"

"Molly. I don't hear her."

Blair's expression turned to fear. "Oh shit, man."

Blair scrambled out of bed, picking up his clothes from the floor, pulling them on. It was the most schizophrenic moment Jim had ever had, torn between admiration for his lover's beautiful body and a quickening sense of dread for his sister.

He could only deal with one strong emotion at a time, so he went downstairs to confirm what his senses and every ounce of instinct told him. And he was right. She was gone. Standing in the
doorframe of the empty room, staring at the rumpled bedclothes, he could not remember having such a bleak feeling since Blair left. The room was so still, a void without Molly's energy and presence. Only a short time ago, he had thought the white prison was behind him forever, and now...

"Hey, Jim, come back to me. Okay? Come on, big guy. I need you. Molly needs you. I know it looks bad, but she's okay. I feel it. She's alive and waiting for us. Come back to me, so we can go get our sister." The voice was soft and loving, accompanied by the warmth of a hand moving in reassuring circles over his arm.

"Blair?"

"Yeah, man. You were really zoned there for a minute."

"He took her."

"I know."

"What he does to them. My God, Blair. It's...he's really going to hurt her. Make her suffer."

"Not if we find her first."

"How do we do that, Chief? We have no idea who this guy is. Shit, we don't know much of anything about him at all. How the hell are we going to figure out where he's taken her? I should have made her tell me everything she knows. I should never have put it off until morning. Fuck! I go and give her this big speech about how I'm a cop and a professional and she should let me handle stuff like this and then I go and fuck it up and don't protect her."

Blair grabbed his arm. "Don't! It's not your fault. We're dealing with something extreme here. We have to concentrate and figure out what to do."

"Like what, Chief? I'm open to ideas here."

"You have to use your senses, man. It's who you are, what you do. Concentrate. Does anything jump out at you?"

"I don't know. I can't..."

"Yes, you can. Now concentrate."

It seemed hopeless to him, but Blair wanted him to try and Blair was his guide. So he tried. He scanned the room with his vision. Nothing out of place. If the killer had left anything behind, it was minuscule enough to be undetectable even to Sentinel sight. But the smell. How had he missed that before? It must have been his agitation. Because it was overpowering. It was Molly, but more potently than he'd ever experienced her, layers and tangles of scent, corresponding to her emotions, very strong ones. Beneath and over and around her usual lemony smell was something sharp and metallic...fear...and something acrid, almost smoky...anger...and something unique, unlike anything he'd ever picked up before, especially strong, almost determined if that's something a scent could be. A possibility struck him, and he followed the powerful scent out of her room into the living room, over to the door.

He felt Blair's hand on his arm. "What is it, Jim?"

"You're right. She's waiting for us. Get your coat, Chief."

He could see that Blair was confused and curious and dying to ask a million questions, but he just
grabbed his jacket and followed him outside to the truck.

"I need you to drive."

He took it as a testament to the extreme gravity of the situation that his friend only arched an eyebrow at him before taking the keys and settling into the driver's seat.

"So what now?"

"Hold on, Chief."

He rolled down the window and leaned out the passenger side, sniffing the air. Yes, there it was, fainter than in the loft, but enough.

"Take a left. Head down Prospect. Slowly."

Blair put the truck in gear and eased out of the parking space, following his instructions, inching along as slowly as possible.

"Slower, Chief."

"Geez, Jim, if I go any slower, we'll be stopped."

"Wait. Yeah, there it is. Make the next left. Left, Sandburg!"

"All right, all right, keep your pants on. A little more notice would be helpful."

"This isn't exactly a science here, Chief."

"Tell me about it."

"Right! Go right!"

"Shit! Okay."

"Keep going straight. That's good, Chief. We're getting closer. The scent's getting stronger."

"Jim, man, are you telling me that you can actually smell Molly?"

"I know it shouldn't be possible, but yeah, I can."

"Oh man, that's just amazing. I wonder if it has something to do with your family bond, like maybe your genetic connection makes you more sensitive to her or something. Or if she was trying to leave a trail for you..."

"Chief--"

"Oh man, sorry. Can't help it. Figuring out new things about your senses is what I do to manage anxiety."

He couldn't help rolling his eyes. "Why don't I doubt that? Bear left up here. We're almost there."

"Of course we are. This has got to be one of the most desolate parts of the entire city. Why is it that bad guys always have to pick the most rundown abandoned building in the most deserted neighborhood for a hideout? Just once, I'd like it to be a three-bedroom ranch house in the suburbs."

"Blair?"
"Yeah, Jim?"

"You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah."

"So you'll take it in the spirit in which it's intended when I tell you to shut up, right?"

"Wow, man. What's it been? Twelve hours? And the honeymoon's already over."

"Left up here, Blair. Left."

"Okay. Okay. I got it."

Molly's smell was nearly as strong as it had been in the loft. It could only be another couple of minutes. He glanced over at Blair, noticing for the first time the white knuckles clutching the steering wheel. Damn. He'd been so focused on finding Molly that he hadn't realized how scared his lover was. Blair's heart was literally pounding in his chest and his breathing was shallow and fluttery.

He reached over to his partner, putting a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. "It's gonna be all right, Chief. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

Blair shook his head.

"Nah, man, I'm sorry. Sometimes my coping mechanisms aren't that appropriate to the situation. You know how I get when I'm nervous," he laughed tensely. "Of course this isn't exactly nervousness. It's more like sheer fucking terror."

Blair looked over at him, and the expression in those eyes, a combination of fear and embarrassment, made him grip his lover's shoulder even tighter. Despite all the time and energy he spent reminding Blair that he wasn't a cop, he himself sometimes seemed to lose sight of it.

"We've been in tough situations before, Chief. We'll make it through this. Hang in there, okay?"

Blair nodded.

"I love you."

A smile lit his lover's face. "I love you too."

"There! That building up ahead. Stop here, Chief. We don't want him to hear the truck."

Blair killed the engine and turned off the lights. "She's on the roof, Jim. Scared, but not hurt."

He shot his lover a questioning look and Blair shrugged. "I don't know, man. I just sense it. Maybe it's that empathic thing she was talking about. So what now?"

"You stay here," he said, opening the door. "Call it in. Get back up. Tell them to send every available unit. No sirens. You don't move. Wait for the cops."

"No way, man. Not this time. Let's call it in, but I'm going with you."

"I can't allow that, Blair. It's too risky."

"Listen, Jim, you don't have a choice here. Molly said it takes all three of this to defeat this bastard. So I am going in."
"Chief, please. I can't have both of you in danger. It's...too much."

"She's my sister too," Blair said softly, his jaw set in a way that Jim recognized all too well.

He sighed heavily but jerked his head toward the building. "Call it in. We're wasting time."

The building was pitch black inside, which fortunately wasn't a problem for him, but it meant his guide couldn't see a thing. To make it worse, the place had been completely trashed, and there was broken glass, abandoned inventory and debris everywhere. He held his gun in one hand and used the other to help navigate Blair around the obstacles. Slowly, they inched across the floor toward a rickety set of metal stairs against the far wall. They climbed deliberately, careful not to make a sound. At the top of the fifth flight there was a door, slightly ajar, letting in the orange glow from the lights on the roof. He could feel Blair relax beside him, relieved to be able to see again.

As they peered out the door, he was almost sorry that he could see. What greeted him made his stomach turn, and he could feel Blair struggle not to gasp out loud. Molly was lashed down to a metal workbench. Her white nightgown, cut from her body, lay discarded in a heap on the dirty blacktop. The man moved around her, keeping to the shadows, almost as if he were made of darkness, chanting eerily in some unrecognizable language, dipping his finger into the same scented oil they'd found on the other victims, drawing on Molly's body with it. He could see his sister shivering with cold and trembling with fear. He could hear the small pleading whimpers and sounds of disgust. He could smell the sharp scent of fear coming off Blair's body in waves.

It was too much for him. Rage hammered into him, catapulting him back in time, erasing the civilizing distance between his modern self and the tribal watchman that still lurked in his genetic code. He crouched low on the ground, his nostrils flaring, hyper-vigilant, his senses flooding the primitive center of his brain with information. His mate was safe beside him, but frightened. His sister was in enemy hands and terrified. Imminent danger. Attack. Defend. Destroy. Protect. Vanquish. Rescue. Kill.

It took a while for the sensation to penetrate through the heavy veil of instinct, the pressure of a familiar hand on his back. And a voice. Molly's. But not a sound in his ears. It was in his head. Her voice. No, Jim, no. He felt Blair tense at his side. Molly? Shit, what was happening? Now he could hear them both, but no one had spoken. What the hell is this? Blair looked as confused as he was. It's our connection. It's how we beat him. Oh no, he knows you're here. Don't do anything. Wait for my signal. He watched the killer pause for a moment and then resume moving his hands over her body. But the touching was different this time, more deliberate, lewd and sexual. Rage and disgust collided in the pit of his stomach.

"It seems we have company, little witch," the man said, loud enough for them to hear. "Your loving brothers are paying us a call. Isn't that considerate? Now I don't have to go back to the apartment to kill them. Come out, come out, wherever you are."

The man fondled Molly's hip. Jim could feel her cringe, and fury ate through him like acid. A picture of himself eviscerating the pervert touching his sister sprang to life in his imagination, and he made a small move forward. No! That's what he wants. Stay there. I'm all right. Blair's hand had returned to his shoulder, calming him, keeping him centered. Hold on, Molly. We're coming. The sound of his guide's voice moving through his head helped him get the primitive fury under control.

The man grabbed Molly's breast roughly and she screamed. "We're having fun, aren't we little witch? Come out, brothers, and you can play too."
I'm taking him down now! He tightened his grip on the gun. Don't let him push your buttons, Jim. He turned to his guide and let his expression communicate just how annoying he found that particular bit of advice. Blair's right. He may not show it, but he's afraid of us. He knows we have the power to stop him. We just have to wait for the right moment. He shifted with restless irritation. When the hell is that going to be?

The killer picked up a knife, a large serrated blade like a hunting knife and held it against Molly's throat.

"Okay, that's enough already. Come out or she dies right now. You can't hide from me anyway. I know exactly where you are."

No, he doesn't. I'm shielding you. Don't come out.

"I'll kill her. Do you hear me, brothers? You know I will. I've killed lots of other people before her."

He ran the blade across her cheek to accentuate his words, pressing in slightly, drawing blood.

Damn it, Molly. It's gotta be now. He was certain a vein would burst in his head if they didn't do something soon. Molly, what do we do? Blair sounded worried. We have to invoke the Spirit. All three of us. Follow along with me. The sound of Molly's chanting filled his head. What good is this going to do? We need action, not words. And I have no idea what you want me to say. The chanting went on, but there was Molly's voice too, speaking to him. Yes, you do. The words are inside you. All you have to do is let them out. Trust me.

Angels of Air. Guardians of the East. We do call and summon you to lend us your strength. He could hear Blair's voice join in tentatively. Angels of Fire. Guardians of the South. We do call and summon you to lend us your force. The words unspooled in his head, resonating, touching on something he never knew was there. But Molly was right. It had been with him from the beginning. Angels of Water. Guardians of the West. We do call and summon you to lend us your might. He chanted along with Molly and Blair, the voice in his mind building and swelling. Angels of Earth. Guardians of the North. We do call and summon you to lend us your power. He reached for Blair's hand, and a wave of electric energy surged through him. Spirit of Love. Spirit of Justice. Spirit Eternal. We invoke you in this hour of need. We summon you in perfect love and perfect trust. We call on you for righteousness sake. Come unto us. Grace us with your presence. Lead us out of this darkness, into the light.

His head was a jumble of images. It was a maelstrom that seemed to engulf him, pushing him backward toward a distant past, into secrets he could never have guessed. Woven huts and rough-hewn landscapes. Tall grasses shifting in starlight. The stone lintel of an ancient temple, intricately carved, mythic beasts and writhing figures, all springing to feverish life in his imagination. And the weathered hands of women grinding grain, forming clay into pots. The bent backs of men moving stealthily through the underbrush, seeking prey. Green field. Deep forest. Savannah and veldt. The overarching sky, brilliant and primitive, a color no longer in existence. The ancient waters, stirring with creation. Heaven separating from earth, darkness from light. A great flash in the nothingness, flintspark of the cosmos.

The vision blended surreally into the present, the sky above rolling and rumbling, black and crackling with electricity. He could see the man advancing on Molly, purposefully, knife raised, but he was held in thrall by the cascading visions and sounds in his head. He could not move. He could not even raise the hand holding the gun. The man was close, so close to his sister. And he was powerless. Please, please, please. He had learned that praying and begging were not so very different. He threw the depth of his desperation into the chant that still swirled through his mind.

The weather grew more turbulent, a gale force wind seeming to come out of nowhere, freakish even
for the mercurial Cascade climate. The powerful air current pushed the man back, keeping him from reaching Molly. There was a crack of thunder and a flash of lightning, but it wasn't like any electrical storm he'd ever seen before. The sky was on fire, blue-white light streaming down toward the rooftop. The light flowed into Molly, enveloping her, until she glowed with its radiance, so bright he had to dial down his vision as far as he dared to keep from having to look away. The ropes holding Molly burned away, and the force of the light levitated her off the altar.

He didn't know who she was anymore. At least not with any certainty. She still looked like his Molly. Sort of. It was definitely her body, but the eyes. No one on earth had eyes like those. They were liquid fire and blue ice and the light of every star in the heavens. And she was hovering a few feet above the workbench. That violated just about every known law of physics. He couldn't really be seeing it. The chanting. That's what had him confused. It had done something to his vision, was making him hallucinate. But if he was just seeing things, then why was Blair staring at the same spot with shocked disbelief all over his face?

"The eternal order, ever the same. Live and let live. Fairly take and fairly give. All beings abide the law of love and heed the Rule of Three."

It wasn't her voice. That's all he could think, over and again. Not her voice. Not her voice. Next to the sinuous, soothing rhythm of Blair's speech, it was the sound he knew best. And it was not what he heard coming out of her body. That voice was an impossible contradiction. It had no volume somehow, didn't register in his ears. But it boomed out over them, immense, endless, making the ground tremble beneath their feet. It was the climacteric voice of the Earth itself, the Heavens, the soul of the Universe.

"All your deeds return at last, three times good and three times bad. And as you live, so shall you pass."

It was over in a fraction of a second: a bright flash, a stream of super-charged light directed at the man in the shadows, a screech of surprise turned quickly to agony as the incendiary brilliance engulfed him. And then nothing. Literally. Except a small scattering of ash that he watched waft away on the wind, as if the man had never been there at all.

Molly lay slumped and motionless on the makeshift altar, and for a moment, he could not tell if she was all right or even alive. But then he saw the soft rise of her chest, could hear her body returning to normal, blood moving in her veins, oxygen rushing in and out of her lungs, the softer, more obscure sounds that were the other organs in her body going about the ordinary business of life. Without even realizing it, he was rushing to her. Blair was by his side and peeling off his jacket, wrapping it around their sister. He picked her up, and she was impossibly cold, as if the core of heat in every cell of her body had pulsed out of her.

He dimly heard sirens and footsteps and the metallic groaning of the stairs beneath the weight of many police officers.


"No, Simon, no ambulance. Molly's okay. We just need to get her out of here. Take her home. Get her warm," Blair said.

Simon stared at them, dumbfounded. "Nobody's going anywhere until I get answers. And this woman is unconscious. She looks like she's been through hell. She needs to go to the emergency room. And somebody needs to clue me in about what happened here. And I'd prefer the condensed
version."

"The perpetrator in the Andrews, Talbot, Edwards and Patterson cases abducted Molly from the loft early this morning. We tracked them to this warehouse and were able to get to her in time. There was a freak accident, and the suspect was struck by lightning and killed while trying to escape. Molly is suffering from shock and exposure, but is otherwise all right. They won't be able to help her at the hospital, so we're taking her back to the loft. And that's pretty much it, sir."

"That's what you want me to tell the Mayor and the Commissioner. The killer was struck by lightning. Where's the body, Jim?"

"Completely incinerated."

"It was a big bolt of lightning. Very hot," Blair added, trying to be helpful.

"You can't be serious," Simon said, "That's a fairy tale, guys. No one in their right mind is ever going to buy it."

"Honestly, sir, at this moment, I don't really care who believes it. We need to take care of our sister. Come on Chief, let's go home."

There were halfway down the stairs when Jim's sentinel hearing picked up Simon's confused exclamation.

"Sister?"

Blair held Molly in his lap on the way home, trying to keep her warm, rocking her gently, trying his best to be comforting. Be okay. Be okay. Be okay. He could no longer feel her thoughts in his mind, but if there was still something left of their connection and he could give her some of his energy and strength, then he wanted to do just that. He held her tightly and focused on getting her well and strong again. There was a part of him that truly knew she would be all right. He could distantly sense her consciousness, retreated far within herself to recuperate, but undamaged. Still. She was so motionless and pale, and her skin was still icy. Eyes closed, face showing her exhaustion, she looked especially young and defenseless. And besides, it was in his nature to worry. Be okay. Be okay. Please be okay.

It had occurred to him more than once already that the events of the past twenty-four hours were beginning to strain even his enthusiasm for extreme possibilities. And that coming from a person who had built his life around some obscure references in a notoriously unreliable adventurer's writings. It was in his nature to believe. But still.

It seemed almost impossible that just yesterday afternoon he'd been standing in the quad talking to Molly like any other teacher with any other student. What could possibly have prepared him for the truly unusual turn his life had taken?

Not a blessed thing.

He so needed some time to process it all. Yeah. Okay. Well, no time like the present, right? Good. Right. Where to begin? He looked down at Molly's pale face. Molly. Okay. That was as good a place to start as any. So she was his sister. Okay. That was an odd but good thing. Right? He loved her. She loved him. They were family. Yeah. Definitely good. But then there was the weirdness about her also being Jim's sister. That was nothing short of freakish. No two ways about it. Of all the people in the world his long lost father could have had an affair with, it turned out to be Jim's missing mother. Still, as completely bizarre as it was, it wasn't a bad thing, was it? No. Of course not.
Together they had made Molly, and he'd already established her as a blessing. And it gave Jim and him one more thing in common, even more of a family bond between them. And he loved Jim. Totally and completely. So what could possibly bother him about sharing a sister with him? Nothing. Except that it had become virtually impossible to believe in any kind of happenstance anymore. At least not where he and Jim were concerned. "Meant to be" seemed to have its sticky fingers all over everything.

And then there was what happened on the rooftop. Where to begin with that?

"Hey Chief? You okay over there?"


Jim frowned. "About Molly? Is she getting worse? Should we head to the hospital?"

"No, man. She's okay. The hospital wouldn't do her any good anyway. I don't think they have a diagnosis for this in any of their medical books. And I have the feeling Molly likes hospitals about as much as I do. I don't think she'd want us to get her pumped full of drugs that aren't going to help anything."

"What should we do, Chief?"

"I'm afraid all we really can do is wait. And get her warm and comfortable. She's going to be okay, Jim. Honest. She just has to recover naturally, in her own good time. Not that I have the foggiest idea how I know that. But I really do feel it."

Jim smiled, a little strained, but a smile nonetheless. "I believe you. You're getting pretty good at that empathic thing."

There was something in Jim's glance...what was it?...that made him blush ever so slightly. Appraisal. Appreciation. And he felt his color deepening. Oh man, Jim was looking at him with sensual awareness.

Because Jim was his lover. Jim Ellison. His lover. He was forced to add that to the growing list of extreme possibilities that had become reality.

All right. Time to process, remember? So take it out and examine it. He and Jim were lovers. Just a few short hours ago, they had been naked together, in Jim's bed, loving each other in every way possible. And it had been mind-blowing. Who could have imagined that kind of pleasure existed? Or that their relative inexperience would make so little difference. Okay. So Molly's paper had gotten him to thinking and hoping a little, and he'd done some research, read a few books, gotten the basic principles straight. Or not so straight. Whatever. Looking back on how easy and comfortable their first time had been, he had to wonder if Jim had done the same thing. Not that he could quite imagine Jim hanging out in the "Gay and Lesbian" section of the local bookstore.

Still.

Nothing they'd done together had seemed to shock or appall Jim. Or even make him hesitate particularly. Jim had been game for everything. And he did mean everything. He couldn't help blushing again. If it hadn't been Jim, whom he loved more than life, whom he had watched and wanted and waited for since the beginning of time, or so it seemed sometimes, he would have been rather embarrassed about some of the details of their lovemaking and especially some of his more...um, enthusiastic responses. But it was Jim. It could never have been anyone else. And that made everything right. No. Better than that. It made everything exquisite.
He caught Jim's eye, and the look on his lover's face made him half afraid he could still hear what was happening in his head. Or maybe Jim had also been recalling their lovemaking. That possibility made him blush even deeper. He could see Jim trying to fight it, but the corner of his mouth insisted on turning up. Now there wasn't just appraisal and appreciation in Jim's expression, but smiling triumph. And something more intense than that...something more like...possession.

It was thrilling and just a little bit terrifying too. All the things he'd been trying to work out for himself about how he could share his life with Jim when he had no experience with commitment seemed like elementary school now. Forget worrying about being Jim's life partner. He was way beyond that now. He was Jim's territory. He knew there was something in Jim, the panther spirit alive in the man, that wanted to claim him, mark him, own him, body and soul. And there was something in him that wanted to be claimed, marked, owned, imprinted by his mate, indelibly, forever--and in that way to claim, mark, own Jim.

Molly stirred a little in his arms, her eyes fluttering open. He watched her frown, struggling to speak. He pulled her closer, brushing the hair out of her eyes, trying to reassure and comfort her.

"Don't try to talk. You've been through a lot, but you're okay now. Everything's all right. We're on our way home," he soothed.

"Jim?" she croaked, searching for her other brother, but not quite able to focus her vision.

"Right here, kiddo," Jim reassured her, reaching over to press her hand with his.

She nodded slightly and then closed her eyes again.

"Blair?"

"It's okay, big guy. She's come out of it, and now she's asleep. I mean she's gotta be exhausted.

Jim nodded, but he didn't move his hand from hers. Blair put his hands on top of Jim's, and they rode the rest of the way to the loft connected that way.

Jim parked the truck as near the entrance as possible, came around to the passenger side and lifted Molly out of Blair's arms to carry her inside. He slid out of the truck and locked the door. The morning colors were beginning to break through on the eastern horizon, violet and orange and pink. The sun would be up soon. Dawn. What did that make him think of? Something he'd read somewhere. A quote. "Morning is when I am awake, and there is a dawn in me." Thoreau. Yeah. Now he understood what it meant. That's what it felt like—the dawn of something different inside him, the first morning of a new self. All the worries he'd been carrying for so many months, for years really, dissolved in the early morning air. This is your home. This is where you belong. It was as if he could hear the words carried on the wind. A simple truth. What he should always have known.

"Chief? You coming?" Jim called.

"Yeah sure, man. Be right there."

They took the elevator up to the loft. He held the door open, while Jim carried Molly inside. They took her to her bedroom and laid her down on the bed.

"Grab some clothes, man. Something warm."

Jim found a pair of sweats, a fleecy sweatshirt and a pair of thick wool socks. Blair quickly pulled the clothes on her, and they settled her beneath the covers. Jim sat down beside her and laid his hand lightly on her forehead.
"She's still really cold, Chief."

"Get some more blankets. I'm going to make up a hot water bottle."

"And maybe we should get out the heating pad."

"Yeah, man, good idea. And I'm going to put a little antiseptic and a bandage on that cut on her face."

By the time they were finished, Molly was settled warmly, piled high with blankets, the hot water bottle and heating pad slowly bringing her temperature back to normal. There was nothing more they could do, but they hung around anyway, aimlessly, unwilling to leave her alone. Finally, Blair sat down on the edge of the bed. Jim pulled up a chair beside him. And they sat there, silently, hovering, waiting, watching, the time slowly ticking by.

"Mhmmm," Molly moaned.

"Molly!" Jim jumped up from his chair, instantly alert.

"Are you all right, sweetie? You need anything?" he fussed over her.

"S'okay. You guys...were great," she smiled weakly. "But..."

"Oh God, what? Are you in pain? Are you hurt?" he fretted.

"Damn it! I knew we should have taken her to the hospital," Jim said.

"You've got to quit watching me sleep. It's making me nervous. Go make out on the sofa or something." This time her smile had just a touch of the devil in it.

It took him a moment to process what she was saying, but that still left plenty of time to enjoy the changing expressions on Jim's face. And they were all priceless. Worry giving way to surprise giving way to a blush he would never have believed possible for a former Vice cop.

"Well, I guess we got our marching orders, big guy," he laughed. "We'd better listen to our sister and hit the couch."

Jim shook his head.

"Come on, man. Molly's right. She's okay, and she needs her rest."

"I don't know, Chief. Maybe one of us should stick around. Just in case."

Molly smiled at Jim and took his hand. "Monitor me with your senses, big brother. If I need anything, you'll know it before I do."

Jim still looked hesitant.

"Come on, big guy," he urged.

Jim bent down to kiss her forehead. "I love you."

Molly smiled drowsily. "Love you too."

She was asleep again before they even made it out the door.
"You want coffee?" he asked, heading for the kitchen, brushing away a few tears.

He had always known that Jim was a man who could love, passionately, deeply, if he would only allow himself to unfold that part of his spirit, if he would give expression to all the beauties of his nature, the person Blair had recognized in him long ago and had fallen in love with. It was his flagging optimism that he'd ever be allowed to see and share in that aspect of Jim's soul that had sent him off to Madagascar. It seemed cowardly to him now, giving up on his friend. But somehow it had also crystallized both their resolves, the break having, in some strange way, brought them closer together. And he had been right--Jim's love was a luminous, beautiful thing. It was the sun in his sky. It warmed and nourished the people it touched. And he had the good sense to recognize just what a lucky man that made him.

He brought the mugs with him to the sofa and settled into Jim's arms. They drank their coffee and gazed out the terrace doors, enjoying the beautiful safety of the morning.

"Chief, do you have any idea what happened on that roof tonight? I mean, I saw it, but I still don't know what 'it' was."

"Right back at you, big guy." He laughed softly. "You know, you'd think I'd be used to the unusual by now, what with your senses and all. But Molly seems to be a heavy duty mystical phenomenon."

"What was that light, Blair?"

He could only shrug. "I don't know, man. I mean, some religious beliefs do envision divinity as a kind of intense, pure light, energy vibrating at an extremely high rate. Not so much a deity, as a kind of pristine orderliness that permeates the universe, that is the universe. And there are certain innate laws, a natural sort of justice. Everything you do has a logical conclusion. What goes around comes around. You reap what you sow. Karmic debt. Action/reaction in Newtonian physics. Molly seems to have been a channel for that energy, for the delivery of a sort of divine justice. The universe righting itself in a certain sense."

"And we helped with that?" Jim raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I know. I don't quite get that either. Somehow it's not quite so hard to believe Molly had a hand in creating something that incredible. There's always been something about her, something I sensed that I could never quite put my finger on. But me? That just seems freaky. And there was that...I mean, do you remember hearing us talking in your head?"

"Yeah. God, I'm glad to hear you say that, Chief. After it was over and I couldn't hear you anymore, I thought maybe it had all been my imagination. I mean, things got pretty hairy there for a while. I don't know...I guess I started to think maybe it had all been some really psychedelic kind of zone."

"But was there chanting? I swear I heard chanting. And it was coming from me. Well, sort of. Geez, I don't know."

"No, but you're right, Chief. I definitely remember chanting. And I knew the words. Even though I don't know the words. I couldn't tell you what they were now if my life depended on it."

"Me too."

"Very, very strange."

"Tell me about it."

They lapsed into silence, and Jim stroked his hair gently, seeming to enjoy the feel of it between his
fingers. He relaxed and leaned into the caress.

"Blair? You know, we never did get a change to talk about it afterwards...how it was...the two of us together. I just wanted to make sure...I didn't hurt you, did I? I know I got a little out of control there. I just...I would never want to hurt you."

He kissed Jim on the cheek. "I know that, Jim. And last night was the most wonderfully sensual and loving night of my life. Nothing hurt. Everything felt good. It was perfect. But you know, you weren't the only one who went a little primal. I hope I didn't hurt you. I want everything between us to feel good."

Jim smiled. "You gave me quite a workout, baby. But it was wonderful. All of it. The best I've ever had."

He couldn't help looking pleased. "Really Jim? The best? You're not just saying that?"

"The best, Chief." Jim's fingers moved in loving patterns across his cheek.

"Me too," he said, lowering his voice, feeling suddenly shy.

"I'm really, really glad, Blair. I always want it to be that good between us."

"Somehow I just don't think that's going to be a problem, big guy."

Jim laughed along with him for a moment but quickly became serious again. "Unfortunately though, it's not always going to be just between us, Chief. There's going to be hard stuff ahead. We have to think about how we're going to handle it."

He couldn't help sighing. "I know that's the reality of the situation, but it sure does interfere with the honeymoon feeling I'm trying to have here. I guess I want to keep things as centered on us as we can right now. And work out how or if we're going to tell people later. I realize it's a big deal what we decide about coming out at the station. I know it's dangerous to be a cop and be out. I think we should concentrate on our relationship and see how we feel about public declarations down the road. It's so new now, and I feel kind of protective and jealous of that. Even if there weren't going to be problems, I'd still want to keep things between us."

Jim took his hand. "I feel just the same way, baby. I do think we should tell Simon though. It wouldn't feel right not telling him. I think he'll understand. Hope so at least. But otherwise, let's keep it between us as much as possible for the time being."

He snuggled closer to Jim. "That sounds good."

"Even though I'd really love to scream how much I love you from the top of the tallest skyscraper in downtown Cascade."

"Hey, I kind of like the sound of that. Let's not rule it out entirely. You know, down the line somewhere."

"Of course, you would like that," Jim teased. "You know we didn't talk about your moving back in here. You will come home, won't you?"

"God, that sounds good. Home. I'm so glad to be back. I missed you so much."

"Me too."
"Never again, big guy. Okay?"

"No way. We're together to stay. Forever. I'm not ready though...I know we could help Molly find another place. There'd be more privacy that way. But I don't think I'd really be okay with that. It's important to me...I really want both of you here."

He couldn't help grinning. "So you can watch over us 24-7?"

Jim look sheepish. "Is that way over the top? More overprotective than even you can stand?"

He kissed Jim's hand. "Nah. It's actually kind of sweet in a weird Sentinel sort of way. I'm cool with it. I certainly want to get to know Molly better. It's a little tricky that she's in my class, but hell that would be tricky anyway. She's my sister, for God's sake. But she's already getting an A anyway. Maybe I can have my TA take care of her final grading. But of course, it's gotta be up to Molly whether she can put up with us or not. People in love can be hard to take. And I do really love you, you know."

When Jim smiled, it was like all the light in the world came into his face. It was very beautiful, and he had really missed it.

"I love you too, Chief," Jim said. "And I'll convince Molly to stay. Everything will be right then. Molly will still be here in the loft where she belongs, and you'll be in my bed where you belong."

He blushed but was actually quite pleased. "Sounds good to me."

"I'm glad."

They grew quiet and thoughtful, lost in each other's presence and the joy and relief of the new day.

He felt Jim tense against his back. "What is it?"

"Simon. Pretty pissed off too, from what I can tell."

He sighed. "Well, I guess that was to be expected with the way we left things."

And, in fact, Simon was not remotely happy when he appeared at the door.

"Ellison! Sandburg! What was that crap back there? I had to come all the way over here for the explanation you owe me, and I expect it to be a good one."

"Come on in, Simon. Coffee?"

"Don't be cute, Sandburg. I don't find it any more amusing than I did before you left."

"It's nice to see you again too."

"Okay, so welcome back then. How's Molly?"

"She's all right," Jim said. "Still sleeping, but she'll be fine."

"Good, good. Now tell me what you did with the body. I'm not criticizing here. I know what he was going to do to Molly, and I would have done the same thing in your position. But I've got to produce a body. And what is all this about a sister? Who has a sister all of a sudden?"

"We both do, sir," Jim explained.
"What?"

"It's a little complicated, Simon," Blair said. "You might want to sit down for this."

Simon sank heavily onto the sofa. "Why does everything with you two have to be complicated? Things aren't complicated for other cops. Or other anthropologists either, I suspect. What is it with you two?"

"A whole lot of stuff, actually," Jim said and explained about Molly's relationship to them.

Simon looked dumbfounded through the entire thing. "So you and Molly have the same mother. And Molly and Sandburg have the same father. But I thought...sorry, Sandburg, I just didn't realize you knew who your father was."

"I didn't. Until Molly told me."

"But how did she...no, never mind, never mind, I don't even want to know. Well, I guess congratulations are in order. You've both gotten a hell of a sister. Oh, but Molly. Poor girl, she'll have Jim looking over her shoulder like you're her father, and Blair acting like her mother."

"Hey!" Blair protested.

"I am not that bad," Jim insisted.

Simon only rolled his eyes.

"You're not giving my brothers a hard time, are you, Simon?" Molly padded out to the living room and curled up on the sofa next to Blair.

Blair hugged her. "Feeling better?"

She nodded.

"You're sure?" Jim asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Absolutely positive?"

"Yes."

"You're sure you don't want to go lie down some more?"

"No, I'm all right."

"You still look pale."

"See what I mean?" Simon asked, sighing heavily.

Molly smiled. "It's okay, Simon. I don't actually mind."

"What?" Jim asked defensively. "I can't ask my sister who just had a very traumatic experience if she's all right? That's overprotective?"

"No, it's very sweet, and I appreciate it."

"See! She appreciates it."
"Run screaming, kid. Run screaming. Jim's been fussing over Sandburg for years. It's never going to stop."

"Simon, wasn't there something you wanted to talk to us about besides Jim's overprotectiveness?"
Blair changed the subject.

"Thanks for reminding me, Sandburg. So who wants to tell me what really happened up on that roof tonight?"

Blair exchanged looks with Jim and Molly.

"It's just like Jim said, Simon. The guy kidnapped Molly. We went after her. There was a freak storm. Kaboom! And that was pretty much it."

"I'm not interested in the edited version, Sandburg. I want to know what really happened."

"But Simon--"

"Don't 'but Simon' me. The odds of what you claim actually happening are about one in hell freezing over. I checked with the local weather station. There were no reports of electrical storms in the area last night. And I talked to the ME who said that even the most powerful bolt of lightning wouldn't cause total incineration. So spill it before I get even more of a headache than I already have."

"Molly, do you want to try to..." Blair asked hesitantly.

"I don't know. I can't...there are holes in my memory. I can remember him breaking in, coming into my room, taking me. There was a van, and we kept driving and driving. And it felt like we were driving forever. And then he took me up onto the roof and...and...started doing the ritual...and..."

She started to cry, and Blair put his arm around her.

"Don't make her do this," Jim hissed.

"I'm sorry, Jim. But I've got to have the story. You know that. Molly, I understand that it's upsetting. But can you tell me what else you remember? It's very important."

She wiped away her tears. "Okay. I'll try. So he tied me down and started chanting and drawing on me with the oil. And then Blair and Jim got there. And I was really afraid that the man would hurt them. So I told them to stay hidden. And then...we had to...well, it was like...I'm sorry I don't know how to put this."

"Just tell me in your own words," Simon prompted.

"Well, we kind of prayed."

"Prayed?"

"Sort of. We invoked the Spirit. I mean, I assume we actually did it. The last thing I remember was saying the chant and focusing my energy and then there was a light in the sky and then...well, the next thing I remember after that was waking up in the truck on the way home."

"I know it sounds crazy, Simon. But that is how it happened. Molly led us in this chant and there was this light and it seemed to take over Molly's body. I mean, it was her, but it wasn't really. And then she...or it?...I mean, does the Spirit have gender? I don't know...'it' held out its hands and kind of...zapped...the guy with this really bright light. And poof! There was nothing left."
Simon just stared silently for a long moment, jaw open, before turning to Jim, a desperate expression in his eyes, begging him to tell a more reasonable story, something, anything else.

Jim just shook his head. "It's all true, Simon. Not that we exactly know what 'it' was. But that's how it went down. The perp is dead. And there really is no body. It was just sort of...vaporized...by the light."

"Ellison, are you trying to tell me that the perp was struck down by the wrath of God?"

"More like the Goddess," Blair corrected.

"Sandburg! Don't fool with me right now. Is it, Jim? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. I think you can see now why we preferred to describe the event as a lightning strike in our official report."

Simon squinted and rubbed his temples, looking like his infamous headaches had turned into a migraine.

"Lightning. Well, I guess the Mayor and Commissioner are just going to have to buy it. I'll find some way to sell it to them. If only I had a body..."

The three of them shook their heads.

Simon held up a hand. "I know. Poof."

They all nodded.

"All right, all right. I'll take care of it. Somehow. Is there anything else you need to get off your chests before I head back down to the station?"

Blair and Jim exchanged a look and nodded at one another almost imperceptibly.

"Actually, Simon..."

"Ah, no. Come on, guys. You're killing me here. You were supposed to say 'no, Simon, that's it, Simon.' I've already had a perp turned to ash through an act of God. What else is there?"

Jim cleared his throat. "Well, actually it's about..."

"Do you want me to go...clean my room or something?" Molly asked, scooting off the sofa.

Jim reached out for her hand. "No. That's okay. You can stay. I know you already know, but you should hear it from us. Besides, it's not like there's anything in there to clean. Not like when Blair lived there.

Blair elbowed him in the ribs. "Hey! Watch it, big guy."

Jim smiled and ruffled his hair affectionately. "Just kidding. Okay, so not really. You know cleaning isn't one of your top priorities in life, Chief."

"Why don't we talk about this later when we don't have company?"

"Fine. I'm just saying..."

Simon whistled loudly. "Hey you two, over here. So you had something to tell me?"
"Oh yeah," Blair said, working up his nerve. "Well, you know how I went to Madagascar? So things were really hard there. I was pretty unhappy. Miserable, actually. And a lot of that had to do with missing Cascade and all the people back here and you know things down at the station and all and so I came back but I still was having...some unhappiness and I met Molly and she was great and you know we had a lot of interesting discussions and this one in particular...you see I'd been trying to decide what to do about this situation I had been having for a while before I left and man, I was all confused about it and I was really worried because there was this really important friendship at stake and I didn't want to do anything to mess that up but I couldn't get my head to stop coming up with all these possibilities and before you know it I was pretty much back where I started...all confused, but then Molly invited me to a party here at the loft and I jumped to the wrong conclusion and thought she and Jim were...and now that's really kind of a disgusting thought...but anyway so I got all freaked out and pissed off and upset and depressed, but in the end it turned out to be a good thing, because I finally realized that Molly and Jim weren't...don't even want to go there, but they weren't, needless to say...and I got all happy because it wasn't too late and I didn't actually have any reason to be broken hearted and there was still time and I hugged Molly and kissed her on the cheek because I was so just so...man, was I ever happy...but Jim had come to the university to pick Molly up and he saw me kiss her and he jumped to the wrong conclusion and thought Molly and I were...well, you know, we hadn't found out yet that she was our sister...but Molly knew and somehow she knew about us...you never did say how you knew about that and I want to hear it sometime...but anyway, so she made us get together and talk it out and we both realized we wanted the same thing and it was just like...oh man, Simon, it's really just the best. I've never been so happy."

"Jim?" Simon asked, not quite sure he'd heard what he thought he had.

"Sandburg and I are together, as in a couple. And we're very happy. It's really new right now, and we're not ready to share it with that many people, certainly not with the guys down at the station. But we did want you to know. Since you're our commanding officer. And our friend."

The silence threatened to deafen them all.

Simon shook his head. "I just can't believe..."

Jim set his jaw grimly. Blair held onto Jim's arm. Molly glared at Simon, ready to defend her brothers.

"...it's taken you two all this time to figure it out. Congratulations!" Simon said, laughing deep in his chest.

Jim and Blair just stared at him in disbelief. Molly's face dawned with pleased understanding, and Simon winked at her conspiratorially.

"Had you going there, didn't I? Ellison, Sandburg, how blind do you think I am anyway? Never mind, I take that back. I don't want to hear the answer. Anyway, needless to say I am glad for the both of you."

"Simon, I don't know what to..." Jim began.

"Thanks, man. I can't tell you how much..." Blair said.

Simon held up his hand. "It's a relief, believe me. Watching the two of you dance around each other was really beginning to get on my nerves. And when you were gone, Sandburg...oh lord, that was unbearable. Jim was just impossible. Well, he got somewhat endurable again when Molly showed up. But it's good to see you both happy."
"How long have you known?" Molly asked curiously.

"Let's just say I've suspected for a quite a while now, but Jim's black mood when Blair left was pretty much final confirmation."

Molly smiled. Blair and Jim were still struggling to recover.

"Man, this day just keeps getting weirder and weirder. I thought you'd come around eventually, Simon, but I didn't exactly expect you to be happy for us. I thought you'd at least accuse me of perverting your best detective."

"Well, kid, that's probably what some people will think. Unfortunately. Are you sure you're prepared to handle it?"

"Blair's not going to have to handle anything," Jim said insistently. "We're in this together. Anyone has a problem with him has a problem with me. And I'll take care of it."

Simon rubbed his eyes tiredly. "That's just what I'm afraid of, Jim. Look, I don't have to tell you how it is. The two of you have some real friends down at the station, and I'm sure they'll be behind you. But police departments are not bastions of liberal idealism. There will be plenty of people who aren't going to like it very much. I'm sure you'll get your share of comments, and with your hearing, you'll know about all of them. I can't have you flying off the handle every time someone says something you don't like about Sandburg."

"We're all assuming that I'm coming back to the station. But Jim's been doing okay without me. I mean, Simon, I taught you and Rafe everything I know about keeping him from zoning. No, listen a minute, Jim. I know you'd like to have me back at work with you, but we'll have our time at home. I don't want to cause you any problems with your job. If I'm not at the station, it'll be easier to keep our relationship to ourselves."

Jim pounded his fist into the back of the sofa. "No way, Chief. I don't want us to have to make those kinds of sacrifices. You know the crazy hours I work. If you're not on the job with me, we'll hardly ever see each other. And you do good work down at the station. You're an asset to the department. And anybody who can't see that is an asshole."

"He's right, Sandburg. As much as I may hesitate to admit it. We could definitely use your help. I'll understand if you decide it's easier not to bother with it. But I'd hate to lose you."

Blair looked stunned. "And just when I think this day has reached maximum freakishness. Simon Banks wants me down at the station."

"Yeah, well," Simon grumbled and Blair couldn't help grinning. "Anyway...I've been holding your credentials for you while you were gone...yeah, I kind of had a feeling we'd be in this situation at some point. You're welcome down at the station whenever you want to come back. If that's what you decide. Either way, I'll understand. Look, Blair, Jim, I know it's going to be hard at times, but the department does have an official equal opportunity policy and serious sanctions against any sort of harassment. You'll have my full support. I won't hesitate to enforce the rules to the full extent of my authority."

Jim's face was deadly serious. "You know we appreciate that, Simon. But as much as I want Blair with me, the anti-harassment policy isn't going to do us much good if we're in the middle of a shoot-out and some asshole guns down Blair and claims it was all just an accident, a case of friendly fire."

"Or they could do the same thing to you," Blair insisted. "We don't know how people are going to
react. Some of them may blame me. But others might take it out on you since you're the cop, one of them, and you're breaking their code."

"I'd like to think it wouldn't come to homicide."

"So, would I, Simon," Jim said. "But we both know it could very well get dangerous. At least I'm a cop. And a Sentinel. I'd have a pretty good chance of hearing them coming. But I don't like the idea of what might happen to Blair when I'm not around to watch his back."

"How often is that, big guy?"

"It happens, Blair. I don't want to take any chances."

"The two of you do have friends. You wouldn't be alone. There would be other people to back you up."

"I don't know," Jim hesitated.

"We're not going to come out right away, big guy. I'd like to come back to work with you, at least until we're ready to tell people. Then we can see how it goes and take it from there. If it gets bad, then I can always quit."

Jim set his jaw. "Then we'll quit."

"Jim--" Simon protested.

"No, Simon. Blair's my partner and my guide. I can't be anywhere he's not welcome."

"But big guy--"

"No, Blair. My mind's made up."

"You love your job. It's what you were made to do."

"That's one way of looking at it. The way I see it I love you. That's what I was made to do. If I can't do that and still be on the force, then it just wasn't meant for me to be a cop. There are plenty of other things I can do. But you...there's only one you."

Blair just held Jim's hand, blinking back tears, unable to say anything.

"So you'll try it," Simon said. "And I'll do everything I can to make it work. I wouldn't want to lose either one of you. All right then, enough of that for now. Who's starving besides me? Let's go out for breakfast and celebrate. Jim and Blair are together again. Molly's safe and sound, and reunited with her family. I'll be getting a much less grouchy detective at his desk on Monday morning. Life's pretty good."

Molly smiled brightly. "That's a great idea. I'll go and change."

Ten minutes later, they were on their way out of the apartment, Simon and Molly leading the way.

"So, Molly, how on earth were you so patient while you were trying to get these two back together? Didn't it just drive you crazy that they could be that dense?"

"It wasn't easy, I'm afraid. I thought it would be a week or two project at the most. Not four months. Every time I thought I'd made some headway, one of them would get stubborn. It was tough."
"Okay, guys. We get the point. We were a little hard-headed. Okay? We admit it. You can drop it now," Jim objected.

"Definitely stubborn. I hear you on that, Molly. I really hear you. All those months with Sandburg gone to Madagascar or Malaysia or wherever it was, I tried to talk to Jim about it. Tried to suggest that he could at least write Blair. Do you think he ever listened?"

"I'm guessing probably not."

"I'm glad to see you all are bonding here and everything, but do you think we could change the subject?" Blair asked.

"You got it, Molly. He never listened once. Sometimes it's just impossible to get something through that thick head of his."

"I found them both fairly obstinate."

"That's a very nice way of putting it."

"Well, they were unhappy. I thought it best to be gentle."

"That was probably the right approach. You never want to push someone who's already close to the edge."

Jim held up his hands. "Okay. Enough already. We admit it. We were stupid. You were right. You knew better than we did. Can we go eat now?"

Simon and Molly burst out laughing.

"Sure, Jim. We're ready anytime you are," Simon said innocently.

Jim shooed them out of the loft. "You know, I've always really regretted introducing the two of you. You coming, Chief?"

"Ready, big guy."

Jim slid an arm around his shoulders, pressing a kiss on him, whispering in his ear, "I love you, baby."

"I love you, too."

"Hey, are you guys gonna take all day?" Simon called from the elevator. "Cause Molly and I are hungry."

Blair rolled his eyes. "Coming, Simon."

He locked the door behind them, marveling over the prospect of Simon Banks taking them out to celebrate the start of this new development in their relationship. Extreme possibilities were just getting redefined by the minute.

The house spirits were feeling particularly playful this morning. Molly sighed, hiding her face in the crook of her arm, trying not to let them see her smile. It only encouraged them. Too late. They skittered around the room, jabbering busily, urging her to get up and quit wasting the day.

"Good morning to you, too," she said.
It was after ten, and Jim and Blair had gone into the station hours ago. She padded into the bathroom for a shower. The steamy spray made her smile as she climbed into the tub and reached for the shampoo. The new hot water heater certainly was an improvement--Jim's answer to her offer to move out and get her own apartment.

It's not like she'd ever really intended to stay, not after she'd helped get them back together. The whole time she'd been living in the spare room she'd been so conscious of Blair's absence, that the loft was the place he belonged. And now that her brothers were reunited, she wanted to give them the time and space necessary to unfold their relationship. She knew that love was its own deeply involving universe. She never wanted to get in its way. Not that she would have gone far. An apartment near the university, maybe. Or one of the dorms. Even Blair's old place.

But Jim would have none of it.

She'd insisted on going to look at Blair's old apartment anyway, thinking the easiest thing would be just to take over the lease from him. Jim's eyes had glazed over before they even got out of the truck.

"I don't like it," he said.

"You haven't seen it yet," Blair protested.

"This neighborhood isn't safe enough for Molly. Or for you either, for that matter, Chief. I'm just glad that I never knew you were living here. I would have...well, I would have come over here and dragged your butt back home. That's what I would have done."

Blair rubbed him arm comfortingly. "Take it easy, big guy. It's not a bad part of town, Molly. Really. Don't listen to him."

"It looks nice actually. Families and kids and dogs and stuff."


"Let's just go in and look around. Okay?" she said.

But the interior didn't convince him either.

"This door's not secure," he said, jiggling the lock. "And anybody could reach those windows from the ground. It's just a miracle no one broke in while you still lived here, Chief."

Blair rolled his eyes, and she couldn't help smiling.

"What? Did I say something funny?" Jim demanded.

"No, big guy, not at all," Blair said, kissing him on the cheek. "I love you."

"Yeah, well," he blushed, pulling Blair into his arms for a quick hug. "But this place still isn't safe enough."

"I'm going to go look around anyway. Okay, Jim?"

He just crossed his arms.

She wandered into the bedroom, empty now, all Blair's things returned to the loft. She tried to picture her life here, imagining new paint, pictures on the walls, plants, throw pillows, knickknacks. But something got in her way, and she had trouble seeing anything in it beyond the current emptiness.
The window looked out over a small park, and she gravitated toward it, staring out at the trees and benches and children playing. It was a nice view, and the sun streamed in, cheering up the room. Not so bad, she thought. Actually, I kind of like the idea of waking up to this view.

"This was always my favorite thing about the apartment," Blair said, joining her by the window.

"Yeah. It's really great. Especially seeing the little kids down there on the swings and the slides. They sound so happy."

He smiled. "I thought you'd like that. So what do you think of the rest of it?"

"It's nice. I like it."

"You could definitely do worse. Although it's not as...I don't know...warm as the loft somehow. That's what I always felt at least."

"That'll come in time, I think. After it's been lived in more."

"Maybe. I mean, you could definitely fix it up, make it more personal. Or then again, you could just come home with us. You know that's finally what's going to make everyone the happiest."

"I don't want to be in the way."

"You're not. You couldn't."

"Still--"

He put his hand on her back. "I want you there. I'm sure you haven't missed the fact that Jim wants you there. If this is about your independence, then I'll help you find a place where you'll really be comfortable and I won't let Jim pressure you about it. But if it's something you're doing for us, then don't. Because we'd much, much rather have you with us. We can work out the time alone thing and the privacy stuff and all the rest of it."

"I do want to stay. But there's a part of me that somehow doesn't feel like it would be the right thing to do. I don't know. Maybe it's just that I never really felt at home before. Maybe I don't know how to do it."

"Yeah, that seems to be a common problem in our family. But you could learn how to do it. Jim and I could help you with that."

She hesitated a moment. "I think I'd like that."

"Good."

He hugged her tightly.

"It can hard giving up that sense of not belonging," he whispered, "But it's really all right to let it go now, Molly. You do belong. You are home."

That broke her restraint, and she cried. She wasn't even quite sure why.

He rubbed her back in circles, making reassuring sounds. "Never forget that I love you. That we both love you."

And she cried harder. As much as her grandmother had cared for her, she could never recall being told she was loved. It felt too good to hear. It hurt like hell.
Jim hovered in the doorway, watching her cry, looking alarmed. "Chief?"

"Molly just decided that she'd rather stay at the loft with us."

Jim looked torn between being pleased and being worried.

"But that's a good thing, right Molly?" he asked, a little confused, a little uncertain.

She nodded her head vigorously.

He joined them by the window, resting a hand on her back, putting an arm around Blair. "Well, good then. How about we all go home now."

That had been three months ago.

She got dressed, made breakfast and took it out to the terrace, settling into a chair, propping her feet up on the railing. In those three months, she had learned a great deal about what home meant. She had found that home was many things, both simple and profound. Home was a moment like this, a quiet breakfast beneath the summer sky. Home was coming back from work, school, an evening out, a trip to the store and having someone ask you how it was. Home was fighting over the remote and waiting for the bathroom. It was lively conversation and companionable silence. It was being accountable to the people whose lives you shared. It was them worrying about you and you worrying about them. It was shared celebration, grief, annoyance, anger, pain, joy. Home was the safe base that gave you courage to venture out into the world. It was the one place you always wanted to return to.

Home went far beyond any geography. It was a serene sense of belonging you carried within you, a companion for wherever your journey might take you.

She finished her breakfast and took the dishes inside to wash them. The house spirits tumbled and frolicked around the kitchen, teasing and flattering her, at once sprightly and solicitous. They got a bit giddy at times, pleased with the way things had turned out, Blair's return to the loft, the generally sunny outlook of their three humans. They liked to show their appreciation, indulging her much as one might spoil a particularly well-loved pet.

As it had turned out, the details of living in the loft with Jim and Blair had been relatively easy. Relationships with family outside the loft had proven more problematical. Naomi had come for a visit in June, on her way to a retreat in Canada. The four of them had gone out to lunch. Blair had already broken the news to her about finding his sister and learning who his father was, as well as the change in his relationship with Jim. On both scores, she seemed to take the news with resignation, peppered with just a little denial. She wished Blair and Jim well but changed the subject when they tried to talk about anything remotely intimate between the two of them. She listened sadly to the news of her lover's long-ago death, but wasn't comfortable talking about him.

At the end of lunch, Molly had been glad she'd gotten to meet Naomi. She saw so much of her in Blair. And Naomi had been genuinely kind to her, asking her all sorts of questions about her studies and future plans, telling wild stories about her own travels, making them all laugh. Still, she had gone away with the uneasy feeling that Naomi would really have preferred never knowing who Blair's father was, and that made her sad.

The evening with Jim's father was even more strained. Mr. Ellison had invited them, along with Stephen, to dinner at his house. Jim and his father carefully navigated one another, trying not to set off any land mines between them. Stephen and Jim awkwardly worked at making conversation. She tried to get to know her other brother, wanting to answer his questions about their mother, but
realizing how deeply it pained William to hear. Blair and Jim concentrated on keeping their hands off each other, not yet ready to reveal their new relationship to Jim's family.

The air had grown thick with all the things no one dared say.

And William's reaction to her had brought out all Jim's protective instincts. When his father had met them at the door, he had stood there dumbstruck, staring, barely able to invite them in. All through dinner, he'd watched her, looking embarrassed whenever he caught her eye.

Jim did not like it a bit. He monitored them like a hawk, his jaw twitching at every glance. When William invited her into the study to look at childhood pictures of Jim and Stephen, he'd insisted on going with them and sat there like a piece of stone while they flipped through the pages of the album. He wasn't comfortable with William talking to Blair either, and every time they fell into conversation, he interrupted and pulled Blair away. Finally, she had to drag Jim off to the kitchen with her under the pretext of getting more wine.

"You have to stop that," she told him. "He's not going to hurt us."

He pulled a bottle of Chardonnay out of the refrigerator and searched the nearby drawers for the corkscrew.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, putting on his favorite blank expression.

"Yes, you do. He talks to me, you glare. He sits beside me, you hover. He looks at me, you grimace. He smiles at me, you scowl. And the same thing with Blair. If you held up a sign that said, 'Get away from them, you bastard!' you could not be more clear."

"So? I don't want him near you. Or Blair."

"I know. That's why I'm trying to tell you that he's not going to hurt us."

"I'd kill anyone who tried to."

She rubbed his arm comfortingly. "I know, big brother. But I need you to consider that this isn't really about me or Blair. Your father's curious about me, because I remind him of our mother. He's curious about Blair, because he senses the connection between the two of you. And you don't want him around us, because he hurt you as a child and you don't trust him. You perceive him as a threat. But he isn't, not anymore at least, not to you or us."

"He ruins everything he touches," Jim said very quietly. "I want to protect you both from that."

"Oh God, Jim," she said, reaching out for him. "Is that how you feel? Ruined? Because it's so not true. Your father may have driven parts of you underground. But it's all still in there, intact, good and honorable and loving. It's in the way you feel about Blair. It's in the way you look out for me. It's in the way your protect this city."

"I worry about being like him," he admitted in a shaky voice.

"I know you do. But you're not like him, Jim. You're a very good man and much, much wiser than he'll ever be. He certainly knows that, and he's a little in awe of you, actually. He's not the powerful one here anymore, Jim. Think about that when we go back in there. Really look at your father, not as his son, but as a detective. Notice how age has changed him, made him more vulnerable and sadder. Realize that he's not someone who can hurt you anymore. Or me. Or Blair. Or anybody."

He held her for a moment longer, before pulling back.
"I'll try," he said, his voice tight with emotion.

"Good."

"So you say he knows about me and Blair."

"Strongly suspects."

"Stephen too?"

"Yep."

He nodded. "Okay then."

Not that it was exactly carefree, but the evening did get better after that. Molly sat down beside William, and Jim only flinched slightly. He took a seat next to Blair, who was talking to Stephen, and reached out for his hand. No one but Blair looked shocked.

"Are you sure, Jim?" he whispered.

Jim nodded, smiled for the first time that night and put his arm around him. It was the most relaxed he'd been since they'd arrived. The rest of the evening passed in the safe shoals of small talk, the latest movies, interesting articles from the paper, Blair's anthropology adventures, Stephen's stock tips, even a joke or two from Jim. Everyone was terribly relieved.

At the end of the evening, they parted on basically amicable terms, William standing in the doorway, waving good-bye to them all. Walking to the truck, she suddenly remembered something she should have done.

"I forgot something. I'll be right back," she said and ran back to the house.

"Molly?" Mr. Ellison looked surprised.

"There was something I wanted to tell you."

"What is it?"

"She forgave you."

It took a moment for her words to penetrate, and then his mouth tightened with emotion. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"Thank you," he said, his voice breaking. "I'm sorry. It's just...oh, God."

She put her hand on his arm. "It's okay."

"You look just like her, you know."

She smiled. "I kind of figured."

"I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable. I just...I couldn't get over the resemblance. I know it bothered Jimmy. I'm sorry about that. You'll tell him, won't you? Tell him I'm sorry."

"Sure."
"You take care of yourself, Molly. And Jimmy, too. You and Blair. You'll take care of him, won't you?"

"Of course."

"Good. That's good then. Maybe I'll see you again sometime. Maybe we could all do it again soon."

"I hope so."

"Thank you again, Molly."

"You're welcome, Mr. Ellison. Bye."

In the truck, Jim wouldn't look at her.

"You were listening," she said.

"He doesn't deserve forgiveness."

"Maybe not yours. There are some things that are simply unforgivable. Maybe he didn't even deserve her forgiveness. I don't know. But the truth is that she did forgive him. And I just felt he had a right to know that."

"Are you okay, man?" Blair asked softly.

He shook his head. "I don't know what to do with all this."

"We'll work on it," Blair said.

"How could she forgive him, Molly?"

"I don't know, Jim. She just did. Forgiveness is like that. It just steals over you sometimes, even when you're not trying for it."

"Why do I have the feeling that's never going to happen to me?"

"Hey man, you never know," Blair said. "You really never know."

Jim regarded him with a skeptical look, but he didn't say anything more.

Since then, they'd gotten together a few more times, and each occasion had gone a little more easily than the last. She and Stephen were working on becoming friends. They had a standing symphony date with each other, every third Tuesday. They went to Jags games and movies and dinner. They liked each other.

Jim and his father had reached a truce of sorts. Mr. Ellison had grown used to how much Molly reminded him of her mother, and that made things easier. He was always extremely respectful to Blair, and that also helped. Forgiveness did not seem to be looming on the horizon, but they could at least be in the same room together without casualties. And that was progress.

Molly gathered up her school books and loaded them into her backpack. She had an afternoon class and needed to swing by the library beforehand. She cast a backwards glance at the loft on her way out, focusing her sight, looking for all the beautiful colors of the love expressed there. She had thought it intense before, but now there was no comparison. It had built to a wild swell, filling every corner of the apartment. And the bonds encircled her too now, blanketing her in the security of familial love. And that gave her the warmest, most cherished feeling she'd ever had.
She locked the door and waited for the elevator. The strange connection they'd shared on the roof that night had not returned, even though Blair had made them do test after test to see if they could reestablish it, until even she was tired of it, not to mention how cranky it made Jim. The most that could be said was that she had a sixth sense about when her brothers needed time alone. She just seemed to know when it was a good idea to study a little longer at the library or go shopping before heading home. So far, she'd managed not to walk in on anything too terribly intimate. Although there was that incident with the food fight in the kitchen one afternoon when they came home early and she hadn't been paying careful enough attention to her intuition. Fortunately, a gal could always close her eyes and pretend to have seen absolutely nothing.

She supposed it wasn't especially surprising that they hadn't been able to mindlink again. The prophecy had said it would come to them in their times of greatest need, and this epoch in their lives had been thankfully calm.

She was very grateful for that. It had given her time feel settled, in a way she would never have imagined possible. It was as if she had traveled deep within herself to find the bedrock of her spirit and had begun building a new life there, on that solid foundation. Still, a feeling came over her every now and then, a certain sort of restlessness, a curiosity. She had been looking for herself and her family and a home for most of her life. Now that she'd found those things, she felt secure enough to wonder what lay beyond, what was out there in the wild world, what adventure, what mysteries, what unimaginable knowledge. She knew enough of herself to understand that although her journey began in Cascade with her brothers and the sense of home they held for her it would not end there. There were many places to see. There were many things to do. There were so many things yet to know.

She stepped out into the strong golden light of the summer afternoon and smiled.

(The end)

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