Summary

When Blair starts dating the local FBI chief, Jim's feelings start to come into focus. Sentinel and guide must figure out what they really want from each other.

Waiting in Vain

by Myrna

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Jim felt the rush of air as the door to the squad room flew open some fifty feet away. He was expecting Blair any minute and had been for the last fifteen, but he usually sensed his guide before he got to the door. Jim smirked at the well-dressed man making a bee line for Simon's office--Daniel Graves, Director of Seattle's FBI office and general thorn in the sides of Cascade's Police Department. Jim wondered if they were being warned off or invited in. Given Graves' territorial nature the former was much more likely, so Jim was surprised when Simon barked his name and motioned for him to join them.

Jim nodded at the Director, offering his hand, and flashing Simon a questioning look. "What's up, Captain?" he asked, sprawling in one of Simon's chairs because he knew it would annoy the rigidly postured Graves. Hmm, Sandburg's influence no doubt. The kid took pride in his ability to rattle both Jim and Simon, no matter how sheepish and innocent he tried to look after the fact.
Simon went on to explain a sting operation the FBI was setting up to catch Russian smugglers at the coast. True to form, they weren't really being asked to join the investigation. Graves simply wanted one of his operatives arrested in high profile, prime time so he could set up a cover. Jim knew he'd be no more than a performing seal for the news cameras, but he agreed with a careless shrug, then sat forward in his chair while Graves explained how the arrest would go down.

They were just finishing when Blair showed up. Jim didn't need the abilities of a Sentinel to read Graves' doubletake. Blair sauntered in to the squad room, tossing a wave toward Jim, but pausing to flirt with Jennie at the front desk. Graves cast a cursory glance toward the door, turned back to Simon, then almost immediately swung his head to look again. Jim watched his pupils flare and was shocked at the increase in temperature he sensed from the composed Fed. "Who's that?" Graves asked, seemingly unaware he was still staring.

Lifting his chin to motion Blair over, Jim bit back a grin. "My partner, Blair Sandburg," he said, then turned to Blair. "This is Daniel Graves. Director of Seattle's FBI office."

Blair's eyes widened with impressed interest. "Nice to meet you," he said with a genial smile, and if he noticed that Graves shook his hand far longer than Miss Manners would deem appropriate, he didn't show it. He turned to Jim and said, "You being warned off again?"

"Nope," Jim said, "Believe it or not, they're inviting me to the party."

"If Director Graves wasn't standing here, I'd come down on the side of *not, *" Blair impudently offered, then grinned up at Graves. "He telling the truth and nothing but the truth?"

"It's Daniel. And even the FBI resorts to extreme measures when the situation calls for it." He was inordinately pleased when Blair laughed. "You seem young for a homicide detective," Graves said, clearly asking for an explanation.

Blair shrugged good-naturedly. "I'm a special consultant," he said, and would have explained further, but Jim interrupted. "Yeah, and forty-five minutes late. Come on, Chief. Bainbridge is waiting for our deposition in the Henley case."

"Sorry about that," Blair said, but offered no excuse. "Nice to meet you," he said to Graves and followed Jim down to the District Attorney's office.

Two hours later, Jim was starved. He and Blair were headed back for the squad room to pick up his keys and call it a night. Bainbridge conducted his depositions like he was presenting in front of the Supreme Court, and now Jim's back was knotted with tension. Oblivious, Blair bounced along beside him, jabbering about a paper he'd read on a Sentinel found in the African rain forest who could predict weather patterns by sensing barometric pressure too slight for instruments to detect. He wanted to run some tests later, to which Jim grunted noncommittally. He sat at his desk and shut down his computer, checked for messages, and grabbed his car keys then headed for the door.

Graves was lurking by the elevator, pacing in a small circle. He looked up and smiled at Blair. "Oh, hey, Blair! There you are. Can I see you for a minute?"

Blair nodded and walked over, leaving Jim to press the button for the elevator and concentrate on anything and everything else to keep from overhearing. Thankfully, there was no wait for the elevator. He rode down to the parking garage and sat in the truck waiting for his guide to come down. There was an extra spring in Blair's step as he bounded to the car, hopping in and slamming the door. "Oops, sorry," he said and grinned apologetically.

"What was that about?" Jim asked, pulling out of the garage.
Blair's eyebrows lifted hungrily. "*That* was about dinner and a movie," he answered. "You're on your own for KP tomorrow."

"You're going *out* with him?" Jim asked, incredulously.

"Hell yes, I'm going out with him," Blair said, cocking an eyebrow at Jim's surprise. "Why wouldn't I? He's got killer good looks, a great job, he's...."

"He's old enough to be your father," Jim threw in.

"I have no clue how old my father is," Blair said loftily. "You're not pinning a father fixation on me!"

Jim winced and glanced over to see if he'd hit a nerve, but Blair just grinned at him and shrugged in that careless way of his. Jim still wasn't always sure when it was an act and when it wasn't.

"Jeez, Sandburg, Graves is so stodgy he makes Simon look like a Dead Head."

"Hey, how stodgy could he be to ask another guy out five minutes after meeting him? He's a fed, man--you know, has to be careful about this kind of thing. He's got balls! I like that."

"Remember that when you're using toothpicks to keep your eyes propped open," Jim muttered, and nearly ran a stop sign, prompting another raised eyebrow from Blair, who let the subject drop.

When they got home, Blair whipped up a quick batch of fajitas before retiring to his room to read, which was just as well. Jim was on edge, and the kid's buoyant mood was making him feel more and more dour.

He was jealous. They both knew it -- Blair's silence over his grumbling offered unneeded confirmation. He would have teased Jim about it, except that it was true. Jim swigged a beer and worked on the kink in his neck. So he was jealous. Another thing they both knew was that he wasn't going to do anything about it.

They'd been fairly honest with one another from the start. Blair told Jim he was gay before he moved in, assuming the macho cop would probably object and withdraw the invitation. Jim had merely shrugged and asked Blair what that had to do with anything. Later, once trust was firmly established, the Sentinel shyly described his own experimentation when he was younger. It was no come on--he'd framed the discussion with numerous reminders that it had been a long, long time ago, it was just a couple of kids messing around. Hell, he'd said, when he was in the army, it wasn't 'Don't ask, don't tell,' it was simply *don't.*

Blair had accepted Jim's words with the same casual shrug, which is not to say he didn't notice Jim checking out his ass every once in awhile or strategically placing himself at the far end of the living room when he got out of the shower. Which is not to say Blair left the bathroom door ajar by mistake.

Still, Jim had made it clear that the only thing he wanted from their relationship was a guide. And Blair had long ago trained himself to want only what was offered. Reaching for more only got your hand slapped and what you *did* have taken away. Wanting more always left you with *less,* so better to appreciate what he *could* have, than waste his time wishing for everything he couldn't.

But he knew Jim was jealous. And it made him happy. And if he spent the evening out in the living room with him, the big man would know it too, and that wouldn't work. So he sat cross-legged on his bed in his small, ill-lit room, and grinned to himself, and daydreamed about something he could never have, but seemed, for the very first time, hauntingly within his grasp.
Daniel Graves nervously adjusted his tie for the hundredth time and took another sip of water. He'd been 15 minutes early to the restaurant and now that it was two minutes past seven, he was sure the kid wouldn't show. Christ, what had he been thinking? He was *never* that forward. There was nothing to suggest to him that Blair was gay, except the absolutely overwhelming physical response his body felt the first time he saw the beautiful young man. Graves was a solid, realistic man, who rolled his eyes at tales of love at first sight and scoffed at his friends who tried to recapture their youth by dating younger and ever younger men. He'd never been with a man so much as five years his junior and Blair was 18 years younger than he--a lifetime spread between them. He'd looked up the young man in the Bureau computer-- another first, using Bureau technology to research a prospective date. Jesus, mid-life crisis anyone?

It wasn't just the age difference. Blair was nothing like the kind of man he generally found himself attracted to. He wasn't tall or blond. He wasn't handsome in a conventional sense. He didn't appear to be *anything* in a conventional sense, but he was stunning. And hell, hair could be cut, couldn't it? Graves smiled to himself, but the smile faded when he checked his watch. Four minutes after. Shit, he wasn't coming. Who was he fooling? A young kid like that...Why had Blair even said yes if he wasn't going to show? Kids today, no fucking respect, that's the problem. Think it's easier to appease you than just coming out with it and saying....

"Hey, Daniel, waiting long?" Blair called, drifting to the table.

Daniel's breath caught in his throat. God, he was more beautiful than he remembered. The black, curly hair looked shiny and clean against his shoulders. He was wearing a white, collarless shirt that buttoned down the front and a black blazer over a well worn pair of blue jeans. His dark sunglasses made him seem exotic or famous. Or both. Daniel's heart fluttered first at the sight of those luscious lips, then again, when Blair removed his glasses to reveal those mesmerizing blue eyes.

Daniel knew he was grinning like a fool, but there was nothing he could do about it. He jumped up and said, "Not long at all." He was pleased and a little surprised that his voice sounded so calm. He held out his hand and when Blair took it, and had to exercise an enormous amount of restraint to keep from pulling him in for a kiss.

"I'm glad you're here," he said in a low voice.

Blair smiled. "Me too," he said, taking his seat. "Whoa, man, you almost went for it!* he thought happily.

"I ordered us a chardonnay," Daniel said. "Is that okay."

"Great," Blair said amiably. "I've never been here. What's good?"

"Hmm, let's see, you strike me as a tree-hugging vegetarian, am I right?"

Blair laughed. "Well, I've been known to hug a tree or two, but I've also been known to devour a steak when the opportunity presents itself."

"The opportunity presents itself," Daniel said gallantly. "I recommend the prime rib."

Looking up, Blair fixed the older man with a saucy glare. "You're not trying to obligate me in any way, are you?" he asked with mock suspicion.

Daniel grinned, but said nothing as the waiter arrived with their bottle of wine. He presented the label to Daniel who nodded absently. Daniel swirled the wine in his glass and took a sip and nodded that it met his expectations. He held his glass to Blair and said, "To obligations."
Blair chuckled and toasted Daniel's glass, taking a drink, then leaning back in his chair to study the older man. He was really handsome, more so than most feds, who seemed to cultivate an every-man kind of appearance. Daniel Graves was tall, with dark hair starting to gray a little. He filled out a suit without any trouble, and Blair imagined him, in the spirit of all good law enforcement officials, to be well muscled under his starched white shirt. With any luck, he wouldn't have to use his imagination for long.

"So, Blair Sandburg, mild mannered graduate student one day, special consultant to the Cascade police department the next. Not the usual career path is it?"

Blair sat up and leaned forward. "You checked me out!" he said, smiling in a way that told Daniel he didn't mind. If anything, he seemed pleased.

"I'm only so brave," Daniel admitted, leaning forward as well. "After I asked you out, I suddenly had visions of your working part time for Hard Copy or Current Affair. 'Tonight on Hard Copy, Sexually Deviant FBI Officers! I needed to reassure myself I wasn't headed for the nightly news."

"Are you reassured?"

"Intrigued," Daniel admitted. "What is it you do, exactly?"

"When I'm a mild mannered graduate student?" Blair innocently qualified. "Oh, you know, read, study, teach intro courses, research shit so tenured professors can get famous off my blood, sweat and tears. You know, the usual."

"How about when you're a special consultant?"

"I consult," Blair said with a shrug. "Come on, man. It's the Cascade police department. Anything is going to seem lame next to running an entire section of the FBI!"

It was Daniel's turn to laugh. "Oh yeah, the imminent danger of a paper cut, the drive and determination necessary to stay awake through endless case meetings. The challenges are endless." They shared a smile, then Daniel tried a different track. "Jim Ellison has one of the highest conviction rates I've ever seen. It nearly doubled after you joined the department. I've got to say, I'm interested in why. Hell, if I wasn't so turned on by the sight of you, I'd try to lure you over to the Bureau, but the anti-fraternization rules would get me fired."

Blair laughed at the man's ballsy flirtation and relaxed back in his seat. "It's nothing really. Anthropology is my field and I just use different techniques I study to help the officers--Jim in particular-- use the skills they've naturally cultivated to help solve crime. You know, how to hone in on observation techniques, crime scene detection, that kind of thing. It seems to work so Simon keeps me around even though I bug the crap out of him."

It was enough to satisfy Daniel's curiosity, and he turned to a different line of questioning. "And you live with Ellison? Doesn't that get a little....tight?"

"Sometimes," Blair admitted with a shrug. "But I get on his nerves more than he gets on mine, so it's no big deal." They laughed, but the way Daniel looked at him made Blair continue. "Actually, my place kind of blew up. Bunch of drug dealers were mixing drugs at one end of the joint, and the place went up in flames. I think Jim kind of thought it was going to be a temporary thing, but, you know, things just kind of gelled...."

"It doesn't bother him that you're gay?" Daniel asked, his tone saying he wouldn't believe it if Blair said no, but he did.
"He doesn't care. Why would he?"

"Mm, there's the eternal question. Why would anybody, but so many seem to. He just strikes me as one of those relentlessly straight poster boys."

Blair laughed at the image. "Jim's cool," he said with a shrug and let it drop.

They passed the rest of the evening in pleasant conversation. Blair did most of the talking, which he didn't realize until they were drinking coffee over dessert. He was telling Daniel about a tribe of African pygmies and the primitive culture still in tact after some 2,000 years when he realized he'd been talking non-stop for at least 20 minutes. "Jeez, Daniel, sorry. I get going on this stuff, and I can't seem to shut up."

Daniel shook his head, the barest hint of a smile playing at his lips. "I'm enjoying it," he said. "I'm enjoying you. I have a feeling I could sit here and listen to you recite the Cascade phone book and pretty much have the time of my life."

"That takes away the pressure to be brilliant and charming," Blair said impishly.

"At conversation anyway," Daniel said and smiled when Blair Sandburg had the good sense to blush.

Blair was as quiet as possible when he returned to the loft, but for once, it was unnecessary. Jim was up and watching an old movie on TV. "Way past your bedtime, isn't it?" Blair asked, flopping on the couch next to the cop.

Jim took in the odor of an entirely different soap and shampoo than he'd smelled earlier in the evening. "Graves hose you down before sending you home?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Blair laughed. "How many times have I told you not to smell me when I come home from a date?"

"Hardly need to anymore," Jim said wryly. "Pretty much a foregone conclusion, isn't it?"

"Are you saying I'm easy?" Blair asked with mock indignation.

"I would, but you'd take it as a compliment," Jim said, smirking when Blair laughed.

"I'm beat, Big Man," Blair said with a yawn. "See you in the morning."

"Right. G'night." Jim watched Blair walk back to his bedroom and shut the door, whistling under his breath as he undressed for bed. Jim heard him crawl under the covers before putting anything else on and realized with a flash of arousal that he'd gone to bed nude. He wondered if it was by design, if Blair knew he would listen in after he closed his bedroom door. Jim squirmed uncomfortably, annoyed at his growing erection and disturbed that Blair seemed to enjoy his date with Daniel Graves.

"Hey, Jim?" Blair called from behind his closed bedroom door.

Jim jumped and pushed away the passing notion that the kid was going to call out an invitation to join him. "What?"

"I was thinking maybe we could go camping this weekend. It's supposed to rain--we can check out your weather radar."
"Oh yeah, Sandburg, that sounds great!" Jim drawled, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Come on, man, this could be something really cool!"

Jim imagined Blair lying on his back, hands behind his head, grinning in the darkness. Jim grinned himself, knowing he'd give in eventually. "It's one thing not to have the good sense to get out of the rain, it's another to willingly head out in it."

Blair laughed. "You start pulling down millions as some brilliant psychic and you'll be singing a different tune."

"I'm holding my breath out here," Jim replied, flipping off the television and heading upstairs. As he went, he thought to himself, *But you have no idea for what.*

Daniel forced himself to wait until Thursday before he called Blair. The grad student had openly explained he wasn't looking to settle down any time soon and that he'd be seeing other people. Daniel assumed that, like hair cuts, minds could also be changed. He smiled to himself. He might be willing to change his own mind where hair cuts were concerned. Something about playing in all that thick, beautiful hair, the way it framed Blair's sweaty face as they laid together in his bed. God, he wished Blair had stayed the night. The only thing sweeter than falling asleep with that angel in his arms would have been waking up to him.

Jim answered the phone and shouted for 'Sandburg' to pick up the extension and Daniel was instantly put off at the tone he used with Blair. He'd have to do a little more digging with the kid to make sure he was happy living with Ellison. "This is Blair," came a voice that sounded jovial enough.

"Blair? It's Daniel. How are you?"

"Great, Daniel, how's it going?"

"Fine, fine. Although it'll be going even better if you tell me you're free for dinner tomorrow night."

Blair laughed. "Ah, man, sorry, but I'm not...."

"Saturday, then?" Daniel said and could have kicked himself for sounding so desperate, so needy.

"No, Jim and I are going camping for the weekend," Blair explained. "I've got a bunch of deadlines all week, too. How about next Thursday?"

"A whole week?" Daniel said, but made sure his tone was light enough for Blair to assume he was joking.

"Hey, I'm a popular guy," Blair said. "My treat this time. You like Indian food?"

"Make it Italian and you've got a date," Daniel said.

"Cool," answered Blair. "I'll call you with the restaurant later. See you!"

Daniel rung off, feeling disconcerted at Blair's take-it-or-leave-it attitude. He hadn't even mentioned their intimate encounter, sex so hot, Daniel could barely think about it without breaking into a sweat. It was the most intense love-making he'd ever experienced, and he couldn't believe--*wouldn't* believe--it was any less so for Blair, whom he assumed was far less experienced than he.
Oh well, there was nothing wrong with starting off slow, was there? The kid was young and no doubt overwhelmed by the gathering intensity of their connection.

It was the first time Jim ever checked weather reports to make sure it *would* rain on a camping trip. Blair pretty much ignored his grumbling, having finally learned the distinction between true discontent and feigned annoyance.

Jim glanced at the kid in the passenger seat. They'd been wrestling with the radio all morning and a truce had been arranged where they listened to a tape of Jim's, then one of Blair's, one of Jim's, one of Blair's. Each of them had veto power over one selection, though Jim had used his three times already. "So, Graves heartbroken you weren't available this weekend?"

"Devastated," Blair said with a wicked grin. "Always leave 'em wanting more, that's my motto."

*Leave them before they kick you out, before they don't want you anymore, before affection becomes disinterest and disinterest becomes annoyance and annoyance becomes something far more ugly.* Years of practice kept Blair's true feelings from showing in his face, but he gave his head a brief shake to clear out the depressing thoughts.

"Yeah, well, it oughta be something about not jumping in the sack at the first invitation."

"Oh right," Blair laughed. "You're a picture of restraint over there."

"Lately I'm a picture of blue balls," Jim complained.

"Andrea Kauffman has done everything but hog tie you to the roof of her car. If you just want a quick lay...."

Jim smirked at the suggestion. "Hell, Sandburg, if I just wanted a quick lay, I'd take *you* out on a date."

Blair laughed again. "You should be so lucky, Big Man," he said, as if the remark hadn't pierced through him like a knife in his gut.

Sometimes Blair wondered why in the hell he'd ever let Jim in under his guard. It was much easier not caring what anyone thought of you.

Anyway, what did *Jim* care if he wanted to grab some comfort in the darkness and slink away before the light of morning? What's wrong with pretending, for a minute or two, that you were safe and protected, the someone loved you? He had no illusions that it would last, or even that it was true. And if he made up in quantity what he lacked in quality, what did it matter to Jim?

Blair shrugged to himself and willed away the sudden onslaught of pictures in his mind, like snapshots visible by a strobe light overhead. Memories being shaken by his shoulders by someone so much bigger, so much angrier than he could ever be.

God he hated it when that happened, when the memories surfaced without warning. *Forget!* he reminded himself.

Blair rolled his eyes at himself and pushed away the introspection. *Think of it this way,* he said to himself. *Maybe if Jim can joke about something so totally impossible, it's not so impossible after all.* That thought eclipsed his morose reflection and made him smile once again.
Blair had borrowed some of the portable weather radars and barometers from the university, and while Jim set up camp, he set up the machines. He'd been given a crash course in weather prediction by one of the grad students in meteorology and he kept referring back to his notes.

Gathering firewood several yards away, Jim surreptitiously watched his guide as he looked from notebook to sky to barometer to notebook again. He grinned and shook his head at Blair's obvious excitement. That kid could make a trip to the dentist seem like some fantastic learning experience.

He couldn't believe he'd made that crack about taking him out on a date. His first thought after he'd said it hadn't been disbelief so much as concern that he might have hurt the kid's feelings, but Blair just laughed it off.

On the subject of disbelief, Jim was stunned at how pissed he'd felt when he picked up the phone and heard Daniel Graves on the line. The guy rankled him for some reason. He'd never really taken much notice of the men in Blair's life—there was never any reason to. They'd only be around for a few weeks anyway, so what was the point. Why, then, did Graves concern him? There was no reason to suspect that he'd last any longer than the others, was there?

Was there?

He brought the pile of firewood back to where Blair was setting up and let it fall to the ground. Blair looked up from his preparations. "Okay, Jim, here's what's going to happen. I've got two timers here, one attached to these machines and one I'll take with us when we hike down to the lake. We'll have you focus in and every time you feel a change in air pressure or temperature or wind direction, anything like that, I'll record what time it happened. Then, when we get back home, I'll be able to compare the readings from the machines and the readings from you. See which one of you comes out on top."

"Ah, the classic battle between man and machine," Jim said. "I feel like Paul Bunyon."

"You mean John Henry," Blair corrected, motioning Jim down the path toward the lake.

"No, I mean Paul Bunyon, the guy who built railroads and won the contest against...."

"That was John Henry. Paul Bunyon traveled around with his blue ox Babe and made the Great Lakes."

Jim took a breath and opened his mouth to speak, but Blair beat him to it. "Not a word, Ellison," he warned darkly. "Not one word."


Blair settled comfortably on a rock with Jim standing a few feet in front of him. He deftly worked the older man into a state of focused concentration, making sure Jim turned down his sense of hearing should a clap of thunder surprise them.

Eyes closed, head back, Jim sniffed the air, allowing the brush of wind to caress his skin. Periodically, he'd quietly inform Blair when he felt a change in pressure. Usually he felt it in his ears or across the bridge of his nose. He was concentrating so hard he nearly jumped out of his skin when cold raindrops began falling from the sky.

Blair grinned at him. "Afraid you're going to melt?" he asked when Jim grimaced and looked up at the imposing clouds.

Jim's reply was lost when the sky opened up and began to rain in earnest. Blair laughed, tilting his
head back and letting the water drench him. Ever the more practical, Jim nudged him off the rock and up toward the path. The cover of trees shielded them from a lot of the rain, but there was a 200 yard clearing that led up to the camp, and they started to run through the mud.

Jim, just a foot behind Blair, tripped on a half-buried root and slammed into Blair. Both of them fell to the muddy ground, Blair face first in the mud and Jim on top of Blair.

"Shit!" Blair called, pushing Jim off him. He looked down at himself and started to laugh. "Oh man, next time you go flying leave me out of it!"

Jim laughed too. "Sorry, Chief," he said, looking anything but.

"Yeah, right!" Blair scoffed, wiping is mud soaked hands down the front of Jim's shirt.

"Real nice, Sandburg!" Jim said, pushing Blair back in the muck.

"Hey, come on! It's not like I did-this-or anything!" Blair said, giving Jim's cheeks a little pat, leaving behind two perfect impressions of his hands on the man's face.

"Sandburg, you're a dead man!" Jim hollered, watching Blair take off at a dead run.

"You have to catch me first!" Blair called over his shoulder, making a bee line for Jim's truck. He crouched around the back end, warily circling toward the front.

"You get in my truck and you won't be able to guide your way out of a paper bag!" Jim said warningly. "Ever."

Blair grinned tauntingly. "Might be worth it to see what happens to Cascade's most *anal* anal retentive when his precious car seats get muddy."

"You wouldn't dare," Jim said, eyes narrowing with comic challenge.

Blair reached for the handle. "I wouldn't? To see you cry like a baby, I'd go to a hell of a lot more trouble than *this!*"

Jim pointed threateningly at the younger man. "Blair Sandburg, you get in that car with those clothes on and the *little* bit of time you have left on this earth will be sheer torture!"

Laughing, Blair's eyes widened in understanding. "Well, hell, Jim, if *that's* the only problem," he said, eyes shining with mischief, "I can take care of that right now!" He pulled his T-shirt off over his head and made a show of undoing the buttons on his jeans and wiggling out of them, until he was standing there in his briefs. He slipped his hands under the waist band and worked his hips as if the briefs were coming off next.

"I'd rather have you crawl in there in those clothes than rub your naked ass all over my seats!" Jim said, holding a hand out to stave off any further disrobement.

Blair laughed. "Hmm, decisions, decisions," he mused.

Jim took advantage of the momentary pause to make a grab for the kid. With a playful shout, he rushed the grad student, sweeping him into a bear hug from behind. Blair was laughing too hard to put up much of a struggle. Jim effortlessly tossed him into his tent. "Put on some clothes, you little pervert!" Jim ordered.

"Now who's the spoilsport?" Blair called, hearing only Jim's laughter in response.
Blair wiped himself down with a towel and pulled on clean clothes, chuckling to himself the whole time. The rain slacked off by then, and he walked over to Jim's tent. The detective, already in a dry pair of pants, hadn't gotten around to putting on a shirt. Blair bit his lip at the sight of the expansive chest, but said nothing as Jim held a towel to his freshly cleaned face. "What are you going to tell the University about all that expensive equipment getting drenched out there?" Jim asked.

Blair laughed. "Believe it or not, most of the stuff designed to measure rainstorms is actually waterproof."

Jim smirked and shook his head. "Always the smart ass, Sandburg."

"You're just such an easy target," Blair teased.

"One of these days, someone's going to teach you a lesson," Jim jokingly warned.

Blair opened his blue eyes wide, scrutinizing the Sentinel with a look so lush, Jim felt it on his skin. "You volunteering for the job?" he asked.

"Might be worth it to shut you up for a moment or two."

Blair licked his lower lip and said, "And how would you go about *that,* Big Man?"

For a brief moment, something short circuited in Jim's brain. He saw a flash of light and felt as if some giant hand was on his shoulder pushing him at his guide. Before he knew it, Jim suddenly grabbed Blair and yanked him in, covering his mouth and kissing him hard enough to draw blood. For a long moment, Blair was shocked into stillness, until his brain finally managed to process this information. This was *Jim* embracing him! Kissing him! Holding him so tight he had to be leaving marks on his arms. Holy fucking shit, this was Jim! Blair opened his mouth and threw his arms around the older man, but his response brought Jim to his senses.

"Shit!" Jim muttered, shoving Blair off of him. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

Breathing hard, Blair shrugged. "Why not?" he asked curiously, reaching over to caress an erect nipple.

Jim backed away. "Come on, Sandburg, don't."

"Why?" Blair asked again, advancing on Jim, who kept walking backward until he was against the tent wall. "I know you want it, Jim--I see the way you look at me. God *knows,* you see how I look at you. We both want it. Let's go for it!"

Jim sighed. "It's not that easy, and you know it. Forget it. It's not going to happen."

But Blair was not going to abandon this most golden opportunity. He ran his hands over Jim's shoulders, down his arms, and up his side. "Just one night then," he whispered seductively. "Come on, Jim. One night of non-stop, hotter than hell, no holes barred sex in the great outdoors. No commitments, no promises. One night."

"No," Jim said simply.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Blair sighed and stepped back. "Come *on,* man! I'd think a guy raised in the age of free love would be more than open to a night of soulless fucking."

Jim replied, "And I'd think a guy raised in the age of AIDS wouldn't."
Blair winced. "Ouch. All right, then. I guess that's game, set and match to the big man." He started out of the tent

The detective reached for Blair's arm. "Wait a second, I didn't mean anything."

Blair stopped and turned, looking up into Jim's blue eyes. "It's no big deal, Jim," he said, his voice soft with conviction.

"Well see, that's where we disagree," Jim said, eyes flashing up behind Blair's head, then down at the ground, then at some point over the younger man's shoulder.

Blair shook his head and shrugged again. He knew from Jim's tone there'd be no budging the man. At least not tonight. He concentrated to keep the victorious grin from his face. *I may not have you tonight, but it won't be long now,* he thought wickedly. "You think about it some more, Big Man," he said cockily and opened the flap of the tent. "It's quite an offer--no promises, no strings, no commitment..."

"Blair!" Jim's angry voice made Blair stop yet again, and look at the older man over his shoulder. Even in the darkened tent, Blair could see the flush of anger on his cheeks. "That is *not* a selling point with me!" he said, eyes blazing.

Blair blinked hard, surprised at the sentiment as well as the vehemence in Jim's voice. When he spoke, his own voice was soft, hesitant--like a child just reprimanded, but not quite sure of his crime. "Yeah, Jim. Sure. Okay," he said, and walked slowly to his own tent. Not quite so victorious anymore. Not so elated. In fact, the only thing he felt at all was confused.

The next day, Jim was quiet, but Blair was utterly, completely himself. Setting up for more tests, following Jim in the search for dry firewood, hiking up into the hills, he blathered on about pygmies and different South American tribes, a research grant he was trying to get, and an article he'd recently read by a researcher in New Guinea. Jim started to wonder if the kid even *remembered* the night before. *Probably blocked it out,* Jim thought wryly. *Post traumatic stress. Shit, I should be so lucky. How can he walk around like nothing happened? Like I didn't grab him, shove my tongue in his mouth, hold him like I was never letting go? How can he stand there talking about New Guinea and research grants and fucking pygmies?*

But Jim didn't bring it up either. There wasn't anything left to say. Blair was willing, and he wasn't, and there was no reason to try to convince one of them to change his mind.

But would it kill the kid to look upset. Even a little?

The nearest either of them came to the subject was after dinner. They'd been sitting around the camp fire, throwing sticks into the flame and watching them burn. They'd had a busy day of hiking and tests. Jim's mind and body were pleasantly lulled by his guide's soft voice as he spoke of camping out in the jungle of Borneo. Jim felt his body temperature rise as Blair described setting up camp near a gentle waterfall that offered a lush and constant soundtrack, and how the smell of water and vegetation gave the air a crisp, clean odor that made you feel like you'd never taken a breath before.

Jim almost smiled. Blair was using the knowledge of Jim's senses to continue the seduction. Luring Jim away from himself with the enticing description of the senses overload found in the jungle. He was describing the crystal clear skies and seeing stars so plentiful, they seemed to swoop down upon
you if you looked at them for too long. Blair smiled fondly at the memory and said it reminded him of when he was a child, sleeping in the back yard and thinking, wishing, that maybe one of those stars would actually come close enough for him to touch.

Jim, his body tingling with arousal, had sighed in exasperation, throwing one last piece of kindling in the fire and standing with a huff. "You know, Sandburg. You're too clever a liar for your own good."

Blair watched him walk to his tent before turning back and grinning at the fire. Okay, so subtle he wasn't. He wondered how long it would take Jim to catch on to his little game. He couldn't say he was surprised at the big man's reaction. "Night, Jim," he said amicably, then retired for the night himself.

Blair had decided he wouldn't put any pressure on the big man. Not yet, anyway. He wasn't going to make a fool out of himself by chasing a man who was still pretending he didn't want to be caught.

Even so, he found it hard to maintain much enthusiasm for the relationship with Daniel Graves. But he wasn't about to sit at home hoping Jim would change his mind, so he continued to see the Federal agent. Besides, Jim's jealousy--glaringly apparent now-- was an added bonus.

But soon, Daniel's neediness began to make up for the searing looks the Sentinel threw every time Blair left for or returned from a date. Daniel was starting to make more and more intrusive suggestions to Blair--everything from urging him to get a haircut to dressing better at school. He thought Blair should transfer to the more prestigious (not to mention expensive) private university closer to Daniel--and even offered to pay the difference in tuition. Now he was talking more and more about Blair moving in with him.

Blair knew it was time to end it. An old lover once described him as a stealth bomber, sneaking in for the attack, then gone before you ever knew what hit. He'd given Daniel six weeks--a good three weeks longer than most.

Now, lying in bed staring at the ceiling while Daniel ran his fingers through the hair on his chest, Blair had the sneaking suspicion that was three weeks longer than he should have. He rolled over and sat up, reaching for his briefs.

"Stay the night," Daniel coaxed, running his hand up and down Blair's back, which Blair found annoying.

"I can't," Blair said, leaning back to kiss Daniel one more time. But he did it more out of obligation than desire.

"You mean you won't," Daniel said.

"Whatever," Blair said with a shrug. He started out of the bed, but Daniel fastened on to his wrist and gripped it hard.

"Stay," he said again, more an order than a request. "No," Blair answered, his voice cold. "I've got meetings all morning at the University, and I don't really want to show up wearing the clothes I had on yesterday."

"I can fix that," Daniel said, releasing Blair's hand. He got out of bed and opened the closet, retrieving a box with a blue bow on the top. "Here, open it."
Still slightly peeved, Blair melted a little at the boyish excitement on Daniel's face. "Daniel, man, what's this?" he asked with more annoyance in his tone than he meant to reveal.

"Open it!" Daniel repeated.

With a sigh, Blair opened the box and looked at the pair of LL Bean khakis and light blue, button-down shirt. Not even close to his style. Blair tried his best to look pleased, but knew that looking too pleased would mean a closet full of this preppy shit. "Daniel, this is nice and all, but, you know....I don't want you buying me clothes."

At least not clothes like *this,* he thought uncharitably.

"No more excuses about having nothing to wear in the morning," Daniel pointed out.

Blair tossed the box on the bed and slid into his jeans. "I like waking up at my place," he said, pulling on his T-shirt and sweater. "Besides, Jim and I have some stuff to go over before the Henley trial."

Daniel flounced on the bed, bitterly sweeping the box to the floor. "Oh, well, if *Jim* needs you, far be it from me to interfere."

"Look, thanks for dinner," Blair said, picking up the box. "And the clothes." He motioned to the bed. "And for this. But I've gotta go."

"How about tomorrow then?" Daniel asked.

"Busy," Blair replied shortly. Daniel grabbed a pair of pants and put them on as he followed Blair down the stairs.

"Saturday."

"I'll call you," Blair said, looking for his car keys.

"You owe me a little more respect than this," Daniel said in a low voice. "I'm not some fucking trick you picked up on the corner of Wilshire and Vine."

"Oh for god's sake, lighten up!" Blair said.

"We've been going out for over a month now and you're still on fuck and run," complained the older man.

"What's wrong with that?" Blair asked, chin raised in defiance. "I never pretended I was after anything else. I told you how it was for me. You're the one who's off the mark here, not me."

"I care for you!" Graves said. "And I know you care for me, too! Why do we still have to keep up the charade of casual sex partners?"

"Can we talk about this later?" Blair asked, thinking *like maybe never?*

"Stay the night, and we can talk about it all you want over breakfast," Daniel said, eyes shining with desperation that made Blair's stomach hurt.

Blair's eyes softened. He didn't want to hurt the guy, but he couldn't make himself feel something he just didn't. "I've gotta go," he said quietly. "I'll call you later."

He picked his keys up off the kitchen table and headed for the door. Daniel took two steps toward
him, intending only to grab his arm to apologize, to say a proper good-bye. He knew he could be overbearing, and he didn't want Blair to go to bed angry, even if they were going to bed in different places.

But somehow, when he grabbed Blair's arm, the new clothes fell from the grad student's grasp, and as stopped to pick them up, Daniel's foot got in front of Blair's and suddenly the younger man went sprawling.

"Son of a bitch!" Blair yelled when his head connected with the coffee table. Jeez, that hurt!

Daniel was horrified. "Oh God, Blair! I didn't mean...Shit, it was an accident, Blair! It was an accident."

Crouched on the floor, Blair held his face in his hands waiting for the blinding pain to pass. Daniel was there, frantically trying to pry his hands away to get a better look. "I'm okay, leave me alone," Blair moaned.

"It was an accident!" Daniel whispered desperately. "I'd never hurt you, not for anything. I love you, Blair! I love you more than anything in the world, and I'd never, never hurt you!"

The pain abated enough that Blair could at least see straight. "Relax, Daniel. I know it's not your fault," Blair said, unnerved by the older man's admission. Maybe if he ignored it, it would just go away.

Daniel winced when Blair brought his face up, and he could see the spreading bruise on Blair's temple. "Christ, this looks bad Blair," he fretted. "Maybe we should go to the ER...."

"Yeah, why don't we life flight me over," Blair said sarcastically. "It's just a bump, Daniel. Man, you have *got* to calm down. You're all over the board, you know? Look, let's cool it for awhile, okay? Let everything fall back in perspective?"

"You think I did this on purpose, don't you?" Daniel whispered, his voice stark with hurt. His face was white, almost gray, his eyes wide with terror.

"No!" Blair insisted. "But you're blowing it way out of proportion. You're blowing *everything* out of proportion! I mean, I trip over my own feet and you're on the floor declaring some kind of stupid love for me? This is getting too weird, okay?"

Daniel's breath was coming in such ragged gasps, the older man thought for a moment he was going to pass out. The room swam dizzily in front of him and he felt a cry of despair at his lips. Several deep breaths later, he sat back on his haunches and managed to speak in a calm, measured tone. "You're right," he said slowly. "Maybe....maybe I have been a little...over the top lately. I just....I really, *really* care for you, Blair. And I guess I'm just a little anxious for you to realize you feel the same way about me. But I'll back up a bit, okay? Keep it in check until you're ready to talk about it. Okay?.....Okay?"

It wasn't. Not really. But Blair was tired, and the entire right side of his head was throbbing and more than anything in the world he wanted to be home in bed. "Yeah, Daniel, okay," he said quietly, averting his eyes from the consummate relief flooding the older man. Shit, this was getting out of hand. He had to end it and soon.

"Come on, now," Daniel said softly. "Stand up. Let me take a closer look at that bump." Blair let Daniel help him up and stood quietly while Daniel probed the injured area as gently as he could. "You shouldn't be driving, Blair. Sometimes a head injury doesn't look bad, but..."
Blair assumed Daniel was just trying to scam him into staying the night. "I'm all right," he muttered. Daniel still looked worried. "Are you dizzy or anything?"

"I'm fine," Blair said concentrating to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Call me when you get home, then," Daniel said, his hands still on Blair's shoulders. Blair groaned and pushed Daniel away. "Come on, man. You're being..."

"If you don't call, I'll call you," Daniel said warningly.

"Daniel, really, Jim's sleeping and he really hates it when..."

"Fuck him," Daniel said.

And Blair almost coughed with sudden laughter and thought, *I'm trying, man! I'm trying!* Daniel continued, "You go to sleep with a concussion and you don't wake up! I want you to call me when you get home. If I don't hear from you in 20 minutes, I'm picking up the phone!"

Blair rolled his eyes and sighed before going through the motions of kissing Daniel good-bye. He winced inwardly at the way Daniel held him so tightly.

When he finally made it to his car, he sat there for a moment, breathing hard and feeling sick. Part of him wished he could drive away and never look back. Not answer the phone until Daniel quit calling. Just pretend the whole thing never happened. Sometimes being a grown up really sucked.

Luckily, Jim was sleeping when he got home. He didn't feel like explaining anything, and Jim would be in his face about the bruise. He crept back to his bedroom and dialed Daniel's number. He answered it on the first ring. "I'm home," Blair said, struggling to keep his voice neutral.

Daniel sighed. "Home," he scoffed. "You should be here with me, Blair. This is your home."

Blair rolled his eyes. "Don't start, Daniel."

Another sigh. "How's your head? Are you dizzy? Sick to your stomach?"

"No, Dr. Graves, I'm fine," Blair drawled.

"All right then, but I'm calling in another couple of hours."

Blair grit his teeth and struggled to keep his voice down. "Daniel, you call here at three in the morning and I *will* be dead because Jim will have killed me!"

"And I said fuck him!" Daniel said, raising his voice for lack of a sleeping housemate. "Why is what he thinks so all fired important to you, Blair? My god, you creep around him like he's some kind of supreme being and you're his fucking lackey. It's demeaning to you!"

"Good *night,* Daniel," Blair said pointedly and quietly fell into bed, wishing he could wipe out the last month and start all over again.

Blair woke up late the next morning, muttering a quiet, "Shit!" when he heard Jim in the shower. Fearful that Daniel would call, he'd slept like crap. *No hot water. Just great.* Throwing on pajama
bottoms and a robe, he hurried out to the kitchen to fix breakfast. His head ached, and he bounced nervously while the coffee took its sweet time brewing, then thankfully gulped down a cup.

He must have awakened right when Jim started the water, because he had enough time to scramble eggs and toast bagels before the big man emerged from the bathroom amidst a cloud of steam.

Blair set his plate on the table, smirking at the remnants of what would have been his hot water. Jim grinned and started for the table, but pulled up short when Blair turned away from the table.

Jim's face froze, his eyes narrowed. "What happened to you?" he asked coldly.

Blair looked down his front, thinking he must have spilled something. He didn't see anything, so he looked around to see what Jim was talking about. "What?"

"Your face!" Jim said, exasperated. "What the hell happened?"

Blair's eyes widened in understanding. He brought a hand up and gingerly touched the side of his head. "Oh that," Blair said with a careless shrug. "I was leaving Daniel's last night and took a dive into his coffee table. You know how graceful I am."

Jim took a few more steps forward. "Did Graves hit you?" he asked, his voice soft with disbelief.

"Of course not!" Blair said with a snort of derision. "I told you, I fell."

"Come on, Chief. I expect a *much* better story out of you."

Blair cocked his left eyebrow at the man. "Which is why you should know I'm telling the truth. I was leaving Daniel's place last night and tripped over my own feet and slammed into a table. It was late and I was tired and I tripped. Jeez, get over it already."

Jim still look unconvinced. "Blair, he might seem like a great guy and all, but surely you don't think it's okay...."

"Man, no lectures," Blair groaned. "I'm a big boy, Jim. I can take care of myself."

"Well, coming from a kid with a bruise the size of a grapefruit upside his head, that's a little hard to believe. Look, you want me to give the guy a visit? Let him fucking try to push around someone his own size?"

Blair whirled angrily away from Jim. "I wish everyone would get out of my *face* for once!" he yelled. "I can take care of myself! And I don't need *you* running interference or *Daniel* fucking hanging all over me. God, just back off, okay?"

Eyes wide, Jim held his arms up in mock surrender. "Jesus, forgive me for caring what happens to you," he said indignantly.

"I'm taking a shower." Blair muttered, brushing past Jim without looking at him, then shot back over his shoulder, "A *cold* shower, Mr. Cares So Much."

Jim smiled slightly, still unsure whether or not Blair was telling the truth. The grad student was a consummate liar, weaving tales so farfetched you usually had no choice but to believe him. Still, he had been edgy and distant the last week or two, but then he'd been difficult too, so who's to say....

The ringing phone brought Jim out of his thoughts. "Ellison," he barked, assuming only the Job would bring a seven am call.
"Ah, Jim, this is Daniel Graves," came a diffident voice. "Is Blair there?"

"In the shower," Jim said, not offering to take a message.

"Mm, okay. Yeah, okay then. How, uh....how's his head look?"

Jim made a face of distaste. "Nasty," he replied.

"I didn't want him to leave last night," Graves said, hating that he felt he had to explain himself to this man whose feelings were nowhere near as deep as his own where Blair was concerned. "I tried to tell him when you injure yourself that way, you have to be careful, but he wouldn't listen. He, uh, he's okay then?"

"He's fine," Jim said and clenched his teeth to keep from adding, *No thanks to you.*

"Will you tell him I called?" Graves asked with a sigh. "I'll be in the car for another fifteen minutes, then he can reach me at the office. Would you ask him....that is, see if he couldn't....well, that's not....I guess I'll just wait for the call then."


"Tell me about it," Blair muttered. He kept talking as he dressed, assuming Jim would focus in to listen. "You know, I laid it all open at the start. I've got tons of shit going on and between my dissertation and the classes I'm teaching, the stuff with you and everything else, I'm not looking for anything major. And now he's got it in his head that we're going to end up walking off hand in hand in the sunset, so *I* feel like the shit because he's so fucking off the mark."

"The course of true love is never smooth," Jim called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, well I'm on the course of pure coitus and I don't care what the course of true love is doing."

"I am *shocked* to hear this cynicism from such an upbeat member of your generation."

"Cynicism *defines* my generation," Blair said, coming out of the bedroom dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. "I've got meetings all morning. What time are we supposed to meet with Bainbridge?"

"Three-thirty. Don't be late or he'll be pissed and want to practice longer."

"Yeah, okay," said Blair, grabbing a bagel and walking out to the living room. He grimaced when he saw the box with his new clothes. Jim caught the look and followed Blair's gaze to the package on the couch.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Blair, but knew he wouldn't get past Jim now. "Just Daniel's 'Blair Sandburg Improvement Package.'" He took the lid off the box and smirked at the shirt and pants. Jim leaned over the couch and burst out laughing.

"Shit, Sandburg, he really is off the mark if he thinks you'll start wearing this stuff."

"Tell me about it," Blair muttered. "I'm so out of there, man."

Jim looked up sharply. He'd deal with the flooding sense of elation later, but first he had to ask. "Did
you try to end it last night?" he asked quietly. "Is that what happened? You tried to call it off and Graves freaked out?"

Blair rolled his eyes. "Jim, I swear to God, I tripped and fell. I don't need you playing big brother, okay? Daniel's an okay guy, he's just looking for something I'm never going to give him. He may be over the top, but he's not violent, and he didn't hit me, and if he had. *I'd* take care of it, not my blessed protector. Got it?"

Jim shrugged sheepishly, then sighed with mock sadness. "Kids today grow up so fast," he said.

Blair pushed Jim's shoulder as he picked up his backpack and made his way to the door. "Later, Jim," he called.

"Three-thirty," Jim called back. "Sharp!"

"You ever known me to be late?"

Jim laughed and stuck his head out the door. "I've never known you to be on time, Sandburg, and you know it!"

Blair tossed off a cheerfully obscene gesture, and Jim was still laughing when he closed the front door. Hm, so the great Daniel Graves was out of the picture now. Given Blair's normal MO, that usually meant a replacement was already lined up and ready to go.

Jim wondered about that. He didn't know of anyone offhand, but Blair was closemouthed about that kind of thing. He probably wouldn't have known more than Daniel's voice on the phone if the two hadn't met at the station.

Somehow, the Sentinel knew another man wasn't waiting to fill Graves' vacated spot, a thought both terrifying and mollifying at the same time.

Did Blair honestly think he was willing to risk the relationship they'd built for a few short weeks in the sack? Was he? No, no, of course not. God, but it was getting harder and harder to deny himself.

His Sentinel senses were an overwhelming burden where Blair was concerned. He knew Blair's scent--the kiwi odor of his shampoo, the clean, familiar smell of Ivory soap--as well as he knew his own. From his bedroom or the shower, the garage or the sidewalk, he could hear Blair's voice as he sang along to the radio or dictated notes into his tape recorder. He heard his laugh when he talked on the phone or read his e-mail. From the sliver of light in the doorway, he watched Blair undress before taking a shower. And as he lay in bed at night, waiting for the reprieve of sleep, he imagined the taste of Blair's semen on his lips, burning the back of his throat as he swallowed....

Shit, this was getting him nowhere. Blair wasn't ready for a serious relationship, and if Jim knew one thing about himself, it was that he couldn't--and wouldn't--handle anything less.

For Blair, the next three weeks, to put it mildly, sucked. Daniel was not a man to take no for an answer. Nor was he a man to take, 'never,' 'get lost,' 'no way,' or a host of other refusals from the young grad student.

The federal agent simply couldn't *believe* Blair's feelings were not as deep as his. Daily phone calls turned into twice-daily, then four times, five times, and more. He found more and more inane reasons to venture to the Cascade police department, and though he rarely spoke to Blair when he was there, he watched him with a gaze intense enough to stand the young man's hair on end. There was a book of sonnets left for him at the station, a new sweater by the front door of the loft; a rose
placed on the chair in his office at the U, alongside a bottle of wine like they'd shared at their first dinner.

Several times, Jim noticed Graves' car outside the loft. He pushed at Blair for a final resolution to the relationship, but Blair shrugged off the suggestion. Daniel was just lonely. A little hurt. He'd get over it soon enough. Okay, maybe the rose thing was a little creepy, but even so, Blair wasn't truly concerned until he went to the Bursar's office at the University and discovered his tuition had already been paid for the upcoming semester. He'd stood there trying to convince the man he was mistaken, but if the *computer* said he was paid in full, then he was paid in full. He almost believed it was a simple accounting error, but the bursar did some quick checking, then looked up at Blair with a smile. "Must be your lucky day, Mr. Sandburg," he said. "Apparently you're the beneficiary of an anonymous donation." It wasn't so anonymous though, and Blair had a sneaking suspicion he was anything but a beneficiary.

Blair felt his life veering more and more out of control. Not only was Daniel turning into a nut, but things with Jim were tense and out of whack. If he wasn't dealing with one of Daniel's crazy overtures, it was an explosion out of Jim. Everything pissed him off these days--breakfast wasn't on time, the bathroom was dirty, his habitual tardiness, his 'lack of respect' for the Job. He was walking on egg shells wherever he went, shoulders hunched against the next blow, never knowing when yet another shoe would drop.

Blair felt eight years old again--perpetually trying to avoid the wrath of those older and bigger and more powerful than he. And as he'd learned when he was eight, when someone is older and bigger and more powerful, you don't stand a chance in hell.

When Jim came home from work that night, he was in a shitty mood, but that was par for the course these days. Blair was on the phone when he walked in, and for a moment, Jim felt a twinge of guilt. Blair had jumped at the sound of his coming through the door, whirling around with a look very close to fear. There were dark circles of sleeplessness beneath his eyes. The kid was all nerves these days, and Jim knew he was partly to blame.

But then he made out the sound of Graves' voice on the other end of the phone, and he wanted to shake Blair for his inept handling of the situation. Blair recognized the look of distaste flooding Jim's face, and he turned away from it, lowering his voice as he tried to reason with the unreasonable Daniel Graves. "Please, Daniel, calm down," he said softly. "Look, I never meant to....I'm sorry you think that....I already told you there's no one else, it just that...would you please let me....just let me say someth....Daniel, I can't talk to you like this. Stop shouting at me and listen..."

Later, Jim could only plead temporary insanity. He certainly never made any kind of conscious decision, never weighed any pros and cons. One minute he was standing there, listening to Blair, the next he'd shot over to his side and yanked the phone from his grasp. "Listen here, you fucking psycho," he growled into the phone. "I am through sitting on the sidelines and waiting for Blair to handle this. Leave him alone. That means no more phone calls, no more stakeouts, no more fucking *stalking* us. If I even *think* I see your car outside my home, I will go to your superior and his superior and on up the ladder until you are the laughing stock of every law enforcement agency I've ever heard of. Got it?" He slammed down the phone and whirled angrily to face Blair. "*That's* how you handle this fucker if you *really* don't want him around anymore."

Blair looked at him like he'd just sprouted wings. "Who in the hell do you think you are?" he asked
incredulously. "What in the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

"What you're apparently incapable of doing. Telling Graves to get lost!"

"It's not your place to tell him anything!" Blair said, his voice still breathless with amazement.

"Oh right, Sandburg. If *I* tell him, he might actually get the picture and stop running after you like the poor dumb fuck that he is."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't want Graves to leave you alone, do you?" Jim asked, shaking his head in disgust. "You tell him you don't want to see him, but every time he comes around you shake your little ass in his face and act surprised when he just doesn't seem to get the message."

"You are *way* out of line here," Blair said, his voice dangerously low.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it? And the truth about you is something both Graves and I have in common. You're a fucking tease, Sandburg. You can't connect with someone on an emotional level, so you connect the only way you know how."

"Go to hell," Blair muttered and headed for his bedroom.

Jim grabbed his arm and pulled him around. "That's right, run away! Go hide in your bedroom like the child you really are!"

"Fuck you!" Blair yelled, jerking his arm out of Jim's hold.

"No problem," Jim said, his voice just as dangerous. "I'd rather do it myself than trust the job to a shallow, insensitive shit like you."

With a roar of pure rage, Blair launched himself at the shocked detective. He flailed against the bigger man, landing a few good shots, but he was too angry to do much damage. Jim pinned his arms to his side with vice-like strength, intent on pushing him back against the wall, but Blair stumbled on his backpack and they both went tumbling to the ground. Blair took advantage of their momentary surprise to free himself, lunging for Jim with another shout. But again, he was no match for the stronger and better trained cop. Jim eventually rolled over on top of him and pinned his shoulders to the floor. His eyes were wild, dancing with fiery anger. Both chests heaved, the stench of sweat and adrenaline assaulting the Sentinel.

The strange thing was, Jim could hardly remember what they were arguing about. And now that Blair was quiet—and immobilized—he couldn't think of a damn thing to say, so instead of speaking, he shocked the hell out of both of them by shoving his tongue down Blair's throat.

Still exploring Blair's mouth, Jim loosened his grip on the younger man, wanting him to know he wasn't being forced. Blair growled and grabbed Jim's shoulders, rolling him to his back, and arduously sucking on his lower lip.

They broke apart, gasping for air, eyes clouded with amazement. "I don't want Daniel Graves calling here anymore," Jim panted.

Blair lifted an eyebrow in amusement. "That makes two of us," he said dryly.

"I don't want him calling you or dropping by to see you or giving you gifts. I don't want him anywhere near you."
"Your mouth to God's ears," Blair said and reached up for that same mouth.

Jim roughly pushed him away. "No," he said dismissively. "This is...this is crazy, Chief."

"Oh, man, come on!" Blair groaned. He started undoing the zipper on Jim's pants, only to be pushed back against the coffee table.

"I said no, God dammit!" Jim snapped. "Christ, fucking kiss you, and you'll take it like a dog on the floor?"

Blair froze, then scrambled back several feet. "Fuck you!"

With that first kiss from Jim, he'd been willing to forgive all the unkind words, all the hurtful slights and unprovoked attacks. He would have gladly forgotten all of it for just one night with this man who'd bypassed all of his security measures, all of the carefully constructed walls of self preservation. When would he learn? When would he *fucking* learn that taking a chance meant only pain? There were people in this world who got what they wanted and people who didn't and forgetting he was one who didn't only led to more heartache. When would the lessons of his childhood quit reinforcing themselves upon his life as an adult? *When you fucking grow up,* he thought bitterly, echoing words he'd heard for a lifetime.

Jim's shoulder's sagged. "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that!" he said, running his hand through his thinning hair. A couple more months of this and he wouldn't have a strand left. "I'm sorry," he repeated softly. "Look, I...I've gotta cool off. Take a shower. Don't go anywhere, okay? I want to talk, Chief. Really talk, okay?"

Blair said nothing. He sat motionless while Jim retreated to the bathroom, then scrambled for his room as soon as the bathroom door shut behind the big man.

He'd had enough of this shit. Enough! It was one thing to be eight years old and trapped, but he wasn't that damaged little kid anymore. He'd promised himself, *promised* that he'd never stick around where he wasn't wanted. He wasn't going to live that way ever again. No way. No fucking way."

From the shower, Jim heard Blair slam his bedroom door. Without much effort, he heard the closet door open and the sound of a zipper, drawers opening and closing. Fuck. Now he was flying off the handle. Jesus, why was everything such an ordeal with that kid?

Jim knew he owed Blair a better apology, but apologizing meant admitting things to himself he wasn't sure he could handle. He threw on a pair of sweats, took a deep breath, then knocked softly on Blair's door and pushed open the door. He leaned against the door jam and watched Blair haphazardly fling clothes into a suitcase. "Come on, Sandburg," he said.

"Fuck you, *Ellison,*" Blair replied.

Jim sighed. "Okay, then Blair. Point taken. Let's talk, okay?"

Blair looked away, swallowing the sick feeling in his stomach. "I'm not some fucking doormat that you can keep fucking with," he said in a level voice.

"I know," Jim said softly. "I'm sorry, Chief."

"I can't figure it out," Blair said quietly. "Are you treating me like shit to convince yourself you don't feel anything for me, or are you just trying to get me to leave? I mean, if you want me out, just say so, and I'm gone."
"You know I don't want you to leave," Jim said in a low voice, his heart hammering fearfully at the mere mention of the possibility. He walked over and carefully took the shirt out of Blair's hand, placing it back in his dresser.

"Then what is it?" Blair asked, taken aback by the gentle gesture. "You think because I'm out this is easy for me? You want me, but you don't. You get pissed when someone else comes sniffing around, but you're not willing to do a fucking thing about it. I'm supposed to sit back there in that fucking room and wait. And hope. And *maybe* you'll decide it's worth it and maybe you'll decide it's not, but in the meantime, I'm supposed to just sit here and be your whipping boy?"

"I know, I know," Jim soothed, a tone Blair sure as hell wasn't used to hearing aimed at him. "I'm being rude and unfair and....cowardly." He looked out toward the kitchen, then back at Blair, questioning with his eyes. Blair sighed and shrugged, then followed Jim out the door.

They sat down at the kitchen table, and Jim hesitantly covered Blair's hand with his own. He expected Blair to jerk away, but he didn't, just sighed and slumped back in the chair.

"I know you think it's being with another man that's holding me back, but it's not," Jim said. Blair looked unconvinced. "I came to terms with that a long time ago. Hell, I had to. You give me a fucking hard on every time you clear your throat. It was either come to terms with it or spend every off duty hour I had in a cold shower." He leaned down, checking to see if he could force a smile from the younger man. Blair's lips twitched in spite of himself, and Jim grinned victoriously. "But, for me, it's moved far beyond some lustful physical attraction. And you're the one who keeps pointing out to me that that's all you've ever had, all you've ever wanted. I'm not looking to be fucked and forgotten."

"You know that's not how I feel!" Blair said hotly, finally looking up into Jim's eyes. "Based on what? You wiggle your ass at me, but you never confide in me. You never share yourself with me."

"Because you're not interested!" Blair pointed out. "I try to tell you things all the time, and I'm lucky if I get a Neanderthal grunt out of you."

"No, you *recite* things," Jim clarified. "You tell me what you've read, what tests you want to run; you give anthropology lectures. But you don't share any of yourself."

"That is who I am!" Blair angrily replied. "Anthropology is what I do! It's what I eat, dream, work, think! It's the last 10 years of my life, the next 50 years of my life. I wouldn't even fucking *know* you without it!"

"But that's not *all* you are!" Jim said. "Sometimes I feel like I know you as well as the dry cleaner who starches my shirts. I get this little, tiny morsel of you and nothing more. I get the anthropologist, but not the person."

Blair diffidently played with the frayed ends of his shirt. "I wake up every morning and still half expect to find a sticky note on my door that says 'Have your shit packed and moved out by noon.'" Blair mused, almost as if he was talking to himself. "I guess I just keep thinking that if I don't invest too much it won't hurt when I'm booted out. Which is stupid, 'cause it'll kill me either way."

It was the most revealing thing Blair had ever said to him, and Jim shuddered with pleasure. "I'm not going to ask you to leave," he said with quiet conviction. "You're my guide. It's as simple and as complicated as that. You're my guide and without you, I'm lost. But I keep thinking that what we have is powerful enough without introducing sex to the equation. Are we going to fuck everything
up by taking this to the next level? Are we looking for the same things? Can we handle it if it turns out we're not? I'm scared shitless here, and you know how I am. Scared comes out pissed." He paused, waiting for Blair to acknowledge the truth of that last statement. Eventually, Blair slowly nodded. Jim squeezed the hand under his and leaned in so Blair would look at him. "I said some terrible things," Jim continued. "I didn't mean any of it. I just wanted to hurt you, make you feel as shitty and scared as I do. I'm sorry. Really, really sorry, okay?"

Blair nodded still staring into Jim's serious blue eyes. "Why can't we just go for it?" he asked. "Damn the consequences. We'll work through whatever happens. Let's just try it and see."

Jim sighed and shook his head, getting up to pace in the small kitchen. He finally stopped and leaned against a counter. "What I feel is deeper than that," he explained, frowning as he searched for the right words to make Blair understand. "I'm not a shirt you can try on and return if it doesn't fit right...."

"That's not what I'm saying," Blair began, but Jim cut him off.

"Yes it is. Try and see. If it doesn't work, you'll just brush yourself off and keep moving. In the meantime, I'm fucking destroyed over here. We're way past the 'try it' stage. That happened a long time ago when we were wrestling over house rules and stupid shit like that."

"So what are you saying?"

Jim returned to his seat and gently pushed Blair's hair behind his ear. It was painfully obvious he didn't know what in the hell he was saying.

"You're so young," Jim whispered. "God, I think of who I was at 25 and who I was at 30, and the difference is staggering. But I look at you, and all I can think of is forever, and I don't think I'm strong enough, brave enough, to make a go of this unless I know you're thinking forever too."

Even though Blair knew Jim could feel the rush of heat that flooded his face, he ducked his head anyway. He'd never allowed himself to think about a future with *anyone,* and now Jim wanted forever? He didn't doubt that Jim *believed* what he was saying, but Blair knew there was no such thing as forever. It had been drummed into him his entire life.

"That's an easy promise to make," Blair said, his voice gruff with emotion. "But it's meaningless. I can't predict what I'll feel in the future. I can only tell you what I feel right now. And that I've never felt it for anyone else; and I can't imagine *ever* feeling it for another soul. But I can't give you a guarantee any more than you can give me one."

Another heavy sigh from the big man, who stood up and kissed the top of Blair's head. "I know, Chief," he said sadly. "I guess I just have to decide if I can survive the uncertainty."

And with that, he headed up to bed, leaving his stunned guide to sit in the dark kitchen and think, *There is no uncertainty, my friend. You'll leave like all the others. The question is just when...*
Blair smirked and shook his head. "He's not like that," he said. "I don't want to embarrass the guy. I just want him to leave us...well, me, alone." Blair stared at his cup, unprepared to see anything, particularly refusal, in Jim's eyes. Not yet.

"I don't see how you can make it any clearer to the guy, Sandburg."

Blair sighed, and shrugged, unwilling to explain to Jim how very much he understood the troubled man all of a sudden.

No matter what Blair said to Jim, the detective resolutely refused to be out of the loft when Daniel was due. Keeping his temper in check, Blair finally managed to secure a promise that Jim remain up in his room. Given his Sentinel hearing, it wasn't much of a promise, but it was the best Blair could hope for.

At ten 'til the hour, Daniel knocked on the door. He looked haggard, like he hadn't slept in days and was surviving on a diet of coffee and Coke. Blair sighed, wondering if he was looking at a picture of himself in the future. Would he end up like this when Jim decided, once and for all, that there was no future for them? God, that would just suck.

Blair led Daniel back to his room, an exercise in futility, but he still felt like it offered a more private setting.

He looked around, bewildered that the only room in the house that reflected any of Blair was this tiny, walk-in closet. Blair preferred *this* to what he could offer? How was that possible?

"Um, Daniel?" Blair began hesitantly. "Look, I asked you here because....uh....well, I guess I just....I just hate the way this is ending, you know? I mean, we had a good time together and all, and I just....I'd just like us to part friends, you know?"

"Friends." Daniel repeated the word, still looking around the bedroom. "I don't understand," he said slowly, turning to face Blair. "I don't understand how you can prefer him to me. I'm offering you a *life,* Blair!" He was incredulous that he had to explain himself. "A home, for God's sake, not some fucking closet! He treats you like a possession, like a chair or a table. Not even a prized possession, just something he can use when feels like it. Why do you prefer him to me?"

"It's not a question of preferring anybody," Blair said, unconsciously lowering his voice, though he knew full well Jim could hear them if he wanted to. Did he want to?

"I'm sorry, Daniel, but I don't....I don't see it that way." Blair turned away from the desperate older man, hating the desperation wreaking from every pore.

"Then you're lying to me, and you're lying to yourself," Daniel said angrily. "You think if you wait long enough, Ellison's going to wake up one morning and say, 'Oh yeah, that's right, I'm queer.' You think he's going to come home from work some night and take you in his arms and swear his everlasting love for you? Is that what you think?"

Cringing at the thought of Jim listening in, Blair gruffly cleared his throat. "Jim has nothing to do with this, Daniel. It's me. Give me a little credit here. I'm not some star struck adolescent. I know..."
what I want, Daniel. And what I don't. I'm sorry I hurt you, but I don't want a serious relationship with you!"

"With me," Graves repeated, hollow and defeated. "I love you, Blair! That has to mean something to you!"

"Daniel, you've only known me for six weeks," Blair said, wishing the man would just grab his coat and storm out. What more could they say to one another? "That's not enough time to..."

"It *is* enough time!" Daniel said, eyes flaring. "How long before you knew you loved him, Blair? How long before you decided you'd fucking wait forever for something that's never going to come, hm? How long?"

"Daniel, please," Blair began, throwing his eyes toward the door, a subtle suggestion for the older man to leave.

"Please what?" Graves hissed. "Shut up? Go away? Leave you and your *boyfriend* to your fucked up relationship? What was I, Blair? A wake-up call for your perfect detective? A little reminder that if he didn't take you, someone else would? Is that what this was all about?"

"God dammit, Daniel, listen to yourself! Jeez, we met. You were attractive and funny and smart and you said, 'let's go to dinner,' so I said, 'what the hell, okay.' That's all. We went out a couple of times and had a few laughs and fucked around a little in bed. End of story. There was no great romance, no pledge of devotion. Look, it was fun, but now you are *seriously* freaking me out! Calling me all time, accusing me of all this garbage, *spying* on me. Fucking paying my tuition?! I didn't sign on for this, okay man?"

Daniel shook his head at Blair's words. "I love you!" he whispered.

"I'm sorry, Daniel," Blair said quietly. "I am. Look, I'm the first to admit I don't know a hell of a lot about love, but I do know it's not like this. It's not suspicious and accusatory and....angry."

"It won't be like this!" Daniel said, eyes lighting as if he finally figured out what it would take to convince Blair he was right. "Blair, it's messed up right now, but when you come home, when we make it right, then you'll see how it will be!"

Blair sighed and shook his head. "No, Daniel," he said gently. "No."

Daniel rushed forward, grabbing Blair by the shoulders and shaking him. Pacing in the darkened bedroom, he had seemed small and inconsequential. Blair had forgotten how powerful he could be. "I'll make you love me!" he growled. "Do you hear me, you little shit? I'll make you love me!"

Blair wrenched himself away, thinking he'd rather kick it than have Jim rush to his rescue. "Go home, Daniel," he said evenly. "And leave me alone. We're through, man. And I'm not going to discuss it again."

Daniel looked like he was wrestling with another advance. "This isn't over, Blair. You'll understand. I guarantee it."

Blair sighed and struggled to keep from rolling his eyes at the melodrama. Daniel snatched up his coat and stalked from the room. Blair heard the front door slam and sank tiredly to the bed. What a stupid mess. Jeez, what was wrong with the guy?

Blair eyed the stack of journals on his desk. He really did have a shitload of reading to do, but he'd be damned if he was going to give Jim the satisfaction of hiding out in his room all night. There was
no sign of Jim downstairs as Blair walked to the kitchen and grabbed a beer out of the fridge. He glanced at the counter next to the front door and smirked at Jim's keys. Well, he was somewhere in the loft. Another sigh as he opened the beer and took a long swig. He wandered out to the living room and flopped down on the couch, head back, eyes closed, trying to control his breathing and center himself

"That went well," Jim said from the top of the stairs. Blair glared at him for a moment before his eyes slid out to gaze at the ocean. "You know, Chief, I told you...."

"Jim, 'I told you so,' is on the top of a very, very long list of things I don't want to hear right now."

Jim grinned and came down a few steps. "I was just going to say..."

"You know, come to think of it, I don't think I want to hear *anything* right now."

Laughing, Jim descended the rest of the way. "Well, sonny, if you're not going to take the advice of someone older and wiser."

"I'll give you older," Blair said wryly. "But wiser is highly debatable."

"Hey, don't take it out on me!" Jim said with mock affront.

"Jeez, I hate mess, you know? It's so....messy. I mean, what's so hard about keeping it simple. Keeping it light. Don't go in too deep and you can go your separate ways without all this....crap."

"Kind of a recipe for loneliness, don't you think?" Jim asked seriously, retrieving his own beer and sitting down across from Blair.

The younger man shrugged carelessly. "Nothing wrong with leading an....organized life."

Jim lifted an incredulous brow at the grad student. "You know, if I'd never seen your bedroom or your office, I might believe you when you say that. The last word I'd use to describe you is 'organized!'"

Blair smirked at his house mate. "My props may be haphazard, but my *life* is right on track. Right where I want it to be. And that means no sloppy *relationships*," Blair rolled his eyes at the word, "bogging me down."

Jim took a long swig of beer, then studied the bottle for a moment, rubbing his thumb along the mouth. He thought about their discussion the night before and wondered if Blair was sending him a message. "You think we're nice and neat, Chief?" he asked casually. "When you've got that Ph.D. on the wall, are you planning on making a clean break?"

Another shrug from the younger man, who turned his head back out toward the sea. Jim felt the heat of his blush, even if Blair did manage to hide the flush across his cheeks. "I wasn't talking about us. That's different," he mumbled, casting his eyes heavenward in search of divine intervention to cut this talk short.

"How?" Jim asked, sounding merely curious.

"Come on, man. This is....it's different, you know? No matter what happens, you're a Sentinel. I'm your guide. That makes it... different."

"How?" He was more insistent this time.
Blair clenched his teeth against the growing frustration. He knew Jim could hear his racing heart; his heightened breathing. He concentrated to bring more of a calm to his system. What was the point of going around in this circle again? "Different, Jim," he said, his tone asking Jim to drop it; to simply let the statement stand.

"I want to know how you see us, Blair." The use of his first name made Blair suddenly uncomfortable. "Is this just a temporary stop for you? Get enough for your paper and get out?"

Blair slammed his beer bottle down and jumped up from the couch. He leaned against the window, but he could see Jim's reflection, see the big man leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, watching Blair with those Sentinel eyes of his. Sometimes Blair imagined he was looking clear through to his soul. "I've given you the only assurances I can. What more do you want from me?" he finally asked. "What do you want me to say? What do you want?"

Blair watched in the window as Jim rose from the chair and walked slowly toward him. His breathing exercises vanished at the predatory gleam in Jim's eyes. Jim moved forward until his thighs touched the back of Blair's; his solid chest brushing against the younger man's back every time he inhaled. "Maybe I want to know that when I come home from work and take you in my arms and swear my everlasting love for you, that you don't have plans to run out the door anytime soon."

Blair's eyes closed and he relaxed against Jim's chest, felt the muscular arms circling him, and wondered if Jim could sense the raging swirl of emotions in his gut—relief, desire, fear. Desire.

"So you've decided, huh?"

"Decided," Jim scoffed at the word. "Sandburg, you hit me harder than that truck barreling down on me. I didn't have a chance, Chief. Not a chance in the world."

Blair grinned, still meeting Jim's gaze through the reflection in the darkened window. "Everlasting love, huh?"

Jim smiled and nuzzled Blair's hair. "Mm, I don't know, Chief. That could get awfully messy." Blair laughed and Jim joined in, thinking it had been awhile since Blair looked happy and relaxed. He hugged the younger man and rocked a little and thought how lucky he was to have his fate so permanently sealed. He needed to make sure Blair understood that, though. He pulled back slightly and turned the younger man to face him. He held Blair's chin in his hand, forcing him to meet his steely gaze. "We're playing for keeps here, Blair. Are you ready for this?"

Blair's brilliant eyes locked with Jim's, and the Sentinel felt his heart skip a beat, then pound in double time at the absolute conviction he saw there. "I'm like you, man," he said slowly. "No choice, no chance. Doesn't really matter if I'm not ready, because it's happening in spite of us, you know?"

Lost in a sea of blue, Jim nodded. He ducked his head and softly covered Blair's mouth with his own. It was a sweet kiss, full of reverence and promise. Blair was shocked all over again at the gentleness of this most powerful man. The younger man parted his lips in invitation and was immediately met with Jim's eager tongue. The kiss deepened and intensified. Jim grew insistent now, but Blair matched him move for move, coaxing even more from him. He grabbed handfuls of Jim's shirt, holding on against disbelief that a dream he thought impossible was unfolding before him.

But as that dream unfolded, another lay in shambles. Had Jim's attention not been focused on other things, he would have easily seen the Acura Legend parked right out front. And he would have seen Daniel Graves in the driver's seat with his head tilted upward, almost as if he was praying. But he wasn't praying, he was watching the perfectly silhouetted bodies of his lover and another man as they writhed against one another. But even a Sentinel could not have recognized the blackness creeping
into the man's shattered heart. *No, it's not over. Not by a long shot.* The boy might stray this one time, but he'd be brought to heel, Daniel Graves was sure of that.

Up in the loft, the need for air necessitated a break, and they tore away, both of them gasping. Blair's head fell back as Jim went to work on his neck, kissing from one ear to the other, the big man's knees nearly buckling at the erotic growls in Blair's throat.

Clothing started falling to the floor—one shirt, then another. Jim's eyes flared with pleasure at his guide's bare chest, and he stepped back to fully appreciate the sight. Blair grew embarrassed, almost shy, under the scrutiny. When first he dared to think there might be a chance with Jim, he'd had a flash of concern that somehow Jim would be less than pleased with him, that physically, he wouldn't turn on the brawny, athletic cop. The flush of desire creeping up Jim's neck, the beads of sweat breaking, the voracious look in his eyes as he licked his lips in anticipation told Blair that wouldn't be a problem.

"Good god, you're beautiful," Jim whispered wonderingly. Blair blushed again, and reached out a fingertip to brush across the big man's darkened nipple.

"Not like you," Blair whispered back, his hand stroking Jim's chest, sliding down the rippled abdomen, gliding through the soft fuzz below his navel. Jim shuddered, aroused by both the physical touch and the look of concentrated rapture on Blair's face. "You're perfect." Blair's hand passed over a bicep that flexed in response, up over the shoulder, back to the heaving chest. "Perfect," he whispered again, then stepped forward and wrapped his mouth around a nipple. He bit it right away, surprising Jim who shouted and surged forward, grabbing Blair's shoulders to keep himself standing. Blair sucked at the tit, moaning every time Jim's straining erection jabbed against him. Blair kissed his way to the other breast, nipping again, leaving his mark, thrilling at Jim's cry of pleasure. The big man's hands were in his hair, down his back, his knee becoming more insistent at his crotch. Finally, with a sound of frustration, Jim nudged Blair back and started to unfasten the buttons on his jeans. Blair reached over to return the favor, but Jim batted his hands away.

The Sentinel slid Blair's jeans over his hips, his heart pounding so loudly in his ears he wondered how Blair could concentrate. Blair's briefs came next, peeled slowly, lovingly, from his body, his erection bouncing when finally liberated from the confiscating fabric. "Blair," Jim whispered, reaching for the younger man's penis, staring at it with rapt attention, as if he'd never seen something so rare and so beautiful.

Blair moved forward, impatient for Jim's treasures to be revealed as well. But the big man once again shoved his hands aside. "Age before beauty, Chief," he said with a grin. He hooked one of his legs behind Blair's and with a simple push, lowered the younger man to the floor and laid on top of him.

A hot flare of desire arched Blair's back from the floor and he thought, *Shit, I'm going to expire right here! Right now, before he ever even touches me!* "Oh, God!" he shouted out loud, unable to articulate the intense hunger in his soul.

But Jim had felt the rush of heat, had felt his face warmed by it, his breath stolen by the implication. He captured Blair's mouth, surging forward when the grad student moaned. He wanted to crawl inside the younger man; wanted to discover him from the inside out. He bit Blair's lower lip, sunk his teeth in one shoulder, then another. Marking the man as he had been marked. His hands traveled everywhere, over the soft curls on Blair's chest, one nipple to the other, pausing to pinch and nuzzle until Blair was writhing beneath him, whimpering with pent up desire. "More, more, more," Blair panted his mantra, arching into Jim with ever intensifying thrust. Finally, *finally,* Jim's hand found Blair's heated erection. They both jumped at the vehemence of the sudden thrill, Jim's own penis twitching against the tight confines of his jeans. They groaned in tandem, Blair's moans ending in a
crescendo of shouts when Jim roughly squeezed the balls in his hand. Jim kissed down the path his hands had followed, taking his sweet time once he reached the fluff of pubic hair below Blair's navel. Slowly, slowly now, he advanced lower and lower. Blair was so out of breath he had no strength to moan or yell. He could only pull in one jagged breath after another. But he managed a shocked, strangled yell when Jim sunk his teeth into his upper thigh. "Shit!" he cried. "Shit!" He started counting wildly to himself, fearful he would come too soon and embarrass himself. Numbers didn't seem to be working, so he tried reciting an Anth 101 lecture to himself.

He heard Jim chuckle. "You like that, don't you, Chief?" he said with throaty satisfaction. Blair couldn't bother answering. He had to concentrate. Another bite, the other thigh this time, but Blair was ready for it and the threat of early release abated.

Jim's tongue flicked against his balls before engulfing one in his mouth. Blair jumped at the contact and smiled when Jim chuckled again. God, the man's focus was amazing, Blair thought, as his testicle was released and Jim nibbled his way up the underside of his penis, concentrating on the thick vein running all the way up to the head. For a moment, Blair was sure the big man wouldn't take any more than the barest tip of his cock into his mouth, but he'd simply forgotten how Jim liked to surprise. He felt Jim inhale and then fireworks exploded behind his eyes when he surged forward and swallowed him nearly to the hilt. Blair arched his back, and Jim took even more of him. Blair's moan started low, in the back of his throat, as if he were trying to be quiet for Jim's sake. It built proportionally to Jim's intensity. The older man sucked and siphoned, gradually urging Blair's hips to buck with greater abandon. His teeth scraped along the length of the shaft and Blair's cry took on an air of urgency. "Oh God, Jim, now!" he warned, reaching blindly to push the man back. "Now!" he cried, thinking maybe Jim didn't understand what he was trying to say, or had perhaps zoned out in his concentration to please.

Jim, who knew precisely what Blair was intimating, placed his hands on either side of Blair's hips, clamping down hard, holding him in place and lunging forward. He wasn't going anywhere. He wanted all of it. Every last morsel. He'd earned it.

Blair shouted in comprehension and violently shot his load, ejaculating down Jim's throat in hot, juicy spurts. Jim swallowed and siphoned until Blair was whimpering for release, and he reluctantly slid back and freed the younger man from his hold.

With surprising strength and speed, Blair flipped Jim onto his back and devoured his mouth, sharing the taste of himself with the older man. When he pulled away, he grinned at the startled look on the big man's face. "Beauty's turn?" he innocently asked.

"God, Baby, any time," Jim answered breathlessly.

Blair shuddered in anticipation, quickly divesting Jim of his jeans and boxers. Jim laughed joyfully at Blair's haste, thinking the younger man looked like a little kid at Christmas. It seemed odd, given Jim's imposing physical appearance, but Blair was still surprised at his size and thickness, understanding that had he gone first, he'd have been embarrassed for Jim to see him. He wondered if Jim knew that, which made Blair wonder about Jim's experience with past lovers, which was something he really, really didn't want to think about right then. He shook his head to clear out the jumble of thoughts and slowly brought his eyes to Jim's. "You're stunning," Blair whispered. "The most beautiful man I've ever seen."

Jim's jovial smile softened into something closer to tenderness. Then he cockily tossed his head and winked at Blair. "It's all yours, Chief!"

The kid-at-Christmas twinkle returned to Blair's pretty blue eyes. "Mine!" he agreed, flashing his
eyebrows at the older man. "All mine!"

Jim laughed again when Blair straddled him, lightly bouncing before stretching out to lie on top of the big man. "You sure you want it on this cold, hard floor, Old Man?" he asked with an evil grin.

Jim matched the grin. "I'm not going to be the one on the bottom much longer," Jim replied, sliding his hand over Blair's thigh to tease at the opening of his ass. He watched Blair's face for signs of dissatisfaction, but saw only a flush of anticipation.

"Go for it," Blair challenged in a throaty whisper, startled at the speed with which Jim shook him off and reversed their positions. It was Blair's turn to laugh. "I hope you're not planning on coming to the party dry," he said. "It'll be embarrassing enough to explain to the nurse how my kidneys got shoved up into my chest cavity."

Jim chuckled and affectionately mussed Blair's hair. "Safety first, Chief, isn't that what they always say?" Blair groaned when Jim pushed off his shoulders to help himself stand. Jim laughed and pulled Blair up, taking a long, leering stare at the compact younger man. "Come with me, Little Boy," Jim said, taking Blair's hand and leading him up the stairs.

Blair let himself be led to the bed and gently pushed to the mattress. He slid back to the center and waited while Jim examined him with almost clinical interest. "I never thought I'd find someone so beautiful in my bed," Jim said in a low voice. "It's not just the way you look," he grinned with self-deprecating humor, "though you knock me out from a thousand paces. But it's you, Blair. All of you. I never thought someone as altogether lovely as you would ever grace my life."

Drawing in a shaky breath, Blair was momentarily at a loss for words. Jim grinned knowingly, his heart dancing at the way Blair shyly grinned and shrugged, as if to say, "Yeah, yeah, so I'm speechless."

Jim laughed happily, stroking Blair's flushed cheek, saying what both of them were thinking. "If I'd known seducing you was the way to shut you up, I would have done it months ago."

"I'll remember that when you're trying to get me to shake the rafters," Blair said, licking his lips and running his eyes up and down the length of Jim's magnificent body.

Jim nodded. "Don't go anywhere," he said gruffly and backed into the bathroom so he wouldn't lose sight of Blair stretched out on his bed. Blair sighed and relaxed into the pillows. His stomach fluttered nervously and he winced against the sudden onslaught of thought and emotion. What would it be like tomorrow and the next day and the next? Would Jim regret this? Would he back off? Pretend it never really happened? Would he laugh at Blair for believing his lines and say he was just trying to teach the kid a lesson? Blair felt guilty for the momentary lapse of trust, but Jim didn't understand. He couldn't. For all his open exuberance, Blair had never allowed himself the depth of emotion Jim so readily exhibited. It was terrifying to the younger man, who wondered how Jim kept from walking around in a perpetual state of fear. What if he leaves, Blair wondered. Oh God, what if he leaves?

Jim left the bathroom, tossing a bottle of massage oil back and forth in his hands. He paused, eyebrows drawn at the troubled look on Blair's face. "What is it?" he asked. Thinking maybe he was rushing the younger man, Jim cautiously came forward, sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed. "Blair, we don't do anything you're not comfortable with, you know that, don't you?"

Blair felt flustered. He nervously brushed the hair from his face. "I want to," he said breathlessly. "Oh God, how I want to. It's just....Jim, I don't think....I mean....it's not that easy for me to...." He stopped, sighing in frustration at his inability to explain. He took a deep breath and forced himself to
look into Jim's gentle eyes. "Did you mean it when you said this was for keeps?" he asked, chin slightly raised as if daring Jim to deny it.

The older man smiled slowly, lovingly and brushed away the same lock of hair Blair had moments earlier. "With all my heart," he said, shrugging helplessly at the finality of the sentiment, at the very inarguable truth of it.

Blair arched upward, as if the words were an arousing caress. Perhaps they were. "Fuck me," he whispered.

The smile widened. "Baby, all you had to do was ask!" Jim said, and dove for the younger man, wrapping him in a bear hug with such exuberance they dissolved in laughter.

Blair swallowed the last bit of laughter with a gasp when Jim captured his mouth and pushed his tongue into it. Blair had never felt so much from a kiss—light and heat, promises and prayers. It was magical. Reality tilted and blurred until Blair felt like he was floating above the mattress. He reached for a fistful of sheet to keep himself rooted to the earth, but they slipped from his fingers as he gently rose up and up and up. He didn't realize he'd been pushed to his stomach until Jim's warm, oiled hands stroked across his shoulders and down each arm. A musky, soapy smell filled the bedroom, but the odor drifted from his senses as Jim trailed down his back, over his side, down the length of his legs, then back up again. Blair's breath grew more ragged as Jim's concentration centered in on his ass. He grunted in surprise when Jim's caress grew more purposeful and a finger slid into his anus. He bucked up, encouraging, requesting, demanding. Jim obliged with another finger. And then a third. Blair moaned when Jim left him, shifting his hips in an attempt to reconnect.

Jim settled himself on top of the smaller man, embracing him tightly against his chest. He kissed behind Blair's ear, sucking on the lobe for a moment. "If it gets to be too much..." Jim started to whisper in that same ear. Blair quickly shook his head. "No!" he muttered in a strangled voice. "Please, go. Go!"

"I don't want to hurt you," Jim said quietly.

"You won't," Blair promised. "God Jim, you couldn't!"

Jim placed his penis at Blair's cleft, took a steadying breath, and resolutely pressed inward. Blair moaned in spite of his best effort not to make a sound. Jim paused, but Blair bucked his hips, clearly calling for more.

Jim huffed, groaning at the heat engulfing his penis. His cock burned and twitched as he slid further into the depths of the beautiful young man. For a moment, he was acutely aware of the loneliness of his life before Blair came to him—the empty nights; the confusion and anger at senses suddenly betraying him, the feeling of being so terribly different from everyone else. The fear that he was crazy.

The rush of affection he felt for the young, exuberant student manifested itself in a sweeping lunge. Blair let out a startled yelp and Jim winced. Even through the condom, he could feel every blood vessel, every pocket of flesh and blood and muscle and tissue. Jim heaved a sigh of relief when his pelvis came to rest against Blair's ass. And God, what a fine ass it was, Jim thought fleetingly. And it was all his. He grinned with territorial pride he knew would make Blair uncomfortable could he see it. But he couldn't, could he? "Ready?" Jim asked. Blair gave the briefest of nods, squirming slightly and clenching his ass until Jim shouted for release. "I'll take that as a yes!" he huffed and slowly began to undulate within the younger man.
Blair had trouble keeping up with Jim; his thoughts wandered in and out of focus as he struggled to come to grips with the stunning force of connection he felt when Jim first entered him. He'd been fucked before by men he liked and some he even admired. But he'd never known anything so intense, so mind altering. It was as if by physically entering his body, Jim also inhabited his soul, an idea that was eerie and oddly comforting at the same time. Blair bit his bottom lip, pushing away the concern that maybe Jim really *had* entered his psyche somehow. Was it such a far fetched idea? The man could hear him walking down the street from a mile away—hell, he could *see* him from five miles. Was it really so crazy to think he could read his thoughts, enter his mind?

And if he could, would it freak him out to realize how alone he'd felt before Jim entered his life? Would he find Blair's infatuation tiresome? His adulation childish? Would he laugh at what he felt? Would he leave?

A sudden, savage thrust that nearly lifted him from the bed brought Blair from his reverie. He shook his head to clear it, and the next time Jim surged within him, he was ready, providing his own backward shove that further impaled himself on Jim's cock. They both shouted with unholy delight. "I thought I was losing you there," Jim whispered.

"I'm gone, Big Man," Blair whispered. "Ungh, God, I'm gone."

"Stay with me, Chief," Jim urged, sliding his hand around front and chuckling at the erection waiting him. "Ah, youth," he teased, nuzzling, then nipping at the back of Blair's neck. The younger man bucked again. Jim was stroking him now, in perfect rhythm with his mighty lunges. Blair gave as good as he got and soon they were both groaning with mounting frenzy. "When you go, you're taking me with you," Jim warned in a tight voice.

"Promises, promises," Blair ground out and was punished for his sauciness with a vicious dig. Another thrust, followed by a possessive bite on his shoulder. Blair's head swam pleasantly. "Say my name," he whispered. "Say my name."

Jim groaned, then huffed. "Blair!" and sent the younger man sailing over the edge with a triumphant cry. Warm ejaculate spilled out over Jim's hand, and the convulsive jerk of Blair's hips momentarily blinded him. He shouted an inarticulate warning and spasmodically released, whispering, "I love you, Blair. I love you.... God how I love you!"

It was the first time Blair Sandburg ever heard the words without heading for the door at a dead run.

"I didn't know it could be like that," Blair said softly, shuddering in Jim's massive arms. The big man smiled against his neck. He liked this shy, demure, post-coital Blair.

"I didn't know it could be any other way," Jim said, puffing his chest with exaggerated pride.

Blair frowned and turned to look him in the eye. "Really?" he asked, eyes wide in troubled disbelief. "You mean, it's always that intense for you?" He looked away for a minute, trying to hide the hurt. "Shit, you're a Sentinel. Of *course* it's always that way for you...."

Jim embraced the younger man and held him close. "Hey, come on. I was just kidding around. You think a man my age would still be standing if sex were always that intense? This was off the charts, Baby. Off the charts." He leaned around to see if Blair's face smoothed over, and it did. He even smiled, and the corners of Jim's mouth lifted in response.

"If you call me Baby at the station, Simon will kick it right there," Blair warned.

"Some big tough cop you are," Blair scoffed. "You're nothing but one big pile of mush." Jim just laughed and started gently stroking his lover. "Mmm, this is nice," Blair sighed after awhile. "I'm usually headed out the door by now. Guess maybe this cuddling thing isn't as overrated as I thought."

"Depends who's doing the cuddling," Jim said. "Be warned, Chief--I wake up in the morning and find you sleeping downstairs, I'll be pissed."

"Spoken like a man who isn't smack dab in the middle of the wet spot," Blair said wryly. "It'll dry." So much for sympathy from the big man.

"It's going to be weird the next time we're working together," Blair said in a drowsy voice.

Jim paused his ministrations. "Why?"

Blair shrugged. "I don't know. I just....I can't imagine looking at you anymore without wanting....you know, this."

"Twenty-four hours a day?" Jim teased. "Seven days a week, 52 weeks a year--nothing but non-stop, hotter than hell, no holes barred sex? Might become boring after awhile--not to mention life threatening."

With a grin, Blair wiggled his ass against Jim's flaccid groin. "Speak for yourself, Old Man."

"You call me Old Man in front of Simon and I'll see to it that *you* kick it right there."

"I'll stick to Daddy-O in public," Blair promised, shouting with laughter when Jim rolled on top of him and pinned him to the bed. "I give! I give!" Blair called, still laughing when Jim eased off.

"I'll tame you yet," Jim vowed, running his hand through Blair's curly hair, before letting the younger man know he wasn't in any hurry. "Eventually. Years and years and years from now."

Blair smiled to himself. He sounded so sure. He wouldn't sound so sure if it wasn't true, would he? "Mmm, nice," he said again, his breath growing deeper as sleep crept closer and closer.

"Hey, Blair," Jim whispered diffidently. "You haven't said it yet, you know that?" Given the discussion over the past two days, Jim knew Blair wouldn't be there with him if he hadn't made a decision in his own mind, but it never hurt to hear it, either.

Blair's voice came out smooth and slow. "Said what?"

"You know. I said it already, but you haven't yet." Jim fiddled absent-mindedly with Blair's curls and wondered if the younger man realized how much of the upper hand he really had in the relationship.

"You know I do," Blair said, but even half-asleep, he realized it wasn't enough.

Jim grinned. The hardest part was out of the way. All that was left was just candy. "I want to hear the whole thing, Baby."

Blair nodded, but was silent for a moment, seeking courage and maybe trying, for whatever it was
worth, to catch a glimpse of the future. "I love you, Jim," he said softly, and continued to himself

"More than my life, more than my next breath. I love you, and I always will."

"Mm, good boy," Jim whispered. "I love you too."

"Enough to sleep on the wet spot?"

"Say good night, Blair."

"G'night."

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