

Summary: Jim and Blair survive their first year of new parenthood.

Categories: [The Sentinel](#) Characters: Blair Sandburg, Ensemble, Henri (H) Brown, Jim Ellison, Jim/Blair, Joel Taggart, Megan Connor, Rafe, Simon Banks

Genres: Slash

Warnings: Previous Warnings Apply

Challenges: None

Series: None

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Story Notes:

This story contains male pregnancy and all the physical and emotional changes that the overload of hormones brings about. If this is something that bothers you, please don't read this story. A possible "squick" for some people: Blair has small breasts; the result of the hormones and the fact that he is lactating/nursing.

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### Chapter 1 by NatalieL

#### Author's Notes:

This story is a sequel to *Nine Months* and was previously published by the wonderful people at AngelWings Press.

"Owwww. . . ." The moan carried through the door and out into the hall as Jim made his way from the elevator, shopping bag in hand. He fit the key in the lock and opened the door. On the couch, his lover was slumped in a miserable heap, the baby sleeping soundly in her crib.

"Did you bring it?" Blair asked.

Jim smiled at the petulant tone and pulled a small jar of ointment from the bag. Coming over to settle himself on the floor between Blair's knees, he carefully unbuttoned the soft flannel shirt and opened it, revealing two softly rounding breasts protruding from the thatch of chest hair. Scooping some ointment onto his fingers, he began to gently massage it into the sore, cracked nipples.

"Oh, man, that feels nice," Blair purred, relaxing into the cushions as Jim ministered to him. "Lynne didn't warn me about this little complication of breastfeeding."

"She probably didn't want to scare you off," Jim chuckled. "The pharmacist said this stuff is safe for the baby, so don't worry about nursing when we're done here."

"Hopefully, I won't have to worry about that for another couple hours," Blair said wistfully. "I just fed her and put her down for a nap."

Jim finished his doctoring and came to sit next to his lover on the couch. "How about a little nap time for Mommy, too?" he said, pulling Blair down so that his head rested in Jim's lap. "It's been a long week for you."

Too tired to protest the "Mommy" line, Blair simply murmured, "Yeah," and closed his eyes. Since coming home from the hospital five days ago, their world had revolved around feedings and diapers. Jim was grateful to escape to the office each day, where all he had to deal with was the low-life scum of Cascade. Blair, on the other hand, was kept busy nursing every two to three hours, never seeming to get enough sleep to keep him going. The cracked nipples simply added insult to injury, making Jim feel a bit guilty about enjoying his time away from home.

He absently stroked the long, soft curls beneath his hand. Since getting pregnant, Blair had not had the time or energy to get his hair cut, and the hormones had stimulated its growth. Jim decided he liked mid-back length, the way it fell over Blair's shoulders, sheltering father and daughter during nursings, how it tangled in his fingers and tickled his chest and abdomen as they made love.

Leaning his head back against the couch cushions, Jim closed his eyes, content to enjoy the rare peace in what had become the bustle of their lives.

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A squall woke the slumbering couple an hour later. Moaning in disbelief, Blair pushed himself up from the comfort of his Sentinel's lap and turned toward the crib.

"When will she start sleeping through the night?" Jim asked, watching as Blair plodded slowly across the room to where Laurene was putting up a fuss in her crib.

"Probably not until three or four months," Blair answered tiredly. "Once she starts eating solid foods, she'll have enough in her tummy to hold her several hours. Breast milk digests too quickly."

"Well, maybe considering the problems you're having nursing, we should at least consider formula. Don't babies sleep longer when they're formula-fed?"

"Yeah, but it's not the same. I started this; I'm gonna finish it." He checked the diaper, and finding it dry, lifted Laurene from her bed and carried her over to the couch. Settling down in one corner, Blair unbuttoned his shirt and positioned the baby over his heart. Latching on with the vengeance of the hungry, she began to nurse enthusiastically.

Jim watched Blair's face, sentinel sight catching every flicker of pain that crossed those expressive eyes as their daughter pulled at the sore nipple. Stoically, Blair endured what had become a painful experience for him. Jim sidled over, draping an arm around the younger man's shoulders and pulling his family against him. Blair snuggled his head under Jim's chin, and sighed.

Jim petted the soft curls tickling his chin and clucked soothing noises at the nursing father and baby. Blair slipped one finger between his nipple and the puckered lips of his infant daughter, breaking the suction so he could shift her to the other breast. A weary sigh escaped as he snuggled deeper into the Sentinel's protective embrace.

Jim pressed his lips into the soft hair under his chin, kissing Blair gently. "Hang in there, Hon. You're doing great," he whispered.

When Laurene had finally finished her feeding, Jim extricated her from the arms of her daddy and took her across the room to the changing table. Expertly stripping off the miniature newborn diaper, he quickly folded it and deposited it in the pail. Wiping down the tiny butt with a moist towelette and sprinkling it with cornstarch baby powder, he quickly replaced the wet diaper with a dry one.

A loud thud made him turn around to see Blair lying on the floor midway between the couch and the kitchen. He quickly positioned Laurene on her back in the center of the crib. Rushing to his partner's side, he knelt down in front of the rocking, shuddering figure.

"Blair, what's wrong?" At first, he got no response. Blair's eyes were tightly shut, tears glistening under his lashes. With arms wrapped tightly around himself, he was rocking in place. "Blair?" Jim reached a hand out to lay gently on his back.

"Oh, God, it hurts, Jim!" Blair hissed through clenched teeth. "What's happening? Why does it hurt?" He continued the rhythmic rocking motion.

Jim noted with alarm how pale the younger man had become. Without answering the rhetorical questions, he stood and lunged for the phone. "I'm calling 911," he said as he dialed.

"Make it stop, Jim," Blair cried before listing to the side and falling over.

The sudden quiet in the room panicked the usually stoic Sentinel. As he waited for the ambulance to arrive, he moved sensitive hands over his Guide, trying to determine what had caused the sudden collapse. The pasty white complexion and shallow breathing had all his alarm bells ringing. It took a major force of will to leave Blair's side when the doorbell rang. "Hang in there, Blair. It's going to be all right," he soothed before standing and making a rush for the door.

The paramedics hurried to the side of the stricken man, assessing his vital signs and asking questions. "Can you tell us what happened here?" the Asian medic asked, looking up at Jim.

"He'd just finished nursing and I was changing the baby. . . ."

"Whoa, back up here a minute," the older, senior medic said. "Nursing?"

"He just had a baby, dammit," Jim exploded. "We don't have time for this. He's dying!"

The medics looked up questioningly, while continuing to set up the IV line and getting Blair settled onto the backboard for transport to the gurney waiting by the door.

"We're part of Dr. Lynne Casey's male pregnancy program," he explained quickly. "Blair gave birth eight days ago. He's only been home from the hospital for five days." He watched as the men carried the backboard and its precious cargo over to the gurney. "He'd just finished nursing and I was taking care of the baby when I heard him fall. He had his arms wrapped around his stomach and was complaining about the pain. Then he passed out."

Liang Hu grabbed the portable phone that connected the medics to the hospital and called in with the statistics. "Make sure Dr. Casey is there when we get there. This is one of her male pregnancy patients," he added.

The medics hustled the gurney out into the hall and down to the elevator. Jim stood, temporarily rooted to the spot, watching them take Blair away. A traitorous thought flitted across his mind: would this be the last time he saw Blair alive? It's not fair, Chief. You can't leave me like this, not now. . . .

He stepped back inside, closing the door behind him. Mechanically, he walked over to the crib and scooped up his daughter, cuddling her against his breast. Whatever happened, he would always have a little piece of Blair here with him. But Blair wasn't going to die. He wouldn't dare.

He searched for the tiny coat, finally wrapping Laurene in several insulated blankets instead. Without putting her down, Jim managed to struggle into his own coat. Picking up his keys from the table by the door, he hurried out and down to the truck. Quickly strapping Laurene in her car seat, he slid into the driver's seat and gunned the engine. As he careened out of the parking lot, he grabbed for his portable light, turning it on along with his siren.

A few minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot opposite Cascade General's emergency room. Laurene tucked in the cradle of his left arm, he charged through the doors and straight to the nurses' desk.

"Blair Sandburg," he growled. "He was just brought in by ambulance a few minutes ago."

The nurse checked her records and looked up at the distraught man. "He's being prepped for surgery," she informed him.

"I need to see him," Jim insisted, heading for the double doors that led to the treatment area.

The petite nurse moved quickly from behind her desk to block his way. "I'm sorry, sir, but you can't see him right now. They're preparing him for emergency surgery."

"What kind?" Jim growled.

"I don't have that information," the nurse stated. "Now, if you'll just take a seat in the waiting area, I'll let you know as soon as there's any word from the surgeon."

"Like hell." Jim barged past the smaller woman and through the treatment room doors.

"Sir, you can't go back there," she called out, following him. "Doctor. . ." She snagged a passing physician and indicated the determined man with the baby striding down the hallway.

The doctor jogged to catch up, grabbing Jim's arm and pulling him around. "I'm sorry, sir, but this area is off limits to visitors. Who was it you were checking on?"

"Blair Sandburg." Jim cocked his head to one side and paused. "I don't hear him. Where is he?"

"If you'll please just wait outside," the doctor gestured back to the doors, "I promise I'll check immediately and come back with whatever news I can find out."

Jim visibly deflated, losing over an inch of his height as his shoulders drooped in defeat. Taking his daughter, he headed back toward the waiting room. "You'll check right away?" he asked, turning at the doors to nail the doctor with ice blue eyes.

"I promise I'll get right back to you," the doctor assured him.

Jim walked over to the bank of pay phones, dropped in his quarters, and dialed. "Simon? Yeah, it's me. I'm at Cascade General. Blair's in surgery. . . . I don't know, sir," he answered after a brief pause to listen. "He just collapsed at home, and I called 911. I'm waiting for someone to tell me what the hell's going on." He listened intently for a few seconds before responding again. "You don't have to do that, sir. We're fine," he lied. "Okay, Simon. Whatever you say. You're the boss." He hung up the phone and went back to settle in one of the hard plastic chairs. He looked down into the peacefully oblivious face of their sleeping daughter. "Your daddy's going to be okay, Sugar," he crooned. "He's got to be. . . ."

The sound of footsteps made the Sentinel look up from his musings. The doctor from the treatment rooms stood before him.

"I wasn't able to get too much information. It appears that the placenta is separating from the omentum, causing massive hemorrhage. He's in surgery now. Dr. Casey will come down and give you all the details once she's finished with the operation." The doctor appeared genuinely concerned, but couldn't be made to give out any more information. At this point, there was nothing more to know.

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Simon came bursting through the waiting room doors, followed closely by Megan Connor. Scanning the room, he quickly spotted his detective slouched in a chair near the nurses' desk. He walked over and dropped a large hand onto Jim's shoulder.

"Any news?"

Jim looked up, weariness ringing his eyes. "Not much, Simon. A doctor came out to tell me it had to do with a separated placenta and massive hemorrhage, but he didn't have anything more to say. We have to wait for Lynne to finish the surgery."

"But the placenta is expelled right after birth," Megan commented, looking puzzled.

"Not in a male pregnancy," Jim explained. "The placenta is left intact, and is absorbed by the body. At least, that's what's supposed to happen."

"But Sandburg can't do anything the easy way," Simon interjected, shaking his head.

"Yeah, trouble still comes looking for him around every corner," Jim answered wryly. There was a pause as he looked at his sleeping daughter, then up into the dark brown eyes of his captain. "I can't lose him, Simon. I can't. Blair's my whole life. I can't raise our daughter alone."

Sinking down into the chair next to Jim, Simon lifted the small bundle from his arms, cradling the

infant gently in his large hands. "You'd be surprised what you can do when you have to, Jim." He studied his detective closely. "Blair's going to pull through. He's strong. You have to believe in him. Don't give up on him yet."

"I haven't, Simon, but it's hard, you know?" His ruminations were interrupted by some soft lip smacking, followed by a hearty bellow of hunger. The cry elicited a weak smile from the new father. "She's hungry again," he mentioned unnecessarily.

"Did you bring along the diaper bag?" Megan asked.

Jim looked up at her, perplexed. "Diaper bag? God, no. I wasn't thinking of Laurene when this happened."

"Well, give me the keys to the apartment, and I'll go pick up a few things for you," the Aussie Inspector offered. "Do you have any formula?"

"No." Jim shook his head. "Blair's been breastfeeding, and he wouldn't allow a can of formula in the house."

"I'll pick one up for you, then," Megan said, grabbing the offered keys and heading for the door. She returned within a half hour, loaded down with diapers, bottles and baby accessories.

"Here you go, mate," she said, depositing her load at Jim's feet. "I got the premixed formula. You can feed it right out of the can."

"It's not warmed," Jim protested.

"Don't worry," Simon assured him. "If she's hungry enough, she'll eat it. Trust me."

Megan popped the can open and filled a bottle, handing it to Jim who quickly pushed it into the squalling mouth. Quiet immediately descended as Laurene sucked eagerly at the offering.

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Chapter 4 by NatalieL

Lynne Casey emerged from surgery five hours later, wearily tugging at her soiled gloves. She scooped the surgical cap from her head, allowing her long hair to fall free, and made her way down the hallway to the waiting room.

Jim rose immediately upon seeing the doctor enter the room. "How's Blair? What happened? Can I see him?"

Lynne smiled wearily at the barrage of questions. "Blair's fine. It was really touch and go there for a while, we nearly lost him more than once, but he's a fighter. In a small number of cases of male pregnancy, the placenta spontaneously separates from the abdominal wall, instead of being absorbed, as would be expected, leaving a large wound that needs to be sutured shut. Blair drew the short straw. There's no rhyme nor reason to this kind of thing happening. It just does sometimes.

"Anyway, he lost a lot of blood. We had to transfuse five pints during the surgery. He was bleeding out, but you got him here in time."

"When can we see him?" Jim repeated.

"Well, I really need to ask you to wait a while longer. He's in ICU recovery now. We're watching him closely. When he's stable enough to be moved to a room, you can go up, Jim, but you'll have to leave Laurene with one of your colleagues, here. Babies aren't allowed to visit in ICU."

"Blair's going to want to see her."

"He's just going to have to wait. Babies pose too much risk of infection, and Blair's condition is still critical."

"How long?"

"At least another hour," Lynne said sympathetically. "Why don't you try going down to the cafeteria and getting yourself a bite to eat? You've got a long, rough road ahead, Jim, and you need to keep up your strength."

"I'll just wait here," Jim intoned.

"Like hell you will, Detective." Simon's bellow was muted in deference to the hospital environment. "I'm taking you down for at least a cup of coffee. No arguments."

Jim gathered up Laurene's supplies, stuffing them back into the diaper bag, then stood and followed his captain. Once in the cafeteria, he hunched over his cup of strong, black coffee as Megan entertained the baby.

"He's going to be fine now, Jim. You can stop worrying," Simon soothed.

"I'll feel better when I can talk to him myself," Jim mumbled. "You didn't see him, Simon. He was white as a sheet and barely breathing. I thought I'd lost him for sure." His hands trembled slightly as he picked up the cup and sipped at the brew. "He was in such pain, and then he was gone. I was so afraid I wasn't going to get to tell him good-bye." He nearly choked on the next sip of coffee, as he tried to rein in the tears before they could get started.

No one spoke, letting Jim get control before continuing on. Simon spotted a plate with muffins stacked high and went to purchase one. He came back to the table and split the muffin three ways. He shoved a piece in front of Jim, who mumbled his thanks, but ignored the offering.

Megan dug into her portion with gusto. "Mmmm, this is really good, Simon. Orange-cranberry's one of my favorites." She turned toward Jim. "You should try it, Jim," she urged.

"Yeah," Simon chimed in. "What would Sandburg say?"

Jim looked up, a ghost of a smile turning up the corners of his mouth. "He'd ask why I think I have to fill my bloodstream with mega-doses of sugar and fat, and tell me that the minuscule amounts of fruit don't begin to make up for it . . . then he'd suggest a Cobb salad instead."

"And your response would be?" Simon prompted.

Jim shoved the entire muffin section into his mouth and attempted to chew. Simon's guffaw of genuine mirth brought smiles to both the Sentinel and the Inspector.

When Jim could finally swallow and speak again, he looked at his friends. "I need to go check on Blair."

"I suppose that means I have to give up this precious bundle," Megan sighed, handing a sleeping Laurene over to her father.

"Thanks, Megan."

"You can ask me to babysit anytime." She flashed him a huge smile.



"Mind if we go with you?" Simon asked, rising.

"If you want," Jim answered absently, making his way out of the cafeteria and back toward the main desk in the hospital's lobby.

"May I help you?" the receptionist at the desk asked.

"Yes. Is Blair Sandburg settled in his room yet?"

The woman checked her computer. "Are you Jim Ellison?"

"Yes, I am," Jim answered.

"There's a note here that Dr. Casey will come down to speak with you when Mr. Sandburg is ready for visitors. If you'd just have a seat over there," she indicated a row of chairs, "I'll inform Dr. Casey that you're here."

Simon and Megan settled in the indicated seats, while Jim prowled the lobby, burning off the nervous energy that seemed to permeate every fiber of every muscle.

Lynne Casey came striding purposefully down the hallway, stopping in front of the pacing man. "He's settled now, Jim," she said softly. "He's still in critical condition, so the visit will have to be short."

"Megan, do you mind?" Jim asked, handing the baby to the Inspector.

Megan was immediately on her feet. "Happy to, Love," she said, holding out her arms.

"There's an observation window in the room. You all could come up. Blair could at least see that he has other visitors." She smiled. "I'm sure he'd love to see Laurene, even if it's only through the window. Come this way." She led the way down the hall to a bank of elevators. Stepping onto the first one available, she pressed the button for the fifth floor.

"His room is right here, off the nurses' station," Lynne said, indicating a room whose door was slightly ajar. "He was still sleeping when I came to get you. You can sit with him a while, until he wakes up again."

Jim pushed the door open carefully and stepped inside. The figure occupying the single bed in the room looked so small and pale, dwarfed by the equipment and lines monitoring his well-being. Somewhere inside the tangle of IV tubing and oxygen masks lay his partner. He stepped to Blair's left and picked up a limp hand, careful of the needles protruding from the delicate veins.

"God, Blair, why does this keep happening to us?" He sighed, looking down onto the peacefully sleeping face.

Dr. Casey interrupted his reverie. "It's all right to wake him. Actually, according to the monitors, he's not even asleep."

"I know," Jim answered absently. "His heart rate and respiration are too high for sleep."

"How did you. . . ?"

"I was a medic in the Army," came the quick response.

Lynne brushed an errant lock from Blair's forehead and leaned down close to his ear. "Blair, Jim's here to see you. Won't you please open your eyes for him? He's been very worried about

you."

"Blair, please?" Jim begged. "I need to see you're all right. I need to hear it from you." He waited, rubbing the back of the limp hand with his thumb. After what seemed an interminable time, a slit of blue showed under the heavy, dark lashes. "That's it, Blair. Wake up for me--you can do it."

The sliver of blue got larger, until Blair was finally focused in on his Sentinel. "Jim?" The voice was weak, but firm.

"That's me, Sweetheart. How're you feeling?"

"Not so hot," Blair muttered.

"You've just been through surgery," Lynne explained, "and you're in ICU. I wouldn't expect you to be feeling too well right now."

"My breasts hurt."

Jim laid down the hand he was holding to gently probe the small globes. "They're pretty hard, all right," he noted.

"When did he last nurse Laurene?" Dr. Casey asked.

"Just before he collapsed," Jim answered.

"That would explain it, then." Lynne nodded. "It's been nearly seven hours since he last nursed, and I'm sure he's used to feedings every two hours or so." Jim nodded in agreement. Lynne turned her attention to Blair. "Your breasts are engorged with milk. I'll have to go find you a breast pump." She looked up at Jim. "We can help him express the milk now, and then again at two-hour intervals. This first milk will have to be discarded because of the anesthesia and medications, but once he's been stabilized, and is off the heavy pain medications, the milk can be stored and used to feed Laurene until Blair is able to nurse again."

Blair's eyes had drifted shut again. Lynne turned to go locate the pump, while Jim gently shook a shoulder. "Laurene's here, Blair."

The statement caused Blair to open his eyes again. He looked at Jim, who pointed toward the window. Turning his head, he saw their child proudly displayed there by Megan. She smiled and lifted one of the baby's small arms to wave at her daddy.

"I want to hold her," Blair whispered.

"Sorry, Sweetheart, not yet." Jim's voice was full of regret.

"I miss her."

"I know you do. She misses you, too, Blair."

"It's not fair, Jim." Blair's eyes filled with tears that quickly turned into a cascade down his cheeks. "She needs me."

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Jim soothed, petting the top of Blair's head. "She misses you as much as I do, but if we follow all the rules, you'll be able to come home sooner, and we'll all be a family again."

Lynne walked back in carrying a breast pump. Mindful of the IV tubing sprouting from seemingly

everywhere, she peeled down Blair's gown, exposing the small, firm mounds of his breasts. "You place the cup firmly over the nipple, like this," she demonstrated, "then flip this little switch." The battery-operated unit hummed to life, creating a suction around the breast, pulling gently at the nipple. Squirts of milk began to slowly fill the attached baby bottle. When the flow finally diminished, she turned the unit off. "Now we do the other breast. Jim, do you want to try?"

Jim looked a little startled. "Shouldn't Blair be doing this?"

"Normally, yes, but he's too weak right now to hold the pump in place. You'll have to do it for him until he can do it himself."

Reluctantly, Jim took the offered pump and positioned it over the other breast. "That's right," Lynne reassured him. He flicked the switch and watched as the suction pulled the milk from his lover's breast.

When they were finished, a small sigh issued from the bed's occupant. "Better." Blair turned his head toward Jim. "How long?"

"How long, what?"

"How long since Laurene ate?"

"Oh, not more than an hour ago, I think," he answered.

"How?"

"Huh?" Jim was thrown a bit by the question. Blair was not yet strong enough to manage complicated sentences. Then it dawned on him. "We had to buy her some formula."

"No. . ." Blair moaned. "No, no, no. . ."

"Blair, Sweetheart, we had to do something. You were in surgery, and she was hungry. What else could we do?"

The tears, always near the surface now, began to slide down Blair's cheeks again. "Oh, don't do that, please," Jim begged, wiping them off Blair's cheeks with a thumb. He leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss against slightly parted lips. "Everything's going to be fine now," Jim assured his partner, and in his own heart, he finally believed it himself.

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Chapter 5 by NatalieL

Lynne had eventually kicked him out. Reluctantly, he had come home, feeling strangely empty and at a loss for what to do. Laurene was fussing, so he fixed a bottle of formula and settled down on the couch to feed her. She spit out the bottle's nipple twice before finally accepting the foreign taste of the formula, and drinking hungrily. When she had finished, Jim changed her diaper and put her down for a nap in her crib.

Once the baby was settled, Jim paced around the loft, nervous energy still not completely dissipated from the stress-inducing day. He found himself in front of Blair's old bedroom, which had become a catch-all storage room for the anthropologist since he moved upstairs to sleep. The thought entered his mind that the tiny room would make an excellent nursery. So far, Laurene's crib had been rolled around the downstairs area during the day, to wherever it was most convenient at the time, and she spent her nights in bed between her daddies, making late night feedings much easier on Blair. She needed a room of her own.

Taking a deep breath, Jim dove into the mess, stacking and organizing. A trip to the basement storage area produced boxes, which Jim quickly filled. Leaving the books and pictures intact, as

well as some of Blair's ornamental wall hangings, he efficiently boxed and cleaned the contents of the room. Even the futon was dragged out. Next time Simon came over, he could help Jim get the bed into the basement.

Suddenly overcome with exhaustion from the stress of a long day, he flopped down on the futon and closed his eyes. Blair's scent still lightly permeated the bedding. Pulling a brightly colored Peruvian blanket around himself, he fell asleep.

He awoke, several hours later, to the lusty wailing of their daughter. He climbed out of the warmth of his cocoon, loath to leave the reminder of his love, in order to attend to her. Once Laurene was comfortable again, he took her upstairs to the bed, cuddling her tiny body against his chest.

His night's sleep was interrupted with regularity, and when morning finally arrived, Jim arose, less than rested and feeling Blair's absence deeply.

A quick shower and shave freshened him, but did nothing to cheer his mood. With no appetite for breakfast, he wandered back over to the newly created nursery. He looked the room over critically before making a decision. Marching out the front door, he walked over to apartment 306 across and down the hall. Mrs. McGinty, a gray-haired, grandmotherly woman, opened to his knock.

"Oh, Detective Ellison. How good to see you! How's Blair and that sweet little baby of yours?"

"Blair's in the hospital," he started to explain. Mrs. McGinty clucked her tongue and looked saddened. "He had a complication from giving birth, but he's going to be okay. It's a little dicey right now, but his doctor is confident everything's going to be fine."

"I'm so glad to hear that," the woman exclaimed. "Would you like to come in?"

"No, actually, I was hoping I could convince you to come over and watch Laurene for a few minutes. I need to go to the hardware store."

"Oh, I'd be more than happy to help." She shuffled out into the hallway, pulling her door shut behind her. "That baby of yours is such a sweet thing. Nary a peep out of her."

Jim grinned, knowing the old woman was hard of hearing. "Yeah, she's pretty well-behaved for a newborn," he agreed. He opened the door to 307 and ushered Mrs. McGinty in. "She's sleeping right now. Feel free to watch TV or something. I shouldn't be long."

"No problem, young man. Take your time." She walked over to the crib and smiled sweetly at the tiny baby nestled in her blankets.

Jim waved good-bye and headed out to the truck. Fifteen minutes later he was at the hardware store, in the paint section. After much indecision, he finally picked out two gallons of a pale mint green and a roll of wallpaper edging. Loading his purchases into the truck, he made his way back to the loft.

When he arrived home, the smell of baking wafted into the hallway. Opening the door, the sweet scent of chocolate hit his sinuses and palate at the same time. "Whoa! Mrs. McGinty, what are you up to?"

"You boys didn't have a single sweet in the house, except for fruit. I thought you might enjoy some of my chocolate chip cookies." She smiled up from the batch she was transferring to the cooling racks.

"Um, yeah. That's great, thanks." Jim's mouth watered. "You didn't have to do that, you know."

"Oh, I wanted to, believe me," the old woman said, continuing her cookie assembly line.

"Well, okay then," Jim agreed. "It won't bother you if I paint?"

"Not at all. Not at all," she said, ignoring the detective in favor of the next batch of cookies.

Jim entered the small room again, knowing he needed to take things off the walls now. He piled everything just outside the room, found his drop cloths and prepared the windows and baseboards for painting.

By the time he had finished, Mrs. McGinty had cleaned up and gone home, leaving a huge container of fresh cookies behind. Jim cleaned himself up, just as Laurene woke up crying.

Going over to the crib, the sweet scent of chocolate was quickly replaced by something less pleasant. "Geez, Blair," he muttered, "why aren't you here to do this?" He tried dialing down his sense of smell, but it didn't help much. He placed Laurene on the diapering table and peeled back the Velcro tabs of the diaper to reveal the stinky mess.

Holding two tiny ankles together with one large hand, he lifted the baby's butt out of the primordial slime of the diaper. One-handedly, he rolled and pitched it, knowing he would have to empty the garbage tonight if he was ever going to get any sleep. Fresh paint had nothing on the smell of a dirty diaper. He took a towelette and wiped down the dirty bottom, finding some relief. Actually, when he thought about it, Laurene hadn't had a bath since Blair had gotten sick.

He wrapped his daughter loosely in a new diaper and placed her back into her crib. Going over to the sink, he got out the dishpan they used as a bathtub and began to run warm water into it. Gathering his supplies, he finally went to grab the object of all the preparations.

He lowered Laurene into the warm water, splashing some up her tiny chest, wetting her down thoroughly. Using a mild baby shampoo, he washed the copious reddish curls, gently massaging her scalp, then used some of the lather to cleanse her body.

Laurene endured the bath in stoic silence. Jim rinsed her off, then lifted her from the water, cocooning her in fluffy white towels.

Once the baby was dried and dressed, Jim warmed a bottle of formula and settled down in front of the TV for a feeding. There was a Jags game on, but somehow the remote tuned to the Learning Channel instead. He missed Blair. He missed Blair's noise; his constant chatter, his educational TV shows, his aboriginal music. The loft was too quiet with just the two of them there.

The ringing of the phone woke Jim. He came awake with a start, surprised at himself for having fallen asleep. "Ellison," he answered, succinctly.

Hi, Jim. Megan here.

"Oh, hi, Megan. What's up?"

Thought you might like a little relief. Have you been to see Blair yet today?

"As a matter of fact, no, I haven't. I've been a little busy."

I'm ready to leave for the day, Megan said, causing Jim to check the clock: 5:15 p.m. If you'd like, I'll stop by and watch Laurene so you can go spend a little time at the hospital.

"That would be great, Megan. Thanks."

No worries, mate. I'll be there in ten. Bye. With that, a soft click broke the connection.

Jim stood up, Laurene still cradled in his arms, and took her to the changing table to freshen her up. He laid her in her crib and wound up the musical mobile. Turning toward the kitchen, he proceeded to toss together a roast beef sandwich from some leftovers, washing it down with a tall glass of milk--the most nutrition he'd had in two days.

He'd just finished and was putting the dishes in the sink, when there came a knock on the door. "Hey, Megan." He hugged the Aussie Inspector warmly. She had become a very close friend of the family in the past few weeks.

"Hey, yourself. Where's the munchkin?" She walked unerringly across the room to the crib. "Here she is!" she crowed, lifting Laurene and cradling her in her arms. The baby answered with a coo of delight. "What a dolly." She turned to Jim. "Get along with you. Blair's been waiting all day.💎"

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Chapter 6 by NatalieL

Jim arrived at Cascade General's ICU and went immediately to Blair's room. A smile greeted him.

"You're awake. That's a surprise."

"Nurse was just in," Blair answered briefly, indicating the IVs and monitors that needed frequent checking.

"Lucky for me. I usually have to sit here and wait for you to wake up. How are you feeling?"

"Fuzzy." Blair closed his eyes briefly, not yet having the strength to stay awake for long intervals. "Sit." He waved toward a chair pushed in the corner.

Jim pulled the chair over next to the bed and settled in. He picked up Blair's hand, squeezing gently. "You're looking better today, you've got more color."

"That's from all the nurses pinching my cheeks and telling me what a cutie I am. You'd better watch it, Jim, you've got competition." A small grin curled his lips.

"You can flirt all you want, Casanova. Just remember whose bed you come home to."

"Always." Blair attempted to squeeze Jim's hand in return, but managed only a weak curling of fingers. His eyelids slid shut again.

"Go to sleep," Jim suggested. "I don't mind, and you need your rest."

"I'm sorry," a nurse interrupted. She stood in the doorway with a cart filled with bathing supplies. "You'll have to step out of the room for a few minutes while I bathe Mr. Sandburg."

Jim stood, but didn't budge from Blair's side. "Let me."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's impossible. If you'll just step outside, this will only take ten minutes." She pushed the cart up to the bed and began to peel back the blankets, mindful of all the needles and tubing sprouting from various areas of Blair's body.

"I'm Blair's S.O., and I used to be a medic in the Army. I know how to bathe bedridden patients."

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"Check with Dr. Casey," Jim interrupted, standing his ground.

"This is quite irregular," the nurse protested.

"So, what else is new? Go check." As the nurse backed out of the room, Jim took stock of the supplies on the cart. More than sufficient to do the job.

The nurse came back a few minutes later, looking a bit miffed, but resigned. "She said you could bathe him, as long as I stayed in the room to supervise in case anything goes wrong."

"What could go wrong? It's just a bath," Jim argued. "I'd like a little privacy." The nurse stood her ground. "All right, give me a minute, would you?" He stepped out into the hallway and over to the nurses' station. "Can you get Dr. Casey for me, please?" he asked, picking up the phone's handset and handing it to the nurse at the desk.

Several minutes and a short conversation later, the head nurse on the floor entered Blair's room and escorted her indignant colleague out. "He's all yours. Ring the call button if you have any problems."

Turning on his heel, Jim re-entered the room and pulled the blinds shut. "Finally, a little privacy," he breathed. "Hey, Chief." He shook Blair lightly. "You ready for a bath?"

Blair nodded agreement, smiling, even though his eyes were still closed.

Jim carefully stripped off Blair's gown, then draped it modestly across his hips. Taking the waterless cleansing foam, he saturated a cloth and began at Blair's neck and shoulders, working methodically down his chest, skirting the still-sore nipples as the cloth caressed each small breast. He worked quickly, mindful of how easily his partner chilled, scrubbing down his chest and abdomen until finally reaching his hips. He removed the cotton gown, exposing lax genitals nestled in a thatch of dark curly hair. After a half dozen heartbeats, he lifted them gently in the palm of his hand and washed them. He longed for the intimacy so long deprived them by the pregnancy, birth, and now this, but steeled his resolve to be patient. Blair was worth waiting for.

He pulled gently at his partner's shoulder and hip, turning him about three-quarters of the way over, so he could reach around to scrub back and buttocks. When he had finished, he pulled a clean gown from the cart and dressed Blair. He then finished wiping down legs and feet. He pulled the blanket up to Blair's chest, laying his arms on top of the covers.

"Ready to have me tackle that mop on your head?" he asked his dozing partner.

Blair cracked his eyes open and nodded. Jim knew well how much the young man hated dirty hair. At home, those curls were washed daily, sometimes twice a day, if conditions warranted. He filled his palm with the rinseless shampoo and began massaging it into Blair's scalp, working his way out to the ends of the long, kinky strands of silk. He then towed out the moisture and oils before pushing the cart aside, finished at last.

"How am I supposed to comb out that mass?" he mused aloud, pulling a small, black comb from his hip pocket and shaking his head.

"Pants."

Jim turned to look at the figure on the bed. "Pocket." Blair had lifted an arm and was pointing toward the closet.

Getting up, Jim went to search through the pockets of the jeans Blair had been wearing when he was brought into the hospital the day before. In the left hip pocket was a bright red stylist's pick. He withdrew the instrument, and returned to the bedside, carefully detangling the curling strands

until Blair's hair lay like russet silk against the stark white of the pillowcase.

"Better?" He stroked his fingers across Blair's forehead, brushing a stubborn lock of hair out of his eyes.

"Much. Thanks, Jim." Jim watched as two tired eyes opened to smile at him with guileless blue.

"You're welcome. It was my pleasure." Jim's voice held obvious affection. He leaned down to press his lips against the full ones beneath him, and was surprised when they parted, offering more than the usual Puritan pecks that had become the norm of late. He allowed himself a brief taste before pulling back, afraid of his body's reactions if he lingered. "You rest now, okay?" Blair nodded. "I'll be back tomorrow. Love you, Babe."

"Love you," the soft voice replied before Blair's breathing evened out in sleep.

Softly, Jim pulled the door closed behind him as he left.

The following morning:

Stripping off his dirty clothes, Jim entered the bathroom and started the water for the shower. After his morning ablutions were finished, he went upstairs to dress.

He was just starting breakfast, when there was a knock at the door. Puzzled, he went to see who would be visiting at this early hour. "Mrs. McGinty! What are you doing over here so early?"

"I thought you might need some help with the baby, seeing as how your young man isn't here."

Jim grinned, wondering how Blair would react to being called his "young man." At least the old woman didn't seem to disapprove of their relationship. "Please come in. I was just fixing breakfast. Would you like to join me?"

"Oh, thank you, no," she answered. "I've already eaten. You go right ahead." She bustled herself into the apartment, making herself at home. "You must be lonely," she said, turning to Jim. "I remember what it was like right after my Glover died. The apartment was so empty, so quiet. My children had all moved away. I hardly knew what to do with myself."

"Well, Blair isn't dead," Jim reminded her. "He's coming home. And I have Laurene here for company."

"Little ones are more work than company," she said knowingly, "but they do tend to soothe that aching spot in your heart. . . ." Her eyes became vacant as her mind wandered through old memories. Snapping back to the present, she pinned Jim with a look. "You miss him."

"Yeah, I do," Jim admitted.

"Why don't you let me watch little Laurene, while you make a trip to the hospital?"

"I wouldn't want to impose. . . ."

"You wouldn't be imposing," Mrs. McGinty interrupted. "Now, you get yourself off to the hospital and spend some time with that young man of yours. Don't you worry about anything here."

Jim smiled in relief. He'd wondered how he would be able to visit Blair so long as the ICU rules were in place. His only other babysitters tended to work unpredictable hours. "I really appreciate this, Mrs. McGinty," he said, grabbing his coat.



"Please, call me Flo," Mrs. McGinty offered.

"Thank you, Flo. I'll try not to be gone too long."

"Take your time. Your young man needs you. Don't worry about me, I'll find everything I need. I'm a nosy old woman." She smiled.

Jim returned her grin. "Good-bye, Flo." He closed the door and hurried down the hallway toward the elevator.

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Chapter 7 by Nataliel

Jim stood at the sleeping man's bedside, unwilling to wake him. He pulled up a chair and settled himself, picking up Blair's hand and rubbing his thumb in gentle circles over it.

The figure in the bed stirred, opening heavy lids to reveal clouded blue eyes. "Jim?"

"Got it in one," Jim answered. "How are you feeling today?"

"Dunno," came the muttered response. "Still don't feel much of anything."

"They've got you on those really good drugs," Jim quipped, trying to sound light-hearted.

"Where's Laurene?" he asked, more alert than he'd been the day before.

"I'm not allowed to bring her, Sweetheart. You know that," Jim reminded him.

"I want to see her."

"Yeah, I know." This was the conversation Jim had so dreaded earlier that morning. "You'll get to see her soon."

"When, Jim? I want to see her now." Blair's tone was petulant.

"I know, Blair, but the hospital has rules, and we have to follow them. When you're well enough to be out of ICU, I can bring her in to visit."

Tears began to form in Blair's eyes, sliding quietly down his cheeks. "She's my baby, Jim. I need her."

"And she needs you, too," Jim assured him. "It won't be long."

"How long?" came the insistent question.

"A few more days." Jim turned to the night stand next to the bed and located the breast pump. "Laurene will sure be happy when she can drink your milk again. It's obvious she appreciates your contributions more than the formula."

Blair's eyes lit up a bit at the news. "Really? You can tell?"

"Oh, yeah. She balks at the formula. It's almost as though she can smell the difference before she even tastes it," Jim confirmed. "You're going to appreciate your time off for those nipples to heal. Laurene isn't going to want to let go once she gets hold of you again."

That elicited a small chuckle, then Blair turned concerned eyes to Jim. "When will you be able to give her the expressed milk? With all the drugs they've got me on. . . ."

"Lynne says that once you're out of ICU, and off the heavy pain meds, you should be able to nurse, and I can take home any expressed milk." Jim pushed the button to raise the head of the bed slightly. "You want to do this?" He offered Blair the contraption.

"Will you help? The nurses have been coming in and doing it for me. I don't think I can hold it in place well enough yet."

"No problem, Partner." Jim untied the neck of Blair's gown and pulled it down to his waist. "Geez, you're beautiful," he murmured, cupping one small breast and rubbing a thumb over the nipple. He leaned down to press his lips against the slightly parted ones of his blushing lover.

"Uh, Jim," Blair protested weakly. "Remember where we are?"

"All too well, I'm afraid," Jim said, taking an antiseptic wipe and cleaning off Blair's nipples. "It's just been a while, you know?"

Blair smiled sweetly and reached a hand up to brush across Jim's cheek. "It won't be much longer. I miss you, too."

Jim captured the hand caressing his cheek and placed it on the pump. "Thought you were going to help out here, Darwin." He positioned the cup against the nipple and turned the unit on. Placing a hand over Blair's, he helped the younger man hold the pump in place until the breast was emptied.

"How is Laurene?" Blair managed to ask as Jim switched the pump to the other breast.

"She's doing great."

"No problems?"

"Nothing I can't handle. The hardest part was finding someone to watch her so I could come here and visit you."

"Who's with her?" Blair worried.

"Old Mrs. McGinty from across the hall."

"Flo?" Blair looked surprised.

Jim returned the look. "You know her?"

"Oh, yeah. She always used to come out and talk when I'd get home late at night. I think she was waiting up to be sure I made it home safely." He smiled at the memory.

"She's very accepting of our living situation," Jim said, still slightly amazed.

"One of her sons is gay," Blair informed him. "As a matter of fact, she often quizzed me on whether or not you'd gotten a clue. She knew how I felt about you, and was convinced you felt the same, but weren't admitting it."

"Yeah, well. . ." Jim muttered. "I did finally figure it out."

"Thank God." A smile ghosted his lips as his eyes drooped shut.

Jim returned the smile, petting the top of Blair's head absentmindedly. "I guess maybe I ought to

let you get some rest."

"Mmmm," Blair muttered agreement.

"Love you."

"Mm-hm," Blair agreed, slipping quietly into a deep sleep.

Jim looked up to see Lynne Casey standing in the doorway. She walked over to the bed when she saw that Blair was asleep. "He's doing very well. I upgraded his condition to serious a few minutes ago. If he continues to improve at this rate, he'll be out of ICU in another day or two."

"Good. It can't come too soon."

Two days later:

Blair pushed the button to raise the head of the bed to a sitting position. His breakfast had just arrived, and he had suddenly realized just how hungry he was. His new room sported a view of the creek and park just across the street from the large municipal hospital. It was a rare, sunny day for November, and the children were already laughing and frolicking through the grass and fallen leaves.

He was about to sample the scrambled eggs when the door opened and a magical sight greeted his eyes.

"Laurene!" He held out his arms, wiggling his fingers in a "come here, gimme" gesture.

Jim walked across the room and placed the squirming bundle into her daddy's waiting arms. He watched as Blair buried his face in the swaddling blankets, drinking in the sight and scent of his precious daughter. When he looked up, his faced beamed with joy, his eyes brighter than Jim had seen them in days.

"Thanks, Jim. God, I was beginning to think I wasn't going to get to see Laur again." He peeled down his gown and put the baby to his breast, lying back with a look of pure bliss as she began her enthusiastic sucking.

"It's good to see you, too, Blair." Jim grinned at his ecstatic partner.

Blair's eyes clouded briefly. "I'm sorry, Jim. It's great to see you, too." His smile spread ear to ear as he met Jim's gaze and held it firmly before turning back to the bundle in his arms.

"That's okay. I understand," Jim said, perching himself on the edge of the bed, cupping Laurene's tiny head in his large palm. "I know how much you missed her."

Blair's stomach took that opportunity to protest its interrupted breakfast.

"Sounds to me like someone else needs to eat," Jim laughed.

Chagrined, Blair picked up the plastic fork and shoveled a mouthful of cooling eggs past his lips. "Have you seen Lynne yet?" he asked between bites. "When can I get out of here?"

"Hey, not so fast, Andretti. This isn't a race. You'll get out when Dr. Casey feels you're healed enough to come home, and not a minute before."

"But I feel so much better."

"Look, Blair, you just got moved out of ICU this morning. I think you have a few days left before Dr. Casey will even consider paroling you."

"That sucks."

"Your distaste for hospitals is well known around here, Kiddo. I don't think anyone wants to keep you here a minute longer than they have to, but none of us want a repeat performance of your last swan dive, so you're staying until the doctor says you can come home."

Blair frowned and shifted Laurene to the other breast, where she continued to nurse contentedly.

"At least Lynne took you off the pain meds twenty-four hours ago so that you could nurse today," Jim reminded him. "Don't worry. You'll be home in plenty of time for Thanksgiving."

"Good morning, Blair . . . Jim." Lynne Casey strode into the room, a cheery smile on her face. "You're looking much better today," she told her patient. "And I think little Laurene is happy to see her other daddy again, too." Blair beamed a smile up at her.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"Oh, at least another three days, Sweetheart. You lost a lot of blood when the placenta separated, and it was pretty touch and go there for a while. I need to keep you here for observation, get you up and walking around a bit, before I can evaluate you for release." She turned to Jim. "When I do release him, I'll expect you to keep him off his feet except for trips to the bathroom or to take a shower. I'm not ordering strict bed rest, but I'll expect about a ninety percent compliance." She turned her gaze to Blair, who looked defiant.

"I've already spent four days flat on my back, and can expect another three before you let me go home. Just how long is this bed rest restriction going to last?"

"Oh, at least a week. Then I'll want you back in my office for an evaluation. We'll proceed from there."

Blair pulled Laurene off the depleted breast and plopped her over his shoulder, patting her back softly until she burped. He stubbornly kept his mouth shut, a signal that Jim had learned long ago meant his lover was royally pissed.

"I'll see to it that he follows all the rules," he said, staring Blair down as he spoke.

The upset man mouthed "fuck you" at minimal sentinel hearing level.

Jim laughed and replied aloud, "That can be arranged . . . when you're feeling better, Sport."

Blair made an obscene gesture behind the doctor's back to his partner, but the smile on his face belied the implied meaning of the hand signal.

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Chapter 8 by NatalieL

Three days later, Blair was released from the hospital. Home had never looked so good to the young man, who stood in the doorway to Apartment 307 and just stared.

"Before you settle down for the day," Jim said pointedly, daring Blair to contradict him, "I have a little surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Blair's face lit up. He followed Jim to the French doors leading to his old bedroom. His partner stepped aside to allow Blair to stand in the open doorway. His jaw dropped.

Before him was a freshly painted room, done in a "My Little Pony" motif. The cheerful border of frolicking ponies contrasted sharply with the remaining pieces of Blair's collection of knickknacks. The crib had sheets and a padded bumper in a coordinated pony fabric, and a brand new mobile of the colorful equines attached to one side. A comfortable looking glider rocker and footstool nestled in a corner next to a small table with a pony-themed lamp. The changing table, in a green gingham print, with pony-printed diapers and related supplies, completed the new nursery.

When he had recovered enough to close his mouth, Blair turned to the man standing beside him. "You did this?"

"Yup. Do you like it?"

"You did this?"

"What's the matter, Sandburg," Jim grouched, suddenly on the defensive. "Don't you think I'm capable of doing a little redecorating?"

"Oh, no, Jim . . . sorry." Blair gulped down his surprise. "It's great. I just wasn't expecting anything like . . . this."

"So, you like it?"

"Oh, yeah, I love it. But why? How come now?"

"I had to do something with all that nervous energy. I worried about you, you know." Blair had the grace to blush at the admission. "I couldn't sleep, and I had to keep busy. This was better than the alternative."

Blair nodded sagely, knowing Jim's temper and how he sometimes vented that anger.

"Soooo. . . ." Blair said softly. "Where is Laurene? I thought she might be sleeping."

"I asked Flo to watch her while I went to pick you up. I figure she can babysit a while longer. No arguments," Jim said, stalling Blair's attempt to protest. "And now," he continued, smiling grimly, "you need to get off your feet."

"You're not going to make me go to bed, are you?" Blair whined.

"No, you don't have to go upstairs," Jim agreed, "but you at least need to stretch out on the couch. Come on." He led the way across the room to the couch he'd prepared before he'd gone to the hospital to pick up Blair. The pillow was fluffed, and the afghan was draped across the back, ready to cover its occupant.

Blair cooperated, lying down and letting Jim remove his shoes and tuck the afghan around him.

"Anything you want, just let me know," Jim told him.

"Could you hand me the remote?" Blair smiled up at the fussing Sentinel. Jim handed it to him, and settled down on the love seat, unwilling to leave the young man's side, now that he finally had him home again.

Blair flicked through the channels, not really interested in watching television. He finally turned it off, setting the remote on the coffee table, and released a sigh. Jim looked up from the newspaper he had been pretending to read.

"What's the matter, Chief? Need something?"

"You," came the soft response.

Jim was immediately at his side, kneeling next to the couch. "Are you in pain? Where does it hurt?" he asked, still worried about Blair's health.

"Here," Blair responded, laying a hand over his heart. "I've missed you so much." He pulled Jim's head down, until their lips met in a tentative kiss.

Jim's body quickly responded to the touch. He pulled back, caressing Blair's cheek, brushing stray locks of hair back behind an ear. "Missed you, too, Babe," he breathed. "But I don't think you're quite ready yet. I'm pretty sure Lynne would consider lovemaking a strenuous activity." He smiled, trying to ease his rejection.

"Especially the way we do it," Blair chuckled. "How about being a pillow, then?" He sat up, making room on the couch for his lover.

Jim settled down, pulling Blair's head into his lap. Blair rolled over onto his side, snuggling into the embrace. "Nice," he murmured, as Jim stroked his hair, running fingers through the spiral tangles. Within minutes, he'd fallen asleep. Jim tilted his head back, resting it against the cushions, content simply to have his love home with him again.

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Chapter 9 by NatalieL

The week had been interminable. Jim had the time off work so he could nursemaid Blair, who was bored to tears being bed or couch bound all day. The only breaks in the monotony had come when Laurene needed her feedings, or when Jim got so tired of the whining that he would come cuddle with his moping charge.

The day of Blair's appointment, the young man fairly bounced out of bed, anxious for his freedom once again. He waited impatiently by the door as Jim gathered up Laurene's paraphernalia for the trip.

Once in the truck, Blair turned to Jim, suddenly sober. "I'm sorry I've been such an ass this week," he apologized.

"You were a little hard to live with," Jim admitted, a smile taking some of the sting from the words.

"Yeah, I know," Blair confessed. "Mom always said I made a terrible patient. You did something she was never able to do . . . keep me in bed for a week."

"When Dr. Casey gives you the 'all clear', I'm gonna keep you in bed for another full week." Jim chuckled.

"Promises, promises." Blair joined the laughter.

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Chapter 10 by NatalieL

"The surgical site is healing nicely," Lynne Casey said, handing Blair back his clothes. "Everything seems headed back to normal."

"Great!" Blair enthused, hopping off the exam table.

"Slow down there a minute." Lynne grabbed his arm as he headed toward the door and turned him back facing her. "Restricted activity for another week." At the crestfallen look on her patient's face, she added, "You can be up and around, take some short walks, but be really careful not to over exert yourself. What happened to you was a major event. Your body is going to take time to

heal completely."

"How long?"

"You can increase your activity a bit each week, but not beyond what feels comfortable. I don't want you pushing yourself, or to hear you've entered any marathons. I suspect things will be back to normal around Christmas." She grinned and shook a finger at both men in turn. "And no sex."

"What?" Blair blurted out. "Oh, come on, Lynne. Have a little mercy here."

"Okay, here's the deal: foreplay and petting's okay, but no orgasms for this one," she said, pointing at Blair, "and definitely no penetrative sex until I've given the all clear. I want to see you again in three weeks. We'll reevaluate from there."

Jim studied his partner. "Can you live with that?"

"Do I have a choice?" the younger man grouched.

"No, you do not," the doctor answered emphatically. "Now get dressed and get out of here. I'm sure you have better things to do than hang around here. Oh, and have a happy Thanksgiving," she called to the retreating pair.

Thanksgiving morning:

The early hours of the chilly November morning found Blair spooned warmly up against his lover's larger body as he held their daughter to his breast while she nursed. The family was buried under a fluffy down comforter, dozing, enjoying the thought of sleeping in.

A key rattled in the front door which soon swung open. Sentinel hearing caught the noise, and Jim was instantly alert. He sat up in bed, slipping a hand under his pillow for his service revolver.

"What is it?" a muzzy voice asked from beneath the comforter.

The intruder bustled in, a large roasting pan securely gripped in tiny, wrinkled hands, and pushed the door shut with her foot.

Jim pulled his hand from under his pillow, leaving the gun where it hid. "Mrs. McGinty!" he called over the railing. "What are you doing here?" . . . so early? his thoughts added.

The old woman clucked. "You and your young man just go back to sleep. I've got a big bird here. Have to start roasting early if we're going to eat before midnight." She continued to bustle around the kitchen for a few minutes before heading back to the door. "I'll be back in a couple hours to baste the turkey and get the fixings started," she called from the doorway.

As the door clicked shut, Blair rolled over, eyeing his partner. "How'd she get in?"

"When you were in the hospital, I gave her a spare key. She was helping out over here so much. . . I guess I just forgot to ask for it back."

Blair grinned up at Jim. "Well, do you want to take her up on sleeping in, or. . . ?"

"Or what?" Jim asked when Blair stopped speaking.

"Or take Lynne up on that clearance she gave me yesterday?" He grinned mischievously as he reached over, lightly grazing his partner's morning erection.

Jim quickly scooped the sleeping Laurene into his arms and deposited her in the bassinet they kept in the upstairs bedroom for when the need arose, and returned to the waiting arms of his lover.

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Chapter 11 by NatalieL

When the couple woke for the second time that morning, Mrs. McGinty was already back, tending the turkey and starting in on the sweet potatoes.

Jim sat up and wrinkled his nose, the scent of dried sweat and semen stinging his nostrils. "You take the first shower," he offered. "Just make it quick."

"Thanks." Blair leaned over to give Jim a quick peck on the lips. "I feel really sticky and cruddy. It was worth it, though." He grinned down at the Sentinel. "That was quite a performance earlier." He slipped into his robe and gathered his clean clothes.

"You'd better get that butt moving," Jim grumbled, "before I decide to nail you again." He reached out to slap his partner, who danced nimbly out of reach.

"Promises, promises," Blair teased as he headed down the stairs.

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Chapter 12 by NatalieL

By the time the Sentinel emerged from his own shower, Blair was settled on the couch with a bagel and a cup of fresh-brewed coffee, nursing Laurene. Jim wandered into the kitchen to inspect the work going on there.

"How are you this morning, James?" Mrs. McGinty asked, smiling knowingly.

"Just great, Flo," Jim smiled back. "Um, can I ask why you're using our kitchen to fix your Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Oh, isn't it obvious, dear?" the old woman clucked. "I don't have anyone at home to fuss over anymore, and you don't have anyone to fix you a special dinner. We're going to have more than enough, if you'd like to invite over some of your friends."

"What do you say, Blair? Who do we know that isn't spending time with their own families today?"

"Megan," the younger man answered. "I'll give her a call. Oh, and how about Simon and Daryl? Were they going anywhere, or was Simon cooking this year?"

"He said something about taking Daryl down to the homeless shelter to help serve Thanksgiving dinner there. They'd probably welcome a good, home-cooked meal after their shift."

"Okay. I'll call them, too. When will dinner be ready?"

"Around four o'clock, dear," Mrs. McGinty answered.

"Thanks, Flo." Blair smiled warmly at their neighbor who still bustled around the kitchen with her preparations.

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Chapter 13 by NatalieL

Megan arrived around three that afternoon. Blair had just put Laurene down for a short nap, while Jim had long ago settled on the couch to watch football. A fire crackled in the fireplace and the room smelled of turkey and cranberries. She wrapped her arms around Blair, who had answered the door, hugging him tightly.



"How're you doing, Sandy?"

"I'm great, Megan. Lynne gave me a clean bill of health yesterday."

"That's certainly something to be thankful for." She smiled widely at Blair, giving him a knowing wink. She turned toward the kitchen, pretending not to notice the slight blush rising in the anthropologist's cheeks. "Something certainly smells yummy."

"Megan, this is our neighbor from across the hall, Flo McGinty. Flo, this is Megan Connor, an Inspector from Australia here on an officer exchange program," he introduced the two.

"Oh, it's very nice to meet a friend of James and Blair." Flo wiped her hands on her apron and came over to wrap Megan in a hug.

"Anything I can do to help?" Megan asked, looking around the well-organized kitchen.

"Not a thing, dear," Mrs. McGinty assured her. "Just make yourself comfortable."

"Would you like a beer?" Blair asked, opening the refrigerator.

"That sounds wonderful," Megan answered. "Thanks."

"How 'bout you, Jim?" Blair called over the noise of the television.

"Yeah, thanks."

Blair pulled two bottles of beer and one of old-fashioned ginger ale from the fridge, handing one beer to Megan and carrying the other two bottles over to the couch.

"Who's playing?" Megan asked, settling herself on the loveseat.

"Washington State and Michigan. Damn," Jim swore, as Washington State missed their first down by two yards.

Opening his ginger ale and taking a sip, Blair snuggled down next to Jim, burrowing in under his arm and laying his head on Jim's shoulder. Jim kissed the top of the curly head, momentarily distracted from the action on the TV.

The time passed companionably, until nearly four o'clock. When Megan heard Mrs. McGinty begin to set the table, she got up to help.

"How many places are we setting?" she asked.

"Six," Flo answered, setting down a stack of plates, then placing them, one on each end and two on each side. "It's going to be a little friendly, but we'll manage," she said, referring to the lack of elbow room between the place settings.

Megan put out the napkins and silverware, then began filling the glasses with water. "Anything else I can do to help?" she asked, coming into the kitchen when she had finished.

"Could you put the marshmallows on the sweet potatoes, dear?" the old woman asked, handing Megan a bag.

"Sure thing."

The two women worked in tandem, putting the finishing touches on the meal.

"When will Simon and Daryl be here?" Megan asked as she dished Mrs. McGinty's homemade cranberry sauce into a serving bowl.

"Any minute now," Jim answered. "I told them four o'clock." Just then, the phone rang. "Yeah?" Jim answered. "Okay, Simon, thanks." He hung up the phone and looked up. "Simon said to go ahead and start without them. The shelter has a record number of homeless this year, and the lines are endless. He says he and Daryl are going to stay a while longer to help."

"Oh, that's a shame," Mrs. McGinty sighed. "If they run short on food, I'm sure we could donate some of this." She waved her hands over the table and counter tops, overflowing with the turkey and fixings she had spent the day slaving over.

"They'll be here as soon as they can get away."

"Well, we might as well get started, then," Mrs. McGinty said. She settled herself at the table and the others followed suit. "It was always a tradition in my family to go around the table and say what we're thankful for, before we start eating. Blair, you've had an especially full year. Why don't you start?"

"Well, I'm certainly thankful just to be seeing this Thanksgiving." He turned to smile at Jim, who had squeezed his hand. "Of course I'm thankful that we have a healthy little daughter, and I'm really thankful for Jim's patience and support through everything I've put him through this year."

"I'm just thankful to have you," Jim responded, leaning over to place a kiss on Blair's cheek. "Our daughter is a wonderful bonus, and I love her very much. I'm just sorry you had to go through so much hell to bring her into the world."

"I'd do it all over again, Jim, for you . . . for her."

"Once was more than sufficient for me," Jim told him.

"Well, I'm thankful to have good friends, and to have been invited here to dinner," Megan added her two cents.

"And I'm thankful to finally have a family I can fuss over again," Flo finished. "Let's eat. James, would you please carve the turkey?"

Jim stood up, taking the meat fork and carving knife, and began slicing off generous chunks of the roasted bird. Conversation was sparse as everyone concentrated on enjoying the feast set before them. They were nearly finished when there was a knock on the door. Jim got up to answer.

"Are we too late?" Simon's voice boomed through the loft.

"Heck, no, Simon. We've got enough here to feed a small army." Jim laughed.

"Well, I brought one with me," Simon responded, pushing Daryl through the door.

"Aw, Dad. . . ." the teenager protested. "Hey, Jim. Hi, Blair . . . Megan."

"Hi, Daryl," Megan answered. "Come on over and sit down. There's plenty of food left."

"Simon, Daryl, I'd like you to meet our neighbor, Flo McGinty. She's the lady who was kind enough to watch Laurene when Megan couldn't, so I could go visit Blair in the hospital. She's

also responsible for all this food." He waved a hand over the table, still groaning under the weight of the remaining comestibles.

"Cool." Daryl pulled up a chair and started filling his plate. "Hey, Dad, sit down. This looks great!"

"Have a busy day at the shelter?" Blair pulled up a chair beside the teenager.

"Yeah. You wouldn't believe how many people there were. We went through seven turkeys in the five hours we were there!" Daryl dug into his own meal with enthusiasm. "There was this one guy there. . . ."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," his father interrupted, proceeding to fill his own as soon as he finished admonishing his son.

Daryl swallowed and washed the food down with a sip of water. "There was this one guy there who brought in his kids. He had five of 'em. Man, I can't imagine living on the street. And this time of year, too."

"It makes you realize just how much you really have to be thankful for, doesn't it?" Blair smiled at him.

"Yeah. Living like that would really suck," Daryl commented, continuing to shovel in his meal. When he was finally finished, he sat back and sighed. "That was really great."

"Thank you, young man." Flo walked past and patted Daryl on the shoulder.

"Name's Daryl."

"Yes, dear, I know." Flo continued to patter around the table, picking up dirty plates and serving dishes.

"Don't sweat it," Blair leaned over to whisper to Daryl. "She calls me 'young man', too."

"Why don't you all gather in the living room and relax. I'll clean up, and we can have dessert after dinner's settled a bit."

"Let me help." Megan popped up and began hauling leftovers to the kitchen island.

Jim braved the kitchen to pull the storage containers out of the cupboard and begin to fill them.

"Shoo!" Flo waved her apron at the male invader to her territory. "Off with you, James Ellison. Take care of your family."

Jim turned to see Blair settled in the corner of the couch, shirt open, nursing Laurene. Daryl had come to perch nearby, but Simon sat as far away as possible, still vaguely embarrassed.

"I think that's so cool," Daryl enthused. "You really make enough milk to feed her? Your breasts aren't all that big."

"Breast size has nothing to do with how much milk a mother, or father, can produce," Blair told him. "It has more to do with how much stimulation the breast gets. Laurene is an enthusiastic feeder, so other than losing sleep, I don't have any trouble keeping up with her."

"How about when you were in the hospital?"

"Daryl, stop pestering Blair," Simon warned.

"It's okay, Simon. I don't mind." He turned back to his audience. "Well, right after the surgery I was so engorged with milk that my breasts ached something awful. The doctor got me a breast pump, and we expressed the milk regularly after that. Once I was out of ICU, and off the drugs that could contaminate the milk, Jim would take it home to feed Laurene."

"Cool."

Jim had come to sit on the arm of the couch, hovering over Blair and their daughter. He draped a protective arm around the nursing man and looked over at his captain. "You okay, Simon?"

"It's still just a little unsettling, is all."

"Did Joan nurse Daryl when he was a baby?"

"Ewww!" Daryl wrinkled up his nose at the very thought.

"As a matter of fact, yeah," Simon said, a smile of warm remembrance spreading across his face. "It was really beautiful. She was really beautiful, holding that tiny bundle to her breast."

"I feel the same way about Blair," Jim said, his voice soft.

Simon turned to the couple, looking at them with new eyes. "Yeah, I can see that you do." He watched Blair nurse for a few minutes, the smile continuing to spread across his features. "You're a lucky man, Jim Ellison."

"You tell him, Simon," Blair quipped. "He doesn't listen to me." His last comment earned him a playful thwap to the back of his head, making his dark curls bounce wildly.

"Anybody ready for dessert?" Megan called from the dining area. "Flo's got pumpkin and mincemeat, your choice."

"Does she have the hot butter sauce for the mincemeat?" Blair asked.

"Of course, dear," Flo's voice rang out from the kitchen.

"I guess I could eat a small piece," he decided. "Um, Jim?"

"Your wish is my command." Jim rose from his perch and bowed before the father and child before heading into the kitchen for the pie and a glass of milk. Coming back to his seat on the arm of the couch, he cut off a small bite with the fork and fed it to his waiting partner.

"Mmmm. . . . That is delicious, Flo. Thank you." Blair savored the bite a few moments longer, then opened his mouth for more. Jim continued the feeding while Blair's hands were occupied with their daughter.

"This, Simon, is my life," Jim said with a long-suffering sigh.

Simon's guffaw rang through the room. "Enjoy it now, Jim; it doesn't last forever."

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Chapter 14 by NatalieL

When the last of the guests had finally left, and the kitchen cleanup was completed, the leftovers stuffed in the refrigerator or sent home with willing hands, Jim wrapped an arm around his love and led him to the stairs. "What a day, huh, Chief?" The tired anthropologist just nodded.

When they reached the bed, Blair dropped unceremoniously onto it. Jim nestled Laurene in a

cushion of pillows and proceeded to undress his exhausted partner. Once Blair was down to his boxers and a tee, Jim took off his own clothes and climbed in beside him, snuggling close. "At least we get to sleep in again tomorrow," he reminded Blair.

His only reply was a soft snore.

Chanukah:

This time of year, the holidays always seemed to run together. Jim came home from work one evening to find a menorah sitting on a table near the patio doors, and Blair in the kitchen, cooking.

"What smells so good?" he asked, dropping his keys in the basket and hanging his coat on a hook.

Blair looked up from the frying pan he was tending. "Potato latkes. They're traditional Chanukah fare."

"Since when did you go all traditional on me?" Jim noted that his unconventional lover was also wearing the traditional skull cap of Jewish men, a yarmulke.

"Having a kid makes you rethink some of your values, you know?" Blair shoveled a couple more of the pancakes onto a platter already piled high. "Makes you want to go back and rediscover your roots."

"Roots? I didn't know you had roots," Jim commented.

"Very funny, man." Blair carried the platter of latkes to the dining room table, which also contained some of the Thanksgiving leftovers from the freezer, all reheated to perfection. "I've got a little something for you," he said, handing Jim a small box.

Jim lifted the lid and stared dumbly at the contents. Inside was a beautiful red brocade yarmulke. He looked up to find Blair smiling at him.

"It was my great uncle's," the young man explained. "He was a rabbi at the local synagogue. When he passed away, my grandmother gave that to me. She knew that Naomi wouldn't raise me in the faith, and she wanted to give me a little something to remind me of my heritage."

"I can't accept this, Blair," Jim said, handing the box back.

Blair pushed it back into Jim's hands. "Of course you can. I can't think of anyone I'd rather see wear it."

"I'm not Jewish," Jim reminded his lover.

"Doesn't matter. When we light the menorah and say the prayers, you can wear it. Now, sit down before the food gets cold."

Jim dug into the food with delight. "This is good."

"Glad you like it. I figured it'd be right up your alley. Most traditional Chanukah foods are of the heart attack on a plate variety." He smiled at the Sentinel, who had a taste for fried foods.

When they finished the meal and had cleaned up the kitchen, Blair helped Jim fasten the yarmulke in place and led him into the living room. Jim gathered Laurene into his arms and

joined Blair over by the menorah. The younger man lifted the center candle, the shamash, and lit it. He bowed his head and began the Chanukah prayers. "Baruch ata Hashem, Elokenu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tizivanu l'hadlik ner shel Chanukah. Baruch ata Hashem, Elokenu melech ha'olam, she'asah nisim la'avotenu, bayamim hahem bazeman hazeh." When he finished, he lit the first candle.

"Now what?" Jim asked, watching the flicker of the small candle.

"Well, traditionally we'd play games, sing songs and eat some more." Blair grinned up at him. "But I'm not that traditional. Besides, it's been a long day and I'm beat. Isn't there a Jags game on tonight?"

"As a matter of fact," Jim said, settling on the couch and patting the cushion next to him, "there is." He picked up the remote as Blair settled next to him. "Happy Chanukah, Blair." He wrapped an arm around the younger man and pulled him close.

"Thanks, Jim. Shalom." Blair settled into the embrace, tucking his head under Jim's chin. The crackling fire and the steady rhythm of Jim's heartbeat beneath his ear worked their magic on the tired anthropologist, and he drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 15 by NatalieL

The eight day festival of Chanukah ended exactly two weeks before Christmas. The last candle had barely been blown out before Blair started nagging his partner about getting a tree.

"Come on, Jim, you'll love it. It smells great, looks pretty; it's a sensory feast you should look forward to."

"It's a mess. Pine needles all over the floor. . . ."

"Come on, man. I'll clean up after it, I promise. We have to have a tree!"

"How about we buy an artificial one?" Jim suggested. "You wouldn't have to water it or clean up after it."

"That's not the same, Jim, and you know it. Heck, we live in Christmas tree country--they're all around us."

"I saw a lot just down the block," Jim suggested, beginning to give in.

"Aw, no, Jim. . . . Not one of those farm-cut, perfectly trimmed things. Let's get a permit and go up into the mountains to find our own."

"You've got to be kidding! It's snowing out there, and it's worse in the mountains."

"Flo could watch Laurene while we're gone," Blair continued, ignoring his partner's protests.

"Blair. . . ." Jim turned his best puppy dog look on the younger man, who didn't buy it for an instant.

"Oh, come on, Jim. It'll be fun. We can start out early in the morning, and be home by afternoon. That will give us plenty of time to get the tree set up and decorated." Blair, whose energy level had returned with a vengeance after his last hospital stay, fidgeted excitedly next to his partner.

Wild curls bounced, blue eyes sparkled, and Jim knew his cause was lost. Blair wanted a tree, Blair would get a tree, the very best he could find in the mountains surrounding Cascade. "Think there's time to pick up the permit this evening after work?"

"Yes!" Blair pulled his fist down in a victory gesture.

"Guess I'd better get going, then," Jim sighed, plucking his heavy leather coat from the hook and slipping into it. Blair draped a wool scarf around his neck for a bit of extra protection. "Thanks, Chief." He leaned in to kiss his partner good-bye and found himself smothered by 160 pounds of enthusiastic lover. Blair had taken advantage of Jim's hold on him to jump up and wrap his legs around his lover's waist.

"You won't be sorry, Jim. I promise." His lips found Jim's once again and latched on with a ferocity that usually meant a quick, hard lovemaking session was about to ensue.

Reluctantly, Jim pulled back from the kiss and pushed gently at Blair's shoulders. "I have to go, Blair. We can continue this after I get home, okay? Just hold the thought." He smiled warmly, trying to take the sting from his words.

Blair slipped down, landing on his feet with a thud. "I'll make arrangements with Flo," he said. "Maybe she'll keep Laurene overnight so we can get a really early start tomorrow morning."

"Methinks the lad has other plans for the eve," Jim smirked, pinching Blair's cheek.

"Well, a little workout before we do all that hiking through the woods would be good insurance, don't you think?" Blair smiled back, putting on his most innocent, wide-eyed look. "You've always stressed to me the importance of a good warm-up before a heavy exercise session."

"Now you listen to me." Jim rolled his eyes in exasperation. "I gotta go. You have any plans for the day?"

"Just finishing typing the final copy of the dissertation. It's going to be such a great feeling to have that done. Sort of like giving myself a little Christmas present."

"Good luck. Don't work too hard."

"Same to you, Big Guy. Hurry home." Blair closed the door behind the exiting Sentinel and leaned heavily against its firm support. He took several long, cleansing breaths: in through the nose, out through the mouth, until the persistent aching in his groin finally subsided and he could get on with his day.

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Chapter 16 by NatalieL

Jim awoke before the sunrise the next morning to find himself blanketed with the warm, naked body of his bedmate. The intimate contact stirred his libido to life, and he groaned as he felt himself hardening. If he didn't do something about it soon, he knew what would happen, and it would mean a significant delay to their day. Blair wanted a Christmas tree, hand-selected and cut in the mountains surrounding Cascade. They needed to get an early start.

He shoved against the compact body, but Blair wasn't moving. Squirming, Jim worked his way out from under his human comforter and trotted down the stairs to take a quick shower. When he had finished, he climbed back up to the loft to wake Blair.

The anthropologist groaned and rolled over when Jim shook him. "Blair. . . . Come on, Babe. You've gotta wake up. We're going Christmas tree hunting, remember?" More protests rose from beneath the pile of blankets. Finally, Jim tossed the blankets back, exposing the bare skin of his lover to the morning chill. Blue eyes snapped open in surprise.

"Jim!" Blair grabbed the blankets and pulled them up under his chin. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Up and at 'em, Paul Bunyan. Grab your ax; we have a tree to kill."

"It's 0-dark thirty in the damn morning, Jim!" Blair protested. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Like hell you are," Jim growled. "Get that comely ass of yours out of bed. It's a long drive into the mountains. If we're getting a tree, we have to get an early start. Besides," he said, softening his approach, "isn't that why we left Laurene with Flo last night? So that we could get an early start?"

Blair moaned once more, but sat up. "Could you hand me my robe, please? It's cold this morning." Jim tossed him the wrap and Blair slipped it on, finally standing and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"I've already showered," Jim informed him. "The bathroom's all yours."

"Thanks," Blair mumbled, shuffling down the stairs, still only half awake.

While his lover showered, Jim started cooking a hearty breakfast of pancakes, eggs and bacon. They ate in relative silence, Jim reading the paper, Blair still trying to wake up. When he had finished eating, Blair made his way into the nursery, settling into the comfortable glider-rocker and picking up the breast pump that sat on the table next to him.

Jim poked his head through the French doors, pausing to admire the scene before him. "Blair." He got the younger man's attention. "I'm going to pack the gear into the truck. We can get going as soon as you're ready."

"Give me another ten minutes, 'kay?"

"Sure, Chief. Take your time. . . , but hurry up!" He laughed at Blair's disgruntled look as he backed out of the doorway and went to gather up the needed equipment.

When he got back to the apartment, Blair was dressed, in multiple layers of flannel, and ready to go. "I'll just drop this off on our way by," he said, holding up the bottle of expressed breast milk.

Jim noted the pump securely stuffed into a pocket of his partner's heavy coat. He nodded. "Let's get a move on, then," he said, holding the door open and ushering Blair through.

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Chapter 17 by NatalieL

The morning sun glinted off the snow as Jim pulled the truck off the road at a likely looking spot. The two men got out and began shouldering their packs and equipment. Blair hefted an ax, while Jim carried a small saw.

"Which way?" Jim asked, deferring to his partner who was studying the landscape.

Blair pointed northwest. "There's a trailhead a hundred yards in this direction. Let's try that." He headed off resolutely, boots crunching through the lightly crusted snow.

A few long strides brought Jim up beside his partner. "So, just what, exactly, are you looking for in the perfect tree?" he wondered.

Blair was studying the evergreens they passed, head swiveling from side to side, in order not to miss anything. "Um, I dunno," he mumbled distractedly. "I'll know it when I see it."

"Where have I heard that before?" the put-upon Sentinel muttered to himself as he followed his partner deeper into the woods.



Finally, after trudging through knee-high drifts of snow for over two hours, Blair stopped and pointed. "There! That's the one, Jim!" He bounded over to a medium-sized fir tree and began pushing the snow away from the trunk.

"You're sure this time?" Jim had heard that particular phrase from Blair several times during their trek, and was beginning to doubt the young man really knew what he wanted.

"Oh, yeah, Jim. This is it. Come on over; help me out here." He hacked off several of the lower branches to give them clear access to the trunk.

Jim brought over the saw and, together, they began to cut their way through the four-inch thick trunk. When the tree finally fell, both men were tired, but triumphant.

"I think you're right," Jim commented, looking at their prize lying in the snow. "That's a real beauty. We'd better start back, though. I felt a drop in the barometric pressure a while back. I think we're in for a storm."

"You could feel that?" Blair's scientific antennae tweaked.

"Give it a rest, Darwin," Jim growled. "We can discuss it later. Right now, we need to get back to the truck." He shouldered the heavy trunk, while Blair took up the rear.

The return trip was slower going, as the heavy tree hampered their progress. The wind was picking up, too, and they were walking straight into it.

"Think you can speed it up back there?" Jim called over his shoulder. "I don't think we have a lot of time left."

"I'm trying, man," Blair panted.

"Try harder," Jim snapped, picking up the pace, causing the smaller man to have to jog to catch up. Within minutes, blinding snow swirled around them and the pair had to stop.

Jim squinted through the storm, but even he could no longer follow the trail back to the road. Setting the tree down, he turned to Blair. "If we keep walking, we're going to get lost," he explained. "Our best bet would be to find some shelter and wait out the storm."

They both looked around, trying to spot some protection. Finally, Blair pointed to a deep snowbank which had piled up against a small stand of trees. "Over there. We could dig a cave in the snow." He headed over and began throwing out handfuls of snow in an attempt to tunnel inward.

Jim slipped off his heavy pack and rummaged through it, pulling out a small, collapsible shovel. He dug into the snowbank with a strength lent of desperation. Although it was nearly noon, the temperature had dropped below freezing and he could see that Blair's purposeful movements were becoming more sluggish.

Within minutes, he had hollowed an area barely large enough to shelter the two men and their packs. He shoved Blair inside and began gathering snow to close up the entrance. He left a small hole in their doorway to let fresh air circulate. Falling against the back wall of their shelter, he closed his eyes in exhaustion.

"I'm sorry." The soft voice floated across the enclosed space.

Jim opened his eyes. "Nothing to be sorry for," he assured his mate.

"If I hadn't insisted on coming out here for the perfect tree. . . . I could have settled for one from the corner lot."

"You couldn't have predicted a freak snowstorm," Jim comforted. "Besides, you had the right idea. This was kind of fun, up until the storm hit."

"Really?" The hopeful note in the soft voice was almost the Sentinel's undoing.

He wrapped his arms around the younger man and pulled him into his lap. "Yeah, really. Don't go guilt tripping on me, okay? Remember, I agreed to this."

"Okay." Blue eyes looked up into his, and Jim was startled to see the usually lush red lips also had a blue tinge. He realized, suddenly, that the man in his arms wasn't even shivering. Blair was always cold, even on the warmest winter days. Long, dark lashes brushed his cheeks as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

"Aw, shit," Jim muttered, making an awkward grab for his backpack and rooting through the contents. He pulled out a mylar emergency blanket, shook it open and wrapped it around the body he cradled. "We've gotta get you warm, Babe. Don't go to sleep on me, okay?" He rubbed at Blair's rosy cheeks, trying to stimulate the circulation.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Sweetheart?"

"Cold."

"Yeah, I know." He looked down into the trusting face turned up to his, his heart nearly breaking with fear. Instinctively, he leaned down, capturing the bluish lips with his own warm ones. At first, there was no response. Jim dove deeper, pushing the slack jaw open with his tongue and tasting the unique flavor of his Guide.

Blair stirred, slipping his arms out from the protection of the blanket to wrap them around the Sentinel. Jim's heart skipped a beat when he felt a warm tongue come to life and do battle with his own. He tipped sideways, laying them down, using Blair's pack as a pillow, and continued the kiss, coming up only occasionally for needed oxygen. The small cave began to warm significantly, as their body heat rose.

Blair finally pushed against the shoulders that held him pinned to the ground. "I always knew you were a hot lover," he joked. "Thanks, Jim. You did it again."

"Did what again?" Jim pushed himself up so he could look at his partner.

"Saved my life."

"You are not going to start that 'Blessed Protector' thing again, are you?"

"Whoa, Jim. Hold up a minute. No way." Blair scooted in the small confines of the cave until he was sitting up. "I just meant to thank you. You know I'd do the same for you, have done the same for you."

"Point taken." Jim grinned, happy to see his lover back to his scrappy, confrontational self.

"Hungry?"

"Famished! What've we got?"

Jim dug through his pack, while Blair looked through his own. Between the two of them, they produced a couple thermoses of hot coffee, four sandwiches, some fresh fruit, trail mix and beef jerky.

"Enough for a feast," Jim declared, watching as Blair wrapped his hands around a thermos and sipped delightedly at the hot brew. "But we've got to ration it out, just in case. No telling how long we'll be here." He handed Blair a sandwich and an apple. They began to eat in silence, savoring the flavors in a way they hadn't taken time to for longer than either could remember.

When they were finally finished, Blair yawned expressively. "Any chance we can get some sleep in here?" he asked.

"I don't know why not," Jim answered. "But not both of us at once. One needs to stay awake to watch for signs of hypothermia. You go ahead and sleep first."

"No, Jim," Blair said, surprising the tough cop. "You're the one who did most of the work here, including, um, nursing me back to consciousness." He smiled. "I'll take the first watch."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely." Blair pulled Jim's head down into his lap and began petting the short, military-cut hair. The rhythmic stroking soon put the big man to sleep.

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Chapter 18 by NatalieL

The phone rang around 10 p.m., startling Simon from a light doze. He turned off the television and picked up the receiver. "Banks," he barked into the phone.

"Captain Simon Banks?" came the voice over the wires, a bit of static crackling over the connection due to the raging snowstorm that had hit Cascade earlier that afternoon.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"My name's Flo McGinty--you might remember me from Thanksgiving. I'm Jim Ellison's neighbor." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I know you'll probably think I'm an old worry-wart, but I've been babysitting little Laurene since last night. . ."

"Last night?" Simon interrupted, surprised.

"Well, yes. You see, the boys wanted to get an early start up in the woods . . . to cut down a Christmas tree, don't you know?" she explained. "Anyway, they should have been back long ago. Young Blair dropped off some milk before they left, and that was 5 a.m. It shouldn't have taken this long, even with the storm. I'm worried about them."

"Thank you, Ms. McGinty, for calling. I'll get busy and start checking around. Don't you worry; we'll find them."

"Oh, I hope so. They're such dears. I wouldn't want anything to happen to either one of them."

"They're very adept at taking care of themselves. I'm sure they're fine," Simon reassured her.

"Okay, then. I just thought somebody ought to know. Good-night."

"Thank you for calling, Ms. McGinty. Good-night." He hung up the phone and sighed. What had those two gotten themselves into now?

He picked up the phone again, dialing emergency services. "Patterson?"

You got me, a voice answered.

"Yeah, this is Simon Banks. I've got a couple of men who haven't checked in since early this morning. They were headed up into the mountains. They could be stranded up there by the storm."

Damn! That's bad news, Simon.

"Why do you say that? Can't you get someone up there to check it out?"

Not in this blizzard. We can't scramble the choppers until the wind dies down and visibility improves. Ground search would be next to impossible in the dark. It's going to have to wait until morning.

"They may not have until morning, dammit." Simon spat into the phone.

Sorry, Cap. There's nothing that can be done until then. I'll put the men on high priority alert. We'll go out at first light. The weather service says the storm should abate sometime after midnight.

Simon released a pent-up sigh. "Okay. All right. Thanks, Patterson. Call me in the morning?"

You bet. I'll keep you up-to-date on the progress of the search. Who're we looking for?

"Jim Ellison and his partner, Blair Sandburg. They were driving a blue and white '69 Ford Ranger, license number 804 GDT, Golf-Delta-Tango. I think they were headed out Highway 10."

Roger that, Simon. I'll be getting back to you.

The phone went dead, and Simon hung it up, staring for a long while at the quiet instrument.

"Dammit, Jim. Can't you guys do anything without finding trouble?"

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Chapter 19 by NatalieL

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty." Jim gently shook the shoulder of the man sleeping in his lap.

Blair stirred and groaned, sitting up and rubbing at his stiff back. "What time is it?"

"After 8 a.m. You really slept."

"I'm not the only one," Blair grumbled, searching for his thermos of coffee. "Did the storm stop?"

"Yeah, hours ago, around 2:00 this morning. Hungry?"

"Mm-hm." Blair nodded, accepting the banana and trail mix. "Are we going to try and find our way out now?"

"Eat first. I'll do a little reconnaissance and see if I can figure out where we are and how to get back." Jim pushed a larger hole in the snow cave's entrance and crawled out. As he stood, he realized just how cramped their quarters had been for the last twenty hours. Stretching out aching muscles, he walked several yards south of their position, scouting out the trail markers with his sentinel vision. Satisfied that he knew the way out, he walked off the trail to relieve himself, then returned to the shelter.

Blair was munching trail mix while holding the breast pump to his chest when Jim returned. The soft whir of the battery operated motor sounded loud in the close confines of the snow cave. Jim smiled. "How come you open up your shirts for that thing, but not for me?"

"You're a lecherous old man, anybody remind you of that lately?" Blair smiled up at him. "I couldn't take it anymore; they hurt," he explained apologetically. "So, did you find our way out?"

Jim settled next to his partner and wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close. "Yup. The snow's deeper, but I can still make out the trail markers. How much longer?" he asked, indicating the pump.

"Oh, give me another five minutes for the other side, just enough so I don't ache. I'm so ready to get out of here."

"Ditto that sentiment," Jim replied, beginning to pack up their accessories. By the time he was finished, Blair was tucking the pump back in his pocket and buttoning up his shirts and coat.

"Ready when you are, Fearless Leader." Blair crawled out of the cave, stretched and donned his backpack.

Jim followed suit and was soon headed down the trail.

"Hey, Jim!" Blair shouted, waving his arms above his head.

The Sentinel turned, looking a bit puzzled. "What now, Chief?"

"The tree?" Blair pointed to their prize. "We're not leaving it. Not after all that!" He began brushing the heavy snow from its branches.

Jim gave an expressive sigh and headed back toward their camp. "This is the last time I let you talk me into this," he snorted, lifting the wet trunk to his shoulder and starting out again.

Blair took up the rear, as before, chuckling under his breath. Jim was too easy where his Guide was concerned.

They were nearly out of the woods when Jim stopped, cocking his head, listening. "You hear that?"

"Hear what?" Blair strained his ears in the quiet of the mountains.

"A chopper."

Just as the words left Jim's mouth, the soft sound of distant helicopter blades reached Blair's ears. "What would a chopper be doing out here?" he wondered.

"Probably Simon, sending out a search party. We are just a tad overdue, you know. Let's get this thing back to the truck." Jim hefted the tree again and finished the short hike back out to the road.

As they were tying the tree into the bed of the pickup, a helicopter flew over. Jim and Blair both waved their arms in the air, Jim indicating that the chopper could leave, they were okay.

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Chapter 20 by NatalieL

"Patterson to base. Is Captain Banks there?"

Roger that, Patt.

"Tell him his men are okay, and are heading out on their own. Over."

Great news! Banks says 'thank you'. Over.

"No problem. Just tell him he owes me one. Over and out."

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Chapter 21 by NatalieL

"You had us worried, gentlemen," Simon admonished two hours later, when the errant duo finally returned to Cascade.

"Sorry, Simon. We didn't mean to cause trouble," Blair apologized.

"You never do. It just seems to find you wherever you are."

"We got our tree. . . ." Blair offered, by way of explanation.

"And it had damn well better be the best tree you've ever had, after putting us through hell last night."

"Give the kid a break, Simon," Jim broke in. "It wasn't his fault we got stuck in that storm. You know I've had survival training; there was no need to get worried. And we did get ourselves a fine specimen of a Christmas tree," he added, dragging the seven-foot evergreen through the door and into the loft. It had been a job of monumental proportions getting the thing up two flights of stairs, almost worse than the original trek out of the woods.

Mrs. McGinty opened her door at the sounds from the hallway. Baby Laurene was tucked securely in her arms. "Look who's home," she cooed at the child. "Your daddies are back."

Blair stopped in front of her apartment and eagerly held out his arms. She placed the squirming bundle back where it belonged, smiling sweetly. "She had a rough night last night, but she seems better this morning. Only a little fussy."

Blair buried his face in the blankets, kissing the tiny cheeks and clucking softly. "It's so good to be home, Sweetie. Did you miss your daddies? We sure missed you." He nuzzled closer, drinking in the sweet baby scent. Finally, he looked up. "What was the problem last night?"

"Oh, she was just a little colicky. Had a hard time getting her down for the night. She probably just missed her routine and her daddies," Mrs. McGinty said.

"Thank you so much for taking care of her for us. At least I knew there was one less thing for me to worry about. Sorry if we scared you. The storm came up so suddenly. . . ."

"Hush, young man." Flo put her fingers against Blair's lips to still them. "She was no trouble at all. I worried about the two of you, but I knew that Captain Banks would be able to find you and bring you home."

"Yes, ma'am." Blair beamed at her. "Would you like to come over and help decorate the tree?"

"I'd love to," she agreed, following Blair down the hall to Apartment 307.

Christmas Eve:

"What a wonderful idea to have our annual Christmas party here," Megan enthused, sipping on a spiced rum and admiring the tree. "So this is the tree you nearly died to bring home?"

"'Nearly died' is exaggerating just a bit," Blair corrected, watching as Laurene's chubby arms waved at the brightly colored miniature bulbs that lit the tree. She cooed and bubbled, smiling in delight at the shiny glass ornaments and glittering tinsel. "We got caught in a snow storm, but we

were quite comfortable in the shelter we dug out of the snowbank."

"Yeah, once I got you warmed up," Jim reminded him, sneaking up from behind to wrap his arms around Blair's waist.

"No! No-no-no, Muffin." Blair pulled the silver strand of tinsel from their daughter's grasp before she could put the tidbit in her questing mouth. "Yeah, well, there was that, all right," Blair agreed. "But once Jim got me nice and hot, we were pretty comfortable. It was just a matter of waiting out the storm."

"Well, I'm very glad you're both all right." Megan smiled, and took another sip of the rum.

"I'll second that," Simon agreed, joining the little group. "You boys put on quite a spread," he said, indicating the extensive buffet on the kitchen island and counters. "This spiced rum is the best I've had in years. Just like my Daddy used to make."

"You can thank our neighbor, Mrs. McGinty, for the bulk of it. We filled her shopping list, and she spent all day yesterday cooking and preparing for this party."

"So, where is she?" Simon asked, looking around.

"She flew down to San Francisco for the holidays to be with her son," Blair explained. "It was Jim's Christmas present to her. She's been so wonderful to us ever since Laurene was born, she deserved something special."

Simon turned to his detective. "Well, well, well. . . The softer side of Ellison, eh?" He laughed, slapping his friend on the back.

"Yeah, underneath that tough guy image, he's just a big pussy cat," Blair smirked.

"Okay. Enough of that," Jim growled, trying to restore some dignity.

Laurene started fussing, working her way up to a full-fledged howl.

"If you'll all excuse me," Blair interrupted, "I need to feed and change Laurene. I think she's about ready to go down for the night."

"Is she sleeping through the night already?" Simon asked.

"I wish," the anthropologist sighed, wrestling with the wailing baby. "It's a struggle to get her to sleep at all in the evenings." He excused himself and headed toward the nursery, closing the French doors behind him.

"Blair's looking very well," Megan commented, remembering how rough the last two months had been on the young man. "I'm so glad he's doing better."

"You and me, both," Jim agreed. "I don't ever want to go through that again."

"You don't want other children?" Megan wondered, looking a little surprised.

"I did, once," Jim murmured, "but not after what Blair went through during and after his pregnancy with Laurene. I can't put him through that again."

"What if he wants to?" Simon asked.

"No! And that's final!" Jim was furious. "I'm not risking him again for anything."

"Hey, this is supposed to be a party. You know, fun?" Joel Taggert walked over to the group after hearing the raised voices. "What would Blair say if he heard you arguing on Christmas Eve?"

"He'd ream me a new one," Jim smiled apologetically. "Sorry. I guess expanding our family isn't a good conversation topic for this evening. Would you all excuse me for a few?" he asked, smiling and exiting the small group.

Jim wandered over to where Joel's girls were sitting, playing a game of Monopoly with Henri and Rafe. "Looks like the girls are beating the pants off you guys," he commented, eyeing the pile of money and cards the children possessed.

"Yeah, guess we weren't cut out to be real estate moguls," Rafe sighed, paying out more rent on property owned by the twins.

"Say, Jim," Henri looked up from the game board, "are you worried about this Y2K thing? I mean, do you think we'll have blackouts? The computers will all shut down?"

Jim shook his head. How many times had Blair explained this to him? "No, I don't think there will be any real global problems. Companies have been working for years to correct the problem, and most of them are ready. There may be scattered outages, but nothing more. At least, that's what Blair seems to think."

"What do I seem to think?" As if saying his name conjured the anthropologist, he suddenly stood in their midst. "Laurene went to sleep for a change," he added in an aside to Jim.

"That's a relief," Jim agreed. "We were discussing the Y2K thing," he said in answer to Blair's question.

"Oh, that's just so much a media myth," Blair sighed. "There was a problem that needed fixing, but it's under control. All these people with their dire end-of-the-world predictions are just scaring people needlessly." He dropped down on the couch, running a hand through his mop of curls.

"Getting tired?" Jim came to settle next to his lover, wrapping a protective arm around him.

"Yeah," Blair admitted. "It's been a long week."

"So, you guys have plans for the millennium New Year's party?" Rafe turned to look at their hosts.

Jim's eyes grew wide, and he shook his head, waving a hand at Rafe to shut up. "Don't get him started," he stage whispered, pointing to Blair who was obviously getting ready to speak.

"The millennium isn't until next year," Blair corrected. "That the millennium is this year is another misconception perpetrated by the media."

"But we're changing to the year 2000," Brown protested.

"Yeah, and the first year of the new millennium will be in 2001," Blair informed him. Having rendered the small group speechless, he continued. "Counting began with the year One," he explained. "There was no year 'Zero'. One through one hundred was the first century, one hundred one through two hundred was the second century, and so on. The 20th century ends with the year 2000, and the next century, the next millennium, begins in 2001."

Jim shook his head again. "We've had this argument all year, leading up to this," he sighed. "I've just given up and yielded to the greater wisdom of my younger, but wiser, partner here."



"And well you should, Jim," Blair laughed, "because I'm right, and you know it."

"See what I put up with?" Jim held up his hands in surrender. "It's no use arguing with him. You'll lose. He's like a dog with a bone on this millennium thing, so just nod politely and change the subject."

"So," Brown said, quick to take the hint, "when do you guys open presents? Christmas Eve or Christmas morning?"

"Naomi always let me open one on Christmas Eve," Blair told him, "but I grew up with the Christmas morning tradition."

"Aren't you Jewish?" Rafe looked surprised.

"Yeah, but Mom was an equal-opportunity holiday activist. We celebrated pretty much whatever came along."

"We always waited until Christmas morning," Jim added. "Steven and I used to sneak downstairs to shake the packages really early, but Sally was always up with hot chocolate to serve us. We were never actually successful in getting a peek under the wrappings." He grinned at the memory.

"And now that you two are together, I guess it's a Christmas morning tradition, then?" Rafe asked.

"Looks like," Jim agreed.

Blair yawned and stretched, untangling himself from Jim's embrace. "Sorry, guys, but I'm beat. Laurene's been keeping me up nights, so my energy reserves are a little low." He rose, making a circuit of the room, giving his apologies and telling everyone good-night. He then made his way to the loft stairs, and slowly climbed the flight to the bedroom.

Simon came over to the couch, where Jim was still surrounded by a small pack of detectives. "Gentlemen, perhaps it's about time we give our hosts a break," he said, clapping a hand against Brown's shoulder. "We've already lost one of them, and Jim, here, looks like he's being sociable just to be polite."

Jim smiled up at his captain sheepishly.

Megan sauntered over, her mug of spiced rum long-since empty. "It was a wonderful party, Jim. Thank you for inviting us all. I do think we've overstayed our welcome a bit, though."

"No, don't say that, Megan," Jim protested. "Laurene's been keeping Blair up lately--she's been a little fussy the last couple weeks--so he crashes whenever the opportunity presents itself. Don't let that run you off."

"Well, you're looking a little under the weather yourself there, Jimbo. I think the Captain's right; it's time we let you boys get some rest." She began gathering up mugs and plates, and carrying them into the kitchen.

She was soon joined by Joel Taggart, who helped her scrape the dishes and load the dishwasher. "Great party, huh?" Joel grinned broadly at his Aussie colleague.

"Sandy always sees to it that the parties here are special," Megan agreed. "Too bad he's had such a rough time of it lately. I thought things were getting better."

"Sounds like Laurene's got a case of colic to me," Joel diagnosed. "Karey had a bad case when she was around two months old. Thought we wouldn't survive the wailing, but she stopped when she turned three months--just like someone flipped a switch." He turned on the appliance, then ushered Megan out of the kitchen. Gathering up his daughters, he said his good-byes.

"It was good having you over. Tell Rebecca we missed her, and that we hope she's feeling better before the new year." Jim clapped his old friend on the back.

"You take care of Blair and that baby," Joel admonished. "Don't let all that crying get to you. It will end."

"It's a relief to hear that." Jim said sincerely.

"Have a Merry Christmas, Jim," Megan said in parting, giving the detective a quick peck on the cheek. "Give Sandy a hug and kiss for me." She tossed a cheery wave of the hand over her shoulder as she made her exit.

Jim closed the door, and leaned against it, exhaustion catching up to him. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself away from the support, and headed for the bedroom stairs.

Christmas morning:

Soft strains of "The First Noel" drifted through the loft, finally waking the sleeping Sentinel. He rolled over to find Blair's side of the bed empty. Peering through the railing, he saw Laurene blissfully nursing, with Blair curled up on the couch wearing his robe and a pair of socks. The Christmas tree lights were on, and the piles of gifts beneath the tree glinted and twinkled from the multicolored reflections on foil wraps and ribbons. Blair's eyes were closed, but he was humming softly along with the carol.

Jim tiptoed downstairs and into Blair's old bedroom, where they had stashed the joint Christmas present they had bought for themselves: a state-of-the-art digital video camera. Jim had plugged in the charger the evening before, and now snapped the battery in place. Walking out of the small room, he zoomed in on the father and daughter nestled on the couch. He panned to the lit tree, and the gifts beneath, but soon came back to his main subjects.

He walked quietly over to the couch, zooming in close on his blissful lover and their daughter. He grinned as heavy lids lifted off the dark blue eyes, and Blair smiled up at him.

"Merry Christmas, Jim." He ran a hand over the soft, silken curls on Laurene's head, looking down at her earnest little face as she fed.

"What are you doing up before dawn?" his puzzled partner wanted to know. Despite the question, Jim kept on taping the scene before him.

"You know how it goes, Jim," Blair explained patiently for the camera. "Laurene can't tell time. When she gets hungry and fusses, I have to come feed her, or risk you waking up all grumpy."

"I don't wake up grumpy," the videographer protested.

"I beg to differ," Blair countered with a smile. "You're like the big old papa bear, and you do get grumpy."

"Well, seeing as how we're all up anyway," Jim said, changing the subject, "how about we start opening all those presents?"

Blair gently pried Laurene from her breakfast and pulled his robe closed. "Why don't you help her open them? I'll take the camera."

Jim faded out and put the camera on pause, setting it on the coffee table. "Sounds like a deal," he said, holding out his arms for the squirming bundle. When he had settled on the floor next to the tree, Blair picked up the camera.

With Laurene secure in the cradle of one arm, Jim drew a package to him and toyed with the wrapping, trying to get the baby interested in the proceedings.

Laurene stared intently at one shiny ornament, and babbled her delight. "Ahahahahahah." Both men laughed at their daughter's first attempt to express herself, before Jim tried once again to interest her in the gifts. Finally, he began opening them with abandon, enjoying himself as much as if the gifts had been meant for him.

When he was finished, he found himself surrounded by a pile of wrapping paper, bows and toys. Laurene had fallen asleep in his arms, but Jim was still grinning like a little boy.

"You know, Jim," Blair observed from behind the camera, "I think this Christmas was more for us than for her."

"What's wrong with that?" Jim replied with a sparkle in his eye. "I think she enjoyed it."

At that moment, Laurene woke up. Screwing up her tiny features, she let out a giant sized wail. Jim knew immediately what was going on. "This one's yours, Chief," he said, holding the smelly baby at arm's length.

"You're a big boy, now," Blair chided. "You can change a simple diaper."

"This is no simple diaper we've got here," Jim complained. "This smells like a major sewage spill."

"You're such a wimp." Blair chuckled and set the camera down. "Give her to me." He took the squalling baby from his partner's arms. "You've really got to remember to dial back when this happens," he said, rising from the floor and heading to the changing table situated in the corner of the room near the bookcases.

"There's no dialing that back," Jim complained.

Laurene appeared to agree, crying lustily until Blair had wiped her bottom clean and wrapped her in a dry diaper, disposing of the dirty one in the sealed diaper bin.

When the baby had finally settled down again, Blair yawned and looked longingly at the stairs to their bedroom. "Think we could get another forty winks before we have to really get this day started?" he asked.

"I think that could be arranged," Jim agreed, guiding his partner and daughter to the stairs, and following them up.

January, 2000:

"Blair?" Jim shook his soundly-sleeping partner. It was 2 a.m., and Laurene was wailing. The Sentinel didn't need the intercom system they'd recently installed to hear that healthy set of lungs howl from the nursery below.

Blair stirred and murmured, turning over to snuggle deeper under the blankets.

"Blair. Wake up. Laurene's crying."

"You take care of it," came the groggy, muffled response.

Jim just shook harder. "I have to get up in a few hours and head into work. You take care of it."

Sighing heavily, Blair peeled back the warm covers, exposing himself to the cool air. Shivering, he pulled on a pair of socks and slipped into his robe. Running a hand through his wild mane to tame the sleep-tousled curls, he shuffled to the stairs.

"Could you step on it, please?" Jim grumbled, covering his head with the blankets in an effort to muffle the cries.

Too tired to throw back a witty retort, Blair descended the stairs, leaning heavily against the banister to support himself. Opening the French doors to the nursery, he was faced with the full volume of Laurene's distress.

Picking the infant up, he carried her to the changing table, checking her diaper, which was still dry. He settled in the rocker, pulling open his robe to nurse. Laurene, however, had other ideas.

After several attempts at offering his breast had been refused by the fussy baby, he stood and began pacing the room, bouncing Laurene and whispering soothingly to her.

"Shh, shh, Sweetheart," he crooned in Laurene's ear. "Your papa has to go to work soon. You need to be quiet so he can sleep." He stroked her hair, a gentle petting motion that frequently quieted the crying. Laurene kept wailing. "Please. Please," Blair begged, almost too tired himself to go through this again.

Since Christmas, Laurene had become increasingly fussy, especially in the evenings. Little seemed to soothe the crying once it started. Blair had spent many nights in the nursery, trying to quiet their daughter so that Jim could get his sleep. It had been over a week since he'd gotten more than a couple hours' sleep in a row. Daylight catnaps seemed more the norm than the exception, and the lack of rest was beginning to show.

Laurene's cries finally quieted to whimpers. Exhausted, Blair sank back into the comfort of the rocker, and once again pulled open his robe. This time he met with success. The baby latched onto the leaking nipple and began to suckle. Blair let his head fall back against the chair's cushion and closed his eyes. That was how Jim found them in the morning.

He came downstairs, dressed and ready to start his day. Noting that Blair had once again failed to have breakfast started on time, he poked his head into the nursery, prepared to growl his displeasure. The sight that greeted him melted the anger, and he smiled.

Blair was sprawled in the rocker, tousled hair a tangled cloud around his face, his robe open, revealing the soft mound of a small breast, nipple puckered in the cool air. In his arms rested their daughter, sleeping soundly and snoring like a soldier.

Jim noted the lines of weariness etched across Blair's youthful features. Even in sleep, the exhaustion his partner felt still showed clearly. He entered the room and carefully lifted Laurene from his partner's arms. The slight jostling woke the sleeping infant, but once she was laid in her crib, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep. He adjusted the robe, fastening it shut, then wrapped an afghan around his love. Lifting Blair's feet, he scooted the footstool beneath them, then tiptoed out of the room, closing the doors behind him.

Early February:

"Dammit, Blair! Can't you do anything around here?" Weary from overtime work on a serial rape/murder case, Jim came home to find their apartment in shambles. Stacks of unread mail tilted ominously on the table by the door, threatening to slide onto the floor at the slightest touch. Newspapers, magazines and books were strewn on every available tabletop. The trash overflowed, and the smell from the garbage under the sink was almost enough to drive the Sentinel back out into the hallway. Dishes cluttered the sink, overflowing onto the counters. In the midst of the chaos, Blair dozed on the couch, still dressed only in his robe and socks--the standard uniform of the day for the exhausted anthropologist.

Jim's stormy entrance woke the cause of all the recent family tension. Laurene began to wail her displeasure. Crossing the room with long strides, Jim entered the nursery, picking up the squalling baby. A quick check of her diaper eliminated that as her distress. He bounced the baby in his arms, trying to quiet her cries.

A bleary-eyed Blair shuffled into the doorway. "Hi, Jim. Sorry about the mess. I promise I'll get it all cleaned up. I've got an appointment to take Laurene into the doctor tomorrow."

"It's about time," Jim snapped. "I haven't had a decent night's sleep in nearly a month."

"You're not the one who has to stay up all night trying to quiet her down," Blair retorted.

"No, but she keeps me up most of the night, anyway. As long as I have to go to work and bring in this family's paycheck, it's your job to take care of that baby and our home."

"I'm doing the best I can!"

"Well, it's not good enough." Jim towered over his shorter mate, trying to intimidate with size.

"I'd like to see you do better." Blair refused to be intimidated, standing on his toes to gain some height, and poking an index finger into Jim's chest. "Give Laurene to me," he demanded, taking the baby from Jim's unresisting grasp.

"It's okay, Sweetie," he cooed into the baby's ear. "Daddy's here. He's going to take good care of his little Muffin." Blair prodded Jim back through the doors of the nursery, and shut them behind him.

Jim just stared at the closed French doors for several minutes before heading into the kitchen to dispose of the garbage and clean out the sink.

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Chapter 22 by NatalieL

"So, Blair . . . why are we seeing Laurene today?" Dr. Roberts, the baby's pediatrician, asked. As he waited for the answer, he began his examination.

"She cries all the time--morning, afternoon, night. I can't get her to stop. Jim's not getting enough sleep, and he's getting really . . . cranky," he answered, shooting for a diplomatic tone.

"Barring any other excuses, providing I find anything, my first thought would be colic," the doctor commented. "However, colic usually starts in infants only a few days to a few weeks old and ends around the third month. Laurene is three months old now. When did this start?"

"It started back in early December," Blair mused, casting his mind back to determine the timing. "But it didn't really start getting noticeable as a problem until around Christmas. Laurene's always been a little fussy," he added. "She's got a taste for breast milk, and won't take formula unless

she's missed a few feedings. Even then, she tends to spit it up. She can't tolerate a wet diaper, or even a damp one. The slightest sound in the apartment can set her off."

"And this started when she was around two months?"

Blair nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's about right."

"Well," the doctor sighed, "I can't find anything physically wrong with her. I'll have the lab draw some blood for testing, just in case. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but it's probably something related to colic, and you'll just have to ride it out. Why it started so late, I don't have a clue. I'll call you with the test results in about three days. In the meantime, I'd suggest trying to get some rest. By the looks of you, Jim's not the only one losing sleep. Do you have anyone who could watch Laurene while you clocked in a few solid hours of sleep?"

"I don't know," Blair hedged. "There's our neighbor across the hall, but I really hate bothering anyone. Laurene's a real handful when she cries."

"I think you should seriously consider it, Blair. If your health deteriorates from lack of rest, you won't be in any shape to care for Laurene. Consider, too, that exhaustion tends to decrease the amount of milk you produce," he added for emphasis. "If Laurene is constantly hungry, that could be part of the problem."

"Thanks, Dr. Roberts. I'll see what I can do." Blair wrapped Laurene snugly in her insulated blankets and carried her out of the exam room.

"Don't hesitate to call if you have any questions," the doctor added as Blair made his way toward the clinic's exit.

"Don't worry," Blair responded. "You'll be hearing from me."

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Chapter 23 by NatalieL

"What did the doctor say?" Jim asked that evening over dinner.

"He couldn't find anything wrong with her," Blair explained. "He said it might be something like colic, but colic would have ended by now." He sighed. "He said it's something we may just have to ride out."

"Ride out?" Jim exclaimed loudly. "For how long? I can't take this much longer as it is."

"He didn't say." Blair's answer was softly spoken, his head bowed as he examined the contents of his plate.

"You've got to find a way to make it stop." The tone of Jim's voice was authoritarian, like the Army Captain he used to be.

"Why me, Jim?" Blair suddenly exploded. "Why is it always my problem? I'm not getting any sleep here, either. And if you think I don't work, just because I'm not going into the precinct or teaching at the university, you'd better think again. When Laurene isn't fussing, I try to get some sleep, because I'm the one who stays up with her all night. When I'm not sleeping, and not trying to quiet her down, or feed her, or bathe her, or play with her, I'm trying to keep the damn apartment clean or fixing your meals. If it isn't perfect, well, fuck you! I'm tired of taking all the blame." He pushed back his chair and stormed into the nursery, his only place of refuge in the otherwise open loft.

Jim sat, stunned by his partner's outburst. After a couple minutes to recover, he rose and walked to the nursery doors, hesitating before opening them. Blair sat in the rocker, nursing their

daughter. It looked as though he may have been crying. His red-rimmed eyes and dark lashes were moist, and his breath hitched slightly as he inhaled.

"Blair," Jim began, then stopped when he was completely ignored. Walking into the room, he knelt beside the rocker. "Blair, please. I'm sorry. I know I've been an ass lately. I've had those long stake-outs, and I'm not getting enough sleep. . . ."

"I know that, Jim," Blair whispered. "All I need is for you to acknowledge that I work, too. You're not the only one suffering through this."

"I know, I know, Sweetheart. I'm sorry. Please forgive me?" Jim looked so distressed that Blair finally nodded.

"Why don't you go take a nap while Laurene's quiet?" Blair suggested, shifting the nursing infant to the other side and settling her in his arms.

Jim stood and leaned over the pair, placing a warm kiss on Blair's temple. "I love you."

Blair looked up with a tired smile. "Love you, too."

Jim left the two alone, and went to find some needed rest.

February, Second week:

Despite repeated reconciliations over the past week, Jim found himself more and more short-tempered. It was easier to stay away than to come home and face the mess and the noise. The doctor had found nothing wrong in the tests he'd run, concluding that Laurene suffered from some delayed form of colic.

This morning was no different from the past several. Laurene was screaming at the top of her lungs, with Blair trying desperately to calm her. Jim had come downstairs to find he once again had to fix his own breakfast and clean up after himself. As he stormed toward the door, grabbing his coat from the hooks next to it, he turned to nail Blair with one last comment. "See if you can't do something about this place today, okay? At least get the dishes done and pick up a little." Without waiting for a reply, he slammed the door behind him.

Blair sighed and sank onto the couch, fighting the migraine headache that Laurene's constant screaming had produced. Draping her over his shoulder, he began singing an old lullaby his mother used to sing when he was small. The squalling quieted to whimpers, and the baby finally fell asleep.

A knock at the door brought Blair's drooping eyelids up. He didn't have many visitors, nor did he want any. Pulling himself off the couch, he shuffled to the door, Laurene still cradled in his arms.

"Flo!" he exclaimed in surprise. He hadn't seen Mrs. McGinty since Jim had sent her to San Francisco to visit her son at Christmas. "Come in!" He gestured toward the living room, then stopped dead. "Um, maybe this isn't such a good time," he amended. "The place is a real mess."

"Oh, don't let that bother you, young man," she said, pushing her way inside. Letting her gaze fan around the room, she shook her head and clucked her tongue. "It has gotten away from you, hasn't it?"

Blair nodded wearily, and followed the old woman over to the couches.

"You look exhausted," she commented. "Here, let me take the little one." Without waiting for

Blair's reply, she lifted the infant from his arms, settling herself on the love seat. "Now, tell me what's been going on."

Blair relayed the story of Laurene's increased fussiness since Christmas, of his and Jim's fights, and the exhaustion that kept him from keeping the loft picked up and neat. "All I really need is one, just one, good solid night's sleep." He sighed, running a hand through tousled hair.

Mrs. McGinty watched the slow, labored movements of the man across from her. "Do you have a supply of breast milk in the freezer?" she asked out of the blue.

"Yeah. There's three or four bottles, I think," Blair answered, sounding puzzled. "Why?"

The old woman dug a hand in the pocket of her flowered dress, producing a key which she handed to him. "Here, take this. It's the key to my apartment. I want you to go over there, stretch out on the sofa, and get some sleep. I'll watch Laurene, and see what I can do about the mess."

"Oh, Flo . . . no, I couldn't let you do that," Blair protested, while his hand wrapped tightly around the key, unwilling to give it back.

The old woman clucked and shook her head. "You trust me with the half-pint, don't you?"

"You know I do, Flo," Blair told her sincerely. "But she's been such a handful lately. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

"I've handled my share of colicky babies in the past, Son. This won't be any different. Now, away with you. Get some sleep. I'll come wake you before James gets home." She made shooing gestures with her free hand, cradling the baby in her other arm.

Blair rose and gratefully made his way out the door and over to the neighboring apartment. After letting himself in, he crossed to the comfortable-looking overstuffed sofa, decorated with pillows and an afghan across the back. Piling the pillows at one end, and pulling the afghan down, Blair settled on the cushions, asleep almost instantly.

In what seemed no time at all, a wrinkled hand was shaking his shoulder, and a soft voice talked him back to consciousness. "Time to get up, young man. Did you have a nice nap?"

Blair blinked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand. "What time is it?"

"Four-thirty. I thought you might like a little time for a shower and shave before James gets home," Mrs. McGinty said.

"Four-thirty?" Blair sat up, looking around for a clock. "I've been asleep seven hours?"

"And you don't have much time, my dear. Let's go, shall we?" She put a hand under Blair's elbow, helping him to his feet.

When they entered the apartment, Blair blinked in surprise. The room sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. Flo had mopped and dusted, as well as picked up and organized. The mail now sat neatly in three piles: Jim's, Blair's and bills. The newspapers were stacked in a recycle bin where they could be taken out or read first, whichever the men desired. The dishes were washed and put away, and there was a pot of stew bubbling on the stove, made from leftovers their neighbor had scrounged from the refrigerator.

Best of all, the loft was quiet.

"Flo, you shouldn't have! I mean, this place was a dump." Blair just shook his head in



amazement.

"Oh, I needed something to do in between tending your sweet baby." The old woman smiled.

"Sweet?" Blair's disbelief rang through that one word.

"Well, she cried, of course," Mrs. McGinty explained, "but once I got her quieted down, I figured I might as well make myself useful."

Blair just stood, shaking his head. Finally, Mrs. McGinty pushed him toward the bathroom. "Get cleaned up. You'll feel better."

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Chapter 24 by NatalieL

Blair stepped into the shower, turning his face into the hot spray and scrubbing at it with his hands. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had an opportunity to take his time cleaning up. He lathered his hair and massaged his fingers through the tangles, rinsing and sudsing a second time, luxuriating in the herbal scent and hot water. He applied the conditioner, which he left in while he scoured every inch of his body clean, then rinsed it out and reluctantly stepped out of the shower, turning off the water with a sigh.

He wrapped his hair with a towel, then dried off with another. Fastening the damp towel around his waist, he wiped a clear spot on the foggy mirror. Coating his beard with shaving cream, he began to carefully scrape away at several days' growth. The process took a long time, but when he was finished, Blair had to admit he looked like a whole new man.

Taking the towel off his head, he began to work his stylist's pick through the tangles. He couldn't remember the last time he'd combed his hair--personal hygiene taking a back seat to a colicky baby and rampaging mate.

His heart sank at the thought of Jim. Since all this started, the couple had not made love. Often, they hadn't even slept in the same bed. Blair catnapped where and when he could, on the couch or in the nursery's rocker, in an attempt to give Jim the best night's sleep he could manage. All his efforts had failed, leaving them on the brink . . . of what? Blair didn't know, and didn't want to know.

He slipped on his robe and headed upstairs to get dressed. When he came down, decked out in his black jeans and a red Henley shirt, even old Flo McGinty whistled. "If I were thirty years younger, James would have a fight on his hands." She smiled at the young man, giving him a wink.

"Thanks for everything, Flo. You're a gem." Blair walked over and hugged the grandmotherly woman. "That seven hours was just what I needed. I feel great."

"I'm glad I could help, Sweetie," Flo clucked. "I guess I'd better get going. James should be home any time now."

Blair walked the old woman to the door, thanking her again as she took her leave.

The smell from the kitchen drew Blair back. His stomach rumbled. He wondered how much longer he'd have to wait for Jim to come home. A quick glance at the clock showed it was almost six o'clock. He set the burner to simmer, and went to check on Laurene.

By 7:30, Blair was beginning to get angry, and a little worried. Jim still wasn't home, and hadn't called. He finally dished up a bowl of the savory stew and sat down to eat. He'd finished about half the serving when Laurene began to wail once more.

Getting up, he went into the nursery to check on her. After changing a dirty diaper, he carried her back out to the dining table to finish his meal. By the time he'd eaten and cleaned up, his migraine was starting up again. He carried the fussy child up to their bedroom and stretched out on the king-size bed. How long had it been since he'd felt this mattress beneath him? It couldn't have been longer than three or four weeks, but it felt like forever.

He pulled the Henley out of the waistband of his jeans, hiking it up under his chin, and put Laurene to his left breast. She latched on and began suckling with painful enthusiasm. Blair closed his eyes and tried to snatch a few more minutes of sleep.

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Chapter 25 by NatalieL

Jim came home around midnight, quietly letting himself into the darkened loft. Sentinel vision swept the area, noting with surprise that the apartment had been cleaned. He walked to the kitchen, finding a note propped up on the center island. "Stew in the fridge, if you want it. Love, Blair."

He sighed, and turned his hearing up a notch. Two heartbeats at rest, and the quiet sounds of slow breathing drifted down from the bedroom. He walked over to the staircase and began to climb. The sight that greeted him at the top of the stairs made him sorry he'd stayed away.

Blair was sprawled on top of the still-made bed, dressed in Jim's favorite snug, black jeans and contrasting dull red Henley, which was currently hitched up under his chin, exposing a hairy expanse of chest that Jim hadn't seen in a while. Above that, a clean-shaven face, and a halo of fluffy, soft hair. Blair had obviously worked at making himself presentable for Jim, and the stubborn detective had blown it by staying out late at a neighborhood nightclub.

He sat on the bed, and reached out to brush a stray strand of hair away from Blair's face. So soft, like silk . . . how could he have forgotten the feel of Blair's hair? He allowed his fingers to glide down, stroking at the contrasting coarseness of chest hair, ghosting over nipples pinched in the cool night air. Blair murmured and stirred, turning into the touch, but not waking. Jim tugged the shirt down reluctantly, and pulled a spare blanket over the sleeping form.

His actions woke Laurene, who let out a wail of protest. Instantly awake, Blair swept the crying infant into his arms and hurried downstairs, with barely a backward glance at Jim.

Jim stood at the top of the stairs, watching as Blair desperately bounced and cajoled the child, begging her to please be quiet so her papa could sleep. He felt like a real ass-hole, but, at the same time, the anger that had kept him away from home this evening began to brew once more.

Without a word to his partner, he stripped and crawled into bed, leaving Blair to deal with the crying. He dialed his hearing down, and covered his head with pillows, closing his eyes in an effort to get a few hours of sleep before he had to leave again for work.

February 14, 2000:

Blair roused himself early, pushing up from the comforts of the padded rocker in the nursery. Laurene had had another rough night, and he had only gotten to sleep himself less than two hours ago. Still, with hopes of a reconciliation with his partner, he got up, took a quick shower, dressed and went out to the kitchen to start breakfast.

The aroma wafting up from the kitchen stirred the Sentinel, who had finally gotten to sleep himself. Curious, he came downstairs to find Blair dressed and putting the finishing touches on a nostalgic breakfast.

"Good morning," he mumbled, sitting at his place at the table, and noting the single red rose

gracing his plate.

"Morning, Jim. Happy Valentine's Day." Blair carried over the frying pan, and removing the rose, began shoveling a pile of scrambled eggs in its place. Buttered toast followed, along with orange juice and coffee.

"Remember the first breakfast I ever fixed for you?" Blair asked. Noting the blank stare from the other side of the table, he explained. "When my warehouse blew up and you let me stay here. Remember? I cooked this breakfast for you then."

"Very nice," Jim grumbled, digging into the food in front of him.

Blair waited expectantly for another response which never came. He picked at his breakfast, occasionally looking up at his partner. "I tried to keep her quiet last night."

"Well, you didn't do a very good job," Jim grouched. Shoveling a last bite of eggs in his mouth, he rose and headed for the front door. "I don't know when I'll be home tonight. Don't wait up for me."

The callous remark was the last straw for Blair. "Fine! Don't come home. See if I care. I've tried to make up here. I've done my best to make you happy. I've busted my butt keeping the place clean, making sure I was up early enough to fix your breakfast, whether or not I got any sleep.

"It's not my fault Laurene keeps crying. You try to blame it all on me, and I'm tired of it. She's your baby, too. You have just as much stake in this as I do. And if anyone is losing sleep around here, it's me. I'm the one who stays up with her all night. I'm the one who has to take your abuse because you haven't gotten your beauty sleep. I've had it, Jim! Maybe it would be just as well if you didn't come home tonight."

Jim simmered, then exploded. "This is my home. My apartment. I'll come home whenever I damn please. If you're so goddamned tired of listening to me, then maybe we just ought to get a divorce."

"Okay!" Blair spat back, hardly realizing in his anger what he was agreeing to.

"Okay. Fine. Get your stuff out of my apartment then." Jim slammed the door behind him, leaving Blair to stare in stunned disbelief.

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Chapter 26 by NatalieL

At a quarter to one that afternoon, there was a knock at the door. Blair opened it to find a puzzled Megan Connor standing in the hall.

"What's up, Love? You sounded upset when you called." She eyed the pair of suitcases sitting next to the door with a bit of trepidation. "Nothing's wrong, I hope?"

"Everything's wrong, Megan," Blair sighed. "Since Christmas it's just been building and building. This morning Jim and I had another fight, and he asked for a divorce. He wants me to move out. Today."

Megan eyed the suitcases again. "And you're ready to leave? Just like that?"

"Not 'just like that', Megan. This has been going on for six weeks. We can barely stand to be in each other's presence anymore."

"Whatever happened? I've noticed Jim's been moody at work, but he never talks about it."

"Would you like to come in?" Blair motioned toward the couches. "Can I get you a cup of coffee,

or something?"

"I really have to get back, Sandy. I can't stay long," Megan apologized.

Blair sucked in a big breath, and let it out slowly. "Okayyyy . . . well, I guess I'd better get right to the point then." He looked at the Aussie Inspector, and saw a friend looking back. "I have to leave today. I'm taking Laurene, and we're moving out. I need somewhere to stay, until I can find an apartment of my own. I was wondering. . . ."

Before Blair had even finished his rushed speech, Megan was digging in her purse. "Here," she said, handing him a set of keys. "You know where I live. Go, make yourself comfortable. I've got a spare bedroom--it's yours."

"Thanks, Megan." Blair felt relief flood through him. "I mean, really, thanks. We won't be a problem, honest. Damn," he said after a moment's thought.

"What is it, Sandy?" Megan looked concerned.

"Well, the reason Jim and I have been fighting so much is because Laur is suffering from colic. She cries all night. We will be a burden. I'm sorry, Megan. I'll get a motel room." He handed back the keys, but Megan refused to take them.

"No worries. I'm not going to let a little crying keep me from helping a friend."

"It's more than a little crying, Megan," Blair tried to explain.

Megan smiled and shook her head. "I know colic, Sandy. Believe me. I can take it. Now, take those keys and get out of here. I have to get back to work." She stood, patting Blair's shoulder as she did. "See you this evening."

"Thanks." Blair said, feeling a bit at a loss over the generous offer. He watched as Megan bounced through the door, throwing a "ta ta" wave over her shoulder as she left.

Blair hauled the suitcases down to the Volvo, packing them in the trunk. He fastened the extra car seat in the back, and checked to make sure he had all the necessities for the baby. He could always come back during the day, when Jim wasn't home, to pick up anything he might have forgotten. With that, he closed the car door and headed back into the building.

He went to the nursery and gathered up Laurene, bundling her warmly against the February chill. As he was walking out the apartment door for what could be the last time, he stopped to pull off his ring, leaving it on the table next to the key basket.

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Chapter 27 by NatalieL

Jim came home that evening, prepared to do battle if he needed to. Blair had been plenty angry that morning, and Jim had no reason to believe he felt any differently this evening. He opened the door to the apartment, and was stunned by the quietness that greeted him. Everything was neat and in order, just the way he liked it. And quiet. Too quiet.

He opened his senses to the maximum, looking and listening for signs of life. Panicked at the stillness, he started in the nursery, noting that many of the supplies were missing, but none of the toys or decorations. Leaving the French doors hanging open, he rushed upstairs to find their bedroom also strangely empty. It wasn't just the lack of Blair, it was the lack of Blair's things. He searched the closet and dresser drawers, finding most of Blair's clothing gone.

Back downstairs in the bathroom, Blair's shaving and hair supplies were also missing, along with his toothbrush. Jim opened the hamper lid, and saw only his own dirty clothes there. He circled

the loft, looking for clues, and spotted a golden glint on the table by the door.

Rushing over, he found the plain gold band on the table. Picking it up, he read the inscription inside, which said, simply, "Forever." I guess maybe it wasn't forever after all, Jim mused, finding his vision becoming blurry with tears.

Taking the ring, he went and dropped onto the couch, turning the golden circle around and around in his fingers. Blair, what have I done?

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Chapter 28 by NatalieL

Megan Connor came home that evening to the luscious smell of Blair's famous lasagne.

"Mmmm," she commented, walking in and hanging her coat in the closet. "I didn't expect to come home to find dinner made."

"I hope you don't mind," Blair put in quickly. "You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

"Of course I don't mind, Sandy, and, no, I haven't eaten yet. I'm famished." She wandered into the kitchenette. "What have you got there? It smells wonderful."

"Lasagne and garlic bread. Hope you like it." Blair pulled the casserole out of the oven and slid the bread in to brown.

"Like it? I love it." She moved to the cupboards. "Here, let me set the table while you finish up in here." She carried the plates and glasses over to the small dinette and began setting the table for two.

Laurene let out a wail from the spare bedroom, and Blair dropped what he was doing to rush in and quiet her. After checking for the usual, he concluded that something must have simply awakened her and she was feeling grumpy. She probably realized she was in an unfamiliar place. He bounced her and whispered to her, doing his best to get her to quiet down.

Megan walked in, crossing to soothe both father and daughter. One hand rubbed firmly, but gently, across Blair's shoulders, making small circles between his shoulder blades, while the other petted and caressed the small bundle in his arms. She leaned in to make soft cooing and clucking noises near Laurene's face. Soon the baby quieted, then began laughing at the raspberries Megan blew at her.

"How'd you do that?" Blair asked in wonder.

"Do what?" Megan looked up, surprised.

Blair looked from Megan to Laurene and back again. "You made her laugh. She stopped crying."

"Well, of course, silly," Megan said, lifting the baby from Blair's arms. "You're too tense. You've lived with this for such a long time, you've lost your ability to think beyond the moment." She made funny faces at the infant, laughing when Laurene made a grab for her pouting lower lip. "That's a good girl," she cooed. "Funny girl. We'll get along just fine, won't we, Honeycakes?"

Blair just smiled, and shook his head. Maybe this moving out thing was a good deal after all.

Later that evening, while Blair nursed Laurene, curled up in Megan's overstuffed arm chair, they talked.

"I know it's been hard on Jim," Blair admitted. "With his sentinel senses, he's so sensitive to the extra noise. It's bad enough for me. I can't imagine what it must be like for him."

Megan smiled, warmed by the trust Blair was putting in her to help them. "It must be hard on the both of you, not getting enough sleep and all. Tempers get on a short wick when you're tired."

"Tell me about it," Blair groaned. "I know Jim doesn't mean half the nasty things he says to me, just like I don't mean what I say to him. We're just so tired all the time . . . I don't think either of us realizes what we're saying."

"Sometimes, silence is the best response," Megan put in sagely. "Still, a lot of bad feelings have passed between you. Do you really think that you'll separate permanently?"

"God, I hope not," Blair sighed. "I miss him already."

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Chapter 29 by NatalieL

Jim stalked the loft, pacing the length and width, measuring off every inch, every nook and cranny, getting used to being alone again.

He had never had much luck with family or relationships in his life. Most of his adult life had been spent alone. When Blair had first entered his existence, he'd gone into their relationship kicking and screaming. But time had won out, and Blair had won not only his confidence and his friendship, but his heart.

He wore Blair's wedding band on the pinky of his left hand, beside his own. How could he have thrown him out . . . again? He'd sworn he'd never do that, under any circumstances. The first time had been, well, he wasn't going to go through that again. He wouldn't lose Blair twice.

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Chapter 30 by NatalieL

Megan watched Laurene closely as she suckled. The baby's face began to crinkle and turn red, then she let loose the nipple with a loud squall.

"I think she's wet," Megan commented.

Blair pulled his shirt closed and stuck a finger inside the elastic lining of the diaper's leg opening. "You're right," he confirmed, getting up to change Laurene. "It's barely damp. How did you know that was the problem?"

"Just a lucky guess," Megan answered, mulling over a thought in her mind. As Blair changed the diaper, she asked, "In your study of sentinels, did you find the trait was inherited? Did it pass through family lines?"

"Oh, very definitely," Blair affirmed. "Sentinels were often ceremonially mated to the tribe chieftain's daughter, in order to perpetuate the line."

"How often did the child turn out to be a sentinel?"

"Well, it was still rare to have a full sentinel, with all five senses on-line, but they frequently fathered children with at least one heightened sense."

"Like hearing?" Megan asked.

"Hearing seemed to be a commonly passed trait, yes," Blair agreed.

"How about sight?"

"That one seemed to be the least passed, but one of the more important to the tribe."

"Touch?"



"Very common, as well as taste. Smell was another one not passed on as regularly."

"Laurene has a marked preference for your breast milk, doesn't she?" Megan asked, seemingly going off in another direction.

"Oh, yeah. It was really hard on Jim when I was in the hospital," Blair explained. "Before we could start pumping the breast milk for her, Jim ran out. I didn't have enough stored in the freezer. Now I make sure to have at least one day's supply, two if I can manage."

"Is she a light sleeper?" Megan continued to probe.

"She didn't used to be," Blair replied. "But lately, any little sound has her awake and screaming."

"She didn't like her wet diaper, either," Megan pointed out.

"Most babies don't," Blair countered.

"But that soon? That sensitive to the wet?"

"Megan, what are you trying to say?" Blair's voice had grown serious.

"Have you considered that what you may have here isn't a case of colic, but a case of an emerging sentinel?" She cocked her head, watching for Blair's reaction.

The young man sat, frozen, across from her. She could almost see the wheels spinning inside his head. "A sentinel? Laurene's a sentinel?" His voice trailed off, and a small grin graced the corners of his lips. "It could be . . . maybe," he agreed.

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Chapter 31 by NatalieL

Jim climbed into bed, alone. Blair hadn't left any clues as to where he'd gone. He'd just have to wait, and hope his partner would contact him. He closed his eyes, sure that tonight he'd be able to sleep, only to find rest more elusive than before. The quiet screamed out at him, louder than any of Laurene's cries . . . or Blair's.

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Chapter 32 by NatalieL

The next day, Blair woke, excited to put his ideas to the test. After Megan had left for work, he got dressed and bundled Laurene for a day on the town. He went out shopping, first picking up a small white noise generator, then going around to the more natural-based baby shops, looking for special formulas, moisture detectors, and aromatherapy candles.

Returning to the apartment, he began to mix several different formulas that the stores' owners had recommended. When it came feeding time, Blair settled in the big chair, an array of different formulas on the table beside him. He'd also paid extra for the "natural nipples" for the bottles. After the fourth try, he actually found a formula blend Laurene seemed willing to eat. "Most like natural breast milk," the can proclaimed. Must be right, Blair agreed, smiling. He finished off the session with the real thing, knowing he was going to find weaning very difficult when the time came.

When it was time for her nap, Blair laid the baby on his bed, surrounded by pillows so she wouldn't roll off. He put the white noise generator on the night stand, and turned it on. The quiet hissing filled the room. He closed the door and, for the next three hours, found he had time on his hands.

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Chapter 33 by NatalieL

Megan walked over and perched herself on the corner of Jim's desk. "You don't look so good this

morning. Want to talk about it?"

Jim looked up at his colleague with a look that said clearly, "Go away, and leave me alone." But Megan was stubborn. Folding her arms across her chest, she stayed put. Jim finally sighed, putting down his pen, and giving the Inspector his attention. "Blair moved out yesterday, okay?"

"And how does that make you feel?" Megan probed.

"Look," Jim growled. "I don't need your sympathy or your counseling." When Megan refused to budge, he admitted, "I didn't sleep last night. The loft was too quiet."

"He misses you, too," she said quietly.

That brought Jim's head back up. "How would you know?"

"I know Sandy," Megan stated firmly. "He loves you, and is hurting as much, if not more, than you are."

"I told him to get out," Jim murmured, almost to himself. "I said I wanted a divorce."

"Do you?"

Jim held up his left hand, still wearing both rings. "Does this look like I really want that?" He paused. "Blair didn't leave any messages, and he hasn't called. I don't know where to start looking for him."

"What would you do if you found him?"

"Tell him what an ass I've been. Ask him, no, beg him, to come home." Jim sighed. "I made a big mistake, Megan. Blair was right. It's not his fault we're having problems right now. He's done his best to make things right. He even tried to woo me at breakfast yesterday."

"Woo you?" Megan chuckled. "How did he do that?"

Jim's eyes became glassy as he remembered. "He'd left a rose on my plate . . . and fixed my favorite breakfast. He was so tired. I could see it in his eyes. He'd barely slept, yet he got up early to cook for me."

"And what did you do?" Megan asked gently.

"That's when I told him I wanted a divorce. I yelled at him to get his stuff out of my apartment."

"Oh, my. Well, I can see where you have some big explaining to do." Megan took a chance, and reached out for Jim's arm. She rubbed it soothingly for a few seconds, then dropped the other shoe. "Sandy's staying with me." Jim looked up sharply. "He's got some exciting news that I know he'd love to share with you."

"News? What news?" Jim begged.

"Why don't you follow me home after work, and ask him yourself?" With that, she slipped off his desk and crossed the bullpen to her own station. Jim's eyes followed her, his mind reeling.

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Chapter 34 by NatalieL

Jim sat in his truck outside Megan's apartment building for a good half hour after Megan had gone in. He kept going over in his mind what he would say to Blair when he saw him again. Could he convince his love that he was sincere? Could he mend the rift he'd created between



them?

Finally, he opened the truck's door and stepped out. Making his way into the building, he paused again at the door to Megan's apartment. Hesitantly, he reached out to knock.

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Chapter 35 by NatalieL

"Can you get that, Sandy?" Megan asked when the knock sounded on her door. She found herself conveniently in the bathroom at the time.

"Sure, no problem." Blair got up and crossed the room, answering the door. "Jim?" He felt stunned, not expecting to see his partner so soon.

The Sentinel dropped to one knee, holding out the gold band Blair had left at the loft. "Please come home, Blair. Forgive me. I've been such an ass. I was scared shitless when I came home last night and you were gone. I finally realized that I was the problem, not you, and not Laurene. I need you back home."

Blair extended his left hand, which trembled slightly, and allowed Jim to slip the ring back to its rightful place on his finger. Jim stood, and pulled the younger man into a fierce embrace. "God, I missed you!"

"Missed you, too," Blair said, fighting back tears that threatened to overwhelm him at the reunion.

Eventually, he pulled himself out of his lover's arms, swiping at his moist eyes with a sleeve. "Come on in, Jim." His excitement began to get the better of him as he bounced on the balls of his feet in the center of the room.

"Out with it, Chief, before you burst." Jim actually chuckled.

"I found out the reason Laurene's been crying so much." He looked over his shoulder at Megan, who stood in the doorway to the bathroom, smiling at the pair. "Well, actually, it was Megan that suggested it, but I did a little experimenting to prove the theory."

"And what would that theory be, exactly?" Jim asked, more amused than curious.

Blair continued to bounce in place, a huge grin plastered across his face. Finally, he couldn't hold it in any longer. "Laurene's a sentinel! A full-fledged, five senses sentinel. That's why we had such problems with her. Every little sound woke her up. Every little discomfort or odd taste or unpleasant odor would set her off. I bought a white noise generator this morning, and she slept for three hours!" His eyes sparkled as he stopped to catch his breath.

"A sentinel?" It was Jim's turn to be stunned. "Oh, God . . . no." He sank into the nearest chair, resting his face in his hands.

"What's the matter, Jim?" Blair walked over to his partner and laid a hand on his shoulder. "This is great news. Now we can stop fighting and start looking for ways to compensate until she's old enough to learn to control her senses."

"You don't understand. You can't understand," Jim moaned. "You didn't have to grow up with it. You didn't have to spend your childhood being called a freak behind your back, or having people look at you oddly, or not believe you because what you said you heard or saw you couldn't possibly have. . . ."

Blair hunkered down beside Jim's chair, tilting his head to get a look at Jim's face. "I'm not your father, Jim. You're not your father. He didn't believe, didn't want to know what was going on with you."

"Oh, he knew, all right," Jim sighed. "He just wished he could make it all go away, make me normal."

"But you're not normal, Jim. You're special. And Laurene's special. She'll grow up in a family that understands her abilities. We'll teach her to control them, to use them only when they're needed. She doesn't have to have a childhood like yours. You'll see. Just imagine what you could have accomplished if your abilities had been recognized and honed as a child."

"I don't know, Blair." Jim looked up into the earnestly excited eyes of his partner. "I'm not sure I'm ready to raise a sentinel daughter. I can barely handle myself at times."

"I'll handle you both," Blair assured him with a smile. "And I'm sure you'll have your own sage comments for her when the time comes. Meanwhile, the white noise generator becomes our next best friend." His grin was infectious, and Jim finally returned it.

"You're irresistible when you set yourself on a mission, you know," he commented, pulling Blair onto his lap and wrapping him in his arms.

"So, you're okay with this?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"This is me we're talking about. Do you ever?" Blair laughed and made a weak attempt to escape Jim's grasp.

"Not so fast, there, Partner. We've got some serious making up to do." Jim tightened his arms, pulling Blair closer to him, brushing his lips against the fullness of Blair's mouth.

"Uh-hem!" Megan cleared her throat and walked into the center of the room. The two men looked up at her curiously. "Don't you think you ought to move this little love fest to the other side of town?"

"You're kicking me out?" Blair asked, faking a pout.

"I'm sending you home, where you belong." She smiled at him warmly. "I love having you here, Sandy, you know that, but I think there's someone here who wants you more."

"Is she right?" Blair turned to the man in whose arms he still rested. "Is there someone here who wants me more?"

"If you have to ask," Jim answered, "then I've been a bigger ass than even I imagined. Blair, the loft is just an empty apartment without you there. You're the one who makes it a home. Come home . . . please?"

"Oh, God, Jim. I thought you'd never ask," Blair sighed in his ear, snuggling into his favorite spot under Jim's chin.

March - Rainier, Third Quarter:

Blair flew around the loft, gathering up books and papers, locating all the pieces of his class syllabus. "I can't believe the time has gone by so fast. I'm not ready. Is Flo here yet?"

Jim smiled at the frantic activity, bouncing a serene Laurene in his arms as he watched the activity with amusement. "Slow down a little, Professor. Everything's right here. You are ready,

you know."

"Classes don't start until Wednesday," Blair huffed, almost out of breath from his wild search of the loft, "but there's so much that needs to be done before then. I've been away from school for a year. I've got to get my office back in order, get my class materials organized, figure out my schedule, assign office hours. . . ."

Jim placed Laurene in her swing, where she giggled happily, and crossed back to gather Blair into his arms. "You worry too much. This is your element. You're going to do fine. Tell me about the dissertation."

"Well," Blair began, looking up into sky-blue eyes, "I - I, um, are you going to kiss me?"

"Do you want me to?" Jim's eyes glinted with mischief.

Blair smiled nervously. "I think it might help."

"Tell me about the dissertation first."

"You're such a dick!" Blair's face crinkled into a look of disdain.

"And you love me for it. Now, spill."

Blair sighed and took a deep breath. "Well, I'll turn it in this week. The committee will take their time reviewing it, then return it with suggestions. I'll probably have a rewrite. At least one, maybe more."

"When do you have to defend it?" Jim asked.

"They've scheduled the defense for May."

"That's a long way off. Why are they waiting so long?" As he questioned his lover, he was gently stroking the soft curls, then stopping to massage tense shoulders.

Blair relaxed minutely under Jim's touch. "Giving me time to back out, I guess," he answered with a nervous laugh. "No, seriously . . . They're giving me time to get it polished. I'm giving a public defense, and I guess they feel that after all this time, I might as well get it right."

"You'll do fine," Jim assured him. "Do I get to come?"

"Only if you want to, Jim."

"My being there wouldn't make you nervous?"

Blair allowed himself to relax completely in Jim's arms, forcing the larger man to help support him. "You're my strength, man. You're the one person in this world I'm most comfortable around. Of course you wouldn't make me nervous. I want you to be there."

"Have they set an actual date?" Jim pulled the sturdy body closer, lending Blair his strength.

"The twenty-fourth."

Jim's jaw dropped, and he stared at the man in his arms. "Your birthday?"

"Yup. Is that karma, or what? I'll get my Ph.D. on my birthday." He smiled.

"You're sure they'll award you the degree? What if they don't? I mean, I can't see why they wouldn't, but some of those committee members are bigger dicks than I am."

"Oh, I'm sure none of them are bigger dicks than you," Blair teased, rubbing his upper thigh against Jim's groin. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

Jim growled and dove in, capturing the pliant mouth beneath his. Blair allowed himself to be taken, momentarily forgetting his responsibilities.

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Chapter 36 by NatalieL

"Hey, Jim." Blair blew through the doors to Major Crime.

Jim looked up from his paperwork and smiled. "You're looking pretty pleased with yourself," he commented. "What's up?"

"You mean besides me?" Blair was bouncing again, excess energy needing a release in movement.

Jim did a quick double-take. "You're not. . . ."

"Of course not. Jim, I'm still breastfeeding. Give me a break."

"So, what's your excuse then?" Jim reached out to grab a nearby chair, dragging it over next to him and tugging Blair into the seat.

"Guess who I bumped into after class this morning?"

Jim thought for all of ten seconds. "I give up."

"Lynne Casey. She was a guest speaker in the Life Sciences Department. She was giving a lecture on micro-biology and male pregnancy." Blair beamed.

"Oh, wonderful," Jim deadpanned. "All we need is for her to let the cat out of the bag."

"Well, actually, she already has," Blair replied, somewhat subdued. At Jim's startled look, he rushed on. "She didn't know that I'd kept it a secret from the university. She mentioned that one of the Profs here at Rainier had gone through the program. Of course, the students asked, and, well . . . she didn't know, Jim."

Jim sat, shaking his head. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, he composed himself enough to speak calmly. "What, exactly, is this going to mean for you working at Rainier?"

"That's the really good part of this, Jim," Blair explained. The Dean of Humanities came to speak to me. He came to me. Seems I'm some sort of instant celebrity on campus. Anyway, they're allowing me the benefits and privileges of being a parent. I get sick leave to stay home with Laurene when she needs it, health coverage for her, as well as myself, and free, on-campus babysitting. They'll even give me special breaks for breastfeeding."

"Blair, you do realize that if this gets around, you're not going to have any privacy. Neither will I. And Laurene will become the center of a media circus."

"Actually, the Cascade Herald has already come knocking, but Dean Crawford sent them packing." Blair chuckled, then continued. "The Dean asked me something that got me thinking."

"Oh no," Jim groaned. "That's dangerous."

"Very funny, Jim." Blair shook his head in mock annoyance.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Jim asked.

"He wanted to know if I planned to get pregnant again soon." Before Jim could open his mouth to protest, Blair hurried on. "He said there are all sorts of waivers and benefits for pregnant employees. I think he sort of liked the idea."

"Well, we're not getting pregnant again just to make the Dean happy," Jim stated flatly.

"Of course not, but it got me thinking. . . ." He glared at Jim when the detective made a move to make another snappy comeback. "I was thinking . . . I'd like to have another child. Laurene needs a little brother, don't you think?"

"No."

"No? What 'no'? Come on, Jim, give it a little consideration first."

"I've given it a lot of consideration. No."

"Jim. . . ."

"This isn't the time or place for this argument, Blair," he said, looking around the bullpen at the attention they were beginning to draw. "We'll talk about it tonight."

"All right," Blair agreed, standing and preparing to leave. "But I don't intend to take 'no' for an answer. At least, not without a fight. See you tonight." He breezed back out of Major Crime with nearly the same bounce as he'd entered.

Jim sighed, trying without much luck to return his thoughts to the case report he was filling out.

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Chapter 37 by NatalieL

"Hi, Flo!" Still bouncing, despite Jim's earlier denouncing of his idea, he approached their volunteer babysitter and hugged her.

"Well, hello to you, too, young man." The older woman chuckled, always tickled by Blair's endless enthusiasm.

"How'd it go today?" Blair asked, finally releasing her.

Flo McGinty straightened her dress and fluffed her hair. "Oh, fine. Just fine. Those suggestions you made seem to have helped a lot," she commented. "I do think she's about ready to be fed again, though. She's growing like a little weed! I didn't remember that such little ones could eat so much."

"She's got a healthy appetite, all right," Blair chuckled. He headed toward the nursery, just as Laurene started to make soft whimpering noises. Picking her up, he headed out to the couch.

Curling his legs under him, Blair settled into the corner of the couch, cradling his daughter against his chest. She began to wetly suckle at his shirt, and he laughed. "You're right. She's hungry again." He pulled up his shirt, letting Laurene settle down to the serious business of feeding.

"This still amazes me no end," Blair commented as the baby suckled noisily. "When Lynne first suggested I might breastfeed, I thought it was the most disgusting thing, but the first time that little mouth latched on . . . it's like magic," he sighed. "Isn't it just incredible, Flo? She's feeding from

me. Me. It shouldn't even be possible."

"And why would you say that, Dear?" Flo came to sit next to the nursing pair. "Men and women aren't that different. There are instances where fathers have nursed their newborns when the mothers have died in childbirth."

Blair looked up, surprised. "Yeah?"

"You should know. You're the anthropologist." She chuckled, ruffling a hand through the long curls.

"Flo, what do you think of the idea of us having another baby?" Blair ventured to ask.

"Oh, I think that would be wonderful, Dear. You two have been excellent fathers. Besides, I don't believe in only children, if there's a choice. The more, the merrier."

"Yeah, well, Jim doesn't seem to think the same way," Blair admitted.

"He's afraid," Flo said with finality. "He'll come around. Give him time." Standing, she went to gather her things. "Time I got going. James will be home soon. It sounds to me like you two have some discussing to do. Don't mind me. I'll let myself out."

As she began to open the door, the knob turned and the door pushed inward. "James!"

"Flo!" Jim backed up, giving their neighbor a chance to pass. "Sorry about that. Have a good evening."

"Thank you. You have a good evening, as well." She started to walk down the hall, then turned back. "Do Blair the courtesy of listening, James," she scolded before opening the door to her own apartment.

"What was that all about?" Jim asked, hanging up his coat and coming to settle next to Blair.

"You know," Blair hedged. "What we were talking about down at the PD."

"The answer's still no," Jim said in no uncertain terms.

"At least tell me why you feel that way. I really need to know, Jim. This is something that the more I think about it, the more I want it. It seems like something that should be discussed, you know?"

"I am discussing it. The answer's no." Jim got up and headed into the kitchen to see what Flo had put in the oven for their dinner.

"I mean it, Jim. If you're going to refuse without even listening to my side, I'd like to know your reasons." Blair stood up and crossed the room, cradling Laurene in one arm and gesturing toward Jim with the other.

Jim spun to face his persistent lover. "All right. How about you almost dying on me? Is that a good enough reason?"

"That was after I'd given birth, and even Lynne said the separation of the placenta was a rare thing. Chances are, it's not going to happen again," Blair argued.

"'Chances are' isn't good enough for me, Blair. I won't lose you! The pregnancy is risky, too. Remember how Lynne cautioned you could hemorrhage and die in the first three months? What about that? And how about the nausea? Have you forgotten that already? You spent three

months in the bathroom puking up your guts and losing weight."

"Every pregnancy is different," Blair explained. "I might not be so nauseous next time. Even if I am, I'll know to ask for the anti-nausea meds sooner. I don't see that as such a big problem. Besides, once the vomiting let up, everything was great. The second trimester was a breeze. It was so cool feeling the baby kick, and watching the changes in my body. Once we told everyone down at the PD, it was kind of fun being the center of attention." He grinned, remembering how all the women had gathered around him, vying for a chance to lay a hand on his softly rounding abdomen.

"I remember you not particularly liking the changes in your body. By the time we were able to have sex again, you were downright embarrassed by it."

"That was my first pregnancy, Jim. Of course things would feel strange. I didn't know how you'd react. I seem to remember you being turned on by the changes. You loved me pregnant. Admit it."

"I'm not admitting to anything," Jim answered stubbornly. "How about when you blew up like a blimp? You can't say much good about that last trimester. I remember you complaining about not being able to see your dick, wondering if it had shrunk, for God's sake! Remember the bladder infection? The difficulty you had simply peeing the last month?" As Jim enumerated each new item he got more and more into Blair's face, until he was mere inches from the younger man.

Blair took the opportunity to place a quick kiss on Jim's lips before countering with his own arguments. Startled by the nonsequitur, Jim backed off a step. "I haven't forgotten all that," Blair assured him. "But none of it lasts very long, and look at the results." He fussed over the infant who had just finished her feeding, putting her over his shoulder to burp.

"The answer's still no," Jim said, digging in his heels and refusing to budge.

"Well, I'm not ready yet, anyway," Blair told him. "I'd want to have Laurene weaned first; maybe wait until after her first birthday. I'm not done discussing this, but I'll drop it for now. What's for dinner?"

Gladly switching gears, Jim walked over to the oven and pulled out the casserole. "Looks like a Shepherd's Pie. Do we still have any of those rolls you baked a couple days ago?"

"Yeah, I think there's a few left," Blair answered. "How about some salad to round it out?"

After putting Laurene in her swing next to the dining table, the men settled down to enjoy their dinner.

May 14, Mother's Day:

Jim walked up the stairs carrying a breakfast tray and a rose. "Happy Mother's Day, Sweetheart," he greeted his drowsy lover.

Blair wiped the sleep from his eyes, smiling appreciatively at the offering. "For me?"

"I don't see any other mothers in the room." He looked around suspiciously. "You don't have Naomi hidden in the closet, do you?"

Blair snorted in his orange juice, nearly choking as he tried to drink. "Not that I know about," he chortled. "But knowing Naomi, anything's possible."

Jim crawled up onto the bed and picked up a piece of crisply fried bacon, feeding it to Blair, who

munched with a wistful smile. "You're too good to me, you know that?"

Jim leaned in to kiss the greasy lips, tasting the wonderful combination of bacon and Blair. "Mmmm . . . not half as good as I'm going to be." He continued to pepper Blair with kisses to his cheek and throat, while the younger man tried valiantly to eat his breakfast.

"Ah! Ah! Cut that out!" Blair gasped around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. Jim had pushed the blankets down and was currently nibbling on one peaked nipple. "Gods, Jim, not while I'm eating!" Involuntarily, he arched into the touch, nearly toppling the tray across his lap.

Taking a moment away from his pleasure, Jim steadied the tray, then lifted it and set it on the floor. Straddling Blair, he returned to teasing the taut nipples. Blair humped into him, pressing his erection against Jim's stomach through the blanket that separated their bodies.

Slowly, Jim inched downward, pushing the blanket lower and lower. His kisses followed the arrow of chest hair to Blair's stomach, where his tongue swirled wetly around Blair's navel. His lover bucked under him, squirming away from the tickling.

Grabbing at the short hair on Jim's head, Blair attempted to push the questing mouth lower, but Jim refused to give in. Rising onto his knees, he leaned forward once more, capturing Blair's mouth, sucking on the probing tongue. While using one arm to brace himself, Jim pinched and pulled at the sensitive nipples with his other hand.

He finally released Blair's mouth, and smiled mischievously down on his panting lover. "Bet I can make you come with nipple stimulation alone," he bragged, diving back to nip at a hard bud.

"Ah - ah - ow! Oh, Jim! Ah - oh!" Blair tossed on the bed, arching his hips in an attempt to get some friction against his aching cock. "Cut it out! Damn, Jim, this is so unfair!"

"You want me to stop?" Jim sat up and stared down at the sweat-drenched body beneath him. He pushed the blankets lower, and a swollen, purple cock jumped out to meet him, pre-come dripping from the tip. "You're so close. Look how beautiful you are," he whispered.

Blair whimpered. Thrusting his hips upward, he begged for release. "Please, Jim. Oh, God, please finish!"

"As you wish." Jim untied his robe and threw it aside, lowering himself so that Blair's cock brushed against his chest. He felt the quiver that ran through the length of his lover's body at the touch. As he moved himself upward, Blair's penis traced a moist line down the center of his chest. He leaned down to seal his lips around one small breast, letting his tongue lave the tender bud. He could feel the stiff cock knocking against his stomach, so he captured the nipple with his teeth and pulled.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Blair cried out, writhing under him. "Jim! Jiiiiim!" His entire body spasmed and he felt hot semen coat his stomach and chest as his orgasm overtook him. The last of the shudders left him limp and spent. Eyes closed, he basked in the feeling of completion.

Jim sat back on his haunches, observing the naked body beneath him. Taking one finger, he began to trace patterns in the semen on Blair's stomach. One blue eye cracked open at the touch to observe him.

"I love you, too," Blair sighed, after seeing what Jim had written in the come. He let his head drop back onto the pillows and allowed his eyes to close once more.

Jim picked up a t-shirt that had been abandoned on the floor by the bed, and wiped Blair's chest and stomach clean, pulling the blankets up to cover the cooling body. Blair grabbed hold, and



pulled the blankets up under his chin.

Jim stretched out beside him, stroking tousled curls and admiring the angelic face of his lover in repose.

"That wasn't fair, you know." Blair spoke softly, eyes still closed. "You know how sensitive my nipples are since I've been nursing. You took advantage of that."

"You asked me to finish. You didn't tell me to stop," Jim argued back, keeping his voice low.

"You know what I mean," Blair said, even though, at this point, Jim didn't have a clue. "If I'd never been pregnant, never had Laurene, you wouldn't have been able to do that. Yet you seem inordinately proud of yourself that you could."

"Is that a bad thing?" Jim wondered.

"Well, no," Blair conceded. "Except that you don't want me to get pregnant again, yet you get sexually aroused by my pregnant and lactating body. What does that say?"

"It says I think you're especially sexy when you're pregnant or nursing. That doesn't make a pregnancy any safer, and it certainly isn't a good reason to get pregnant again."

"No, it's not," Blair agreed, finally opening his eyes and turning his head to look at his lover. "But you can't deny you like it."

"No. I won't deny it. It doesn't change my mind, though."

"I don't want Laurene to be an only child," Blair began. "I want us to have a son, a brother for Laur. That doesn't mean that I don't love our daughter. I do, Jim. She's the most precious thing in my life, next to you. But I want a son, too. Someone to pass on the Sandburg-Ellison name. A companion for Laurene, somebody for her to play with. Somebody she can call on for help and support when we're gone."

"I promise, Jim. This will be the last pregnancy. Just this one more, and I'll never bring it up again."

Jim lay quietly, studying his partner and mulling over some of the arguments.

"Jim?" Blair probed when his partner remained silent.

"I'm processing," he replied, grinning. A few moments later, he spoke again. "I still don't like the idea, Blair. It's too risky for you. But give me some time. I'll think about it."

"Wonderful!" Blair cried out, knowing now that it was only a matter of time. "Um, Jim?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

May 24:

"How do I look?" Blair stood nervously at the foot of the stairs.

Jim looked up from breakfast preparations to stare. Blair looked stunning in the tailored navy blue suit Jim had bought him for his birthday. It was complimented by a blue shirt that matched his eye

color perfectly, and a diagonally striped navy blue tie. Instead of the usual silver hoops, Blair's earlobe sported a diamond stud, a gift from Naomi. With his hair tied back in a neat ponytail, he looked ready to face the world . . . and his doctoral committee.

"You look amazing. You'll knock 'em dead on looks alone," Jim assured him.

"I wish it was going to be that easy," Blair said, walking over to the table and sitting down. "It takes a little bit more than a nice suit to convince the committee to hand over a degree." Jim set a plate of waffles and a bowl of strawberry compote in front of him. "Ah, gee, Jim," Blair sighed. "I think I'm too nervous to eat."

"When do you give your presentation?"

"At ten o'clock." Blair took a sip of coffee and watched as Jim dug in hungrily to his stack of waffles.

"It's just eight now," Jim reminded him. "You'd better at least try to eat something. It wouldn't do to have you passing out in the middle of your presentation."

"I might just do that anyway," Blair admitted.

Jim laughed. "You are the one person I know who could talk to anyone, at any time, for any length of time, on practically any subject and sound like a genius. This is something you've been studying for what, the past six years?"

"Closer to eight," Blair mumbled, taking a small bite of waffle to see how it would sit in his stomach.

"If you can't convince a few stuffed shirts that you know what you're talking about, I'll quit my job and move back to Peru."

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Chapter 38 by NatalieL

Blair's eyes swept over the audience, picking out Jim, seated in the front row, smiling broadly. His gaze then settled on the dissertation committee. The public presentation of his research had taken close to two hours. It was now eleven forty-three. "Any questions?"

Eli Stoddard cleared his throat and looked up at his apprentice. "In your case studies, it would appear that you've only found one subject that actually fits the criteria for a sentinel. How can you base your conclusions on just the single subject?"

"Actually, sir, I had two subjects that fit the criteria of a full-fledged sentinel. However, one of the subjects had no one to guide her in the use of her senses. They ran out of control, and she went insane. I was able to study my other subject closely for over three years. Beyond that, I have documented several hundred examples of people possessing one or more heightened senses, how they developed and how they are being used.

"Actual sentinels, while always somewhat rare, I believe, were more common in our distant past. They are now found almost exclusively in isolated hunter/gatherer tribes of South America and Africa. To find a person with these abilities in urban Cascade was a stroke of incredible luck on my part.

"My studies of this subject simply served to reinforce what I had learned from my sampling of other subjects, and what Burton had expounded upon in his book *The Sentinels of Paraguay*. I didn't really need this subject to draw valid conclusions from the data I'd collected. He only served to prove conclusively that I was correct in my assumptions."

Blair took a deep breath, and watched as the committee members whispered among themselves. He waited nervously until Dr. Stoddard spoke again.

"Thank you very much, Blair. That was a fine presentation. If you will be so kind as to step outside, the committee will discuss their decision." Then, turning to the audience, he dismissed them as well.

The auditorium slowly emptied as Blair stood outside the heavy oak doors, nervously chewing on a finger. Jim approached and wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

"You knocked them dead in there, just like I thought you would."

"I'm not so sure," Blair hedged. "I was pretty much obfuscating my answer to Stoddard. One subject is a statistically invalid sampling."

"You had two subjects, Hon. You said so yourself," Jim reminded him.

"Alex Barnes doesn't really count. I didn't know her long enough, or have enough time to study her or talk with her to include her data in the dissertation. Besides, twice nothing is still nothing. Eli might have killed me with that question of his. And no one else said anything. That's not a good sign, Jim."

"Look, Blair. It's noon. I suspect they're just anxious to get out of here and get on with their lunch breaks." Jim smiled. "I've got a feeling you're going to be all right."

"Jim!" Blair glared at him aghast. "You weren't listening in on the committee, were you?"

Jim's face shone with angelic innocence. "Would I do a thing like that?"

Before Blair could answer, a female TA opened the heavy doors. "You can come in now."

Blair looked nervously at Jim, straightened his tie, and walked through the doors, back to his place at the podium.

Eli Stoddard looked up from the printed and bound version of Blair's dissertation. Their eyes met, and his mentor smiled warmly at him. "Congratulations, Dr. Sandburg. Welcome to the faculty."

"Don't just stand there," Jim prodded when Blair didn't respond immediately. "Say something."

"I - I, uh, thank you. Thank you very much." Blair stepped down from the stage and met Stoddard halfway. The older man pulled the new Doctor of Anthropology into a huge bear hug.

"It's about time, kid. Damn, I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Eli. Thank you for putting up for me, for having the patience and not giving up."

"You were worth every minute, Blair. You have a fine mind--a little quirky, perhaps, but you see things others don't. It's a rare quality." He slapped the young doctor on the shoulder. "I hear there are other congratulations in order, as well. I should have known that you, of all people, would try something as unusual as getting pregnant."

"Well, you know how it is, Eli. The system frowns on gay couples adopting. This was a viable alternative. Besides, it gave me time to finish up my thesis."

"I hope you'll invite me by sometime to meet the new member of your family. How old is she now?" Stoddard asked.

"Nearly seven months. You should see her, Eli. She's amazing! She evens says "da-da" now. Jim and I are still arguing over which one of us she means." Blair grinned. "You're joining us down at Bailey's Pub for the celebration, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"See you there around eight, then?"

"On the button."

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Chapter 39 by NatalieL

"Congratulations, Blair." Flo gushed upon hearing the news. She wrapped her arms around the young man and squeezed. "I never doubted you'd get your degree."

"Thanks, Flo," Blair gasped when he could breathe again. "Um, I've got a little favor to ask."

"Anything you need, Honey. Just tell Aunt Flo."

"'Aunt Flo' is it now?" Blair laughed. "Well, you've certainly earned the title. We, uh, the faculty and some of my students from Rainier are throwing me a party tonight. We might get home kind of late. Could we bother you to watch Laurene overnight?"

Flo McGinty chuckled, crossing her arms over her heart. "It's no bother at all, young man. You know I love that sweet baby like she was my own."

Laurene laughed and spit bubbles at her daddies from the swing in Flo's living room. Jim walked in and lifted the hefty seven-month-old into his arms. "She looks happy enough to be here," he chuckled.

"Oh, we'll get along like gang busters," Flo assured him.

"Do you need anything else from our place?" Blair asked. "More diapers, food, juice . . . do you have enough milk to last until morning?"

"Do you have any more bottles in your freezer?" the elderly woman inquired. "I could probably use a couple more feedings. I've got plenty jars of baby food and diapers."

"I'll go check." Blair hurried down the hall to their apartment, disappearing inside.

"He seems all aglow this afternoon," Flo commented.

Jim looked up from the raspberry blowing contest he'd been having with his daughter. "He's waited a long time for today. I think a small part of him never quite believed it would really happen."

"What will he do now?"

"He's going to take a teaching position at Rainier--full-time, at full-pay. He's been offered tenure after three years," Jim added proudly.

"My, that's wonderful news," Flo gushed.

"Yeah. I guess all those years he spent at Rainier paid off. It helps that Chancellor Edwards retired, too," Jim said, with just a hint of emphasis on retired. "The new Chancellor looked over Blair's record and was impressed by his success with his students, despite the time he took off to

work with me."

"Will he be able to spend time with you at work?" Flo worried, knowing their close partnership extended to the police department as well.

"Not full-time, but Simon, our boss, hinted that when Blair got his degree, there might be an official, paid position as a consultant open. It would be part-time, on an as-needed basis. The school has even agreed in advance to give him the time off, if the city requests his services."

"It sounds to me like you two have it all figured out," Flo approved.

Just then, Blair bounced back into the picture carrying three bottles of frozen breast milk. "This enough?"

"That should more than suffice, young man. Thank you." Flo patted his cheek. "Well, get along with you two now. I'm sure you have things you need to do before the big celebration. You can come pick up Laurene anytime tomorrow. Sleep in. Don't worry about us."

"Thanks, Flo. You're the greatest," Blair enthused. He held out his arms for the baby. Reluctantly, Jim handed her over. After some nuzzling and good-byes, Blair finally handed her back to her caretaker. "See you in the morning," he assured the child.

With longing, backward glances, the two fathers made their way back to the loft. Flo lifted one baby arm and helped Laurene wave bye-bye.

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Chapter 40 by NatalieL

"That was a nice party," Jim said, backing Blair through the door to their apartment and steering him over to the stairs, "but I'm ready for a little private celebrating. How about you?"

In answer, Blair was already scrabbling at Jim's shirt buttons. He yanked the shirttails from Jim's pants and tore the shirt open, popping the last couple buttons. He leaped into Jim's arms, wrapping his legs firmly around narrow hips and burrowing his face into the junction of neck and shoulder, nipping at the sensitive skin there.

Further words were unnecessary, as Jim carried Blair up the stairs and lowered him carefully to their bed.

"You, Doctor Sandburg, are the smartest, sexiest Ph.D. I know."

"I'm the only Ph.D. you know," Blair guffawed.

"Not true," Jim protested. "But even so, you're still the smartest, sexiest. . ."

"Yeah, yeah. I get the picture." Laughing, Blair began work on Jim's slacks, loosening the belt and unbuttoning the waistband.

The couple wasted no time disrobing each other, and soon lay stretched out side by side. Jim propped himself up on an elbow, and let his hand glide down Blair's arm where it rested on his side. He followed the curve of the arm down to the strong, square hand which rested near his groin. Grasping it, he pulled the hand to his lips, kissing the fingers.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "I'm so lucky to have you."

Blair opened his mouth to speak, but closed it quickly when Jim rolled him onto his back and began ghosting a hand over the slight swell of his breasts, down to his stomach. The hand slid beneath the head of his straining erection to come to rest over his navel. Blair waited, knowing

there was something his mate wanted to say, giving him time to collect his thoughts.

"I want us to have a son." The words were spoken so softly, Blair almost missed them. At his sharp intake of breath, Jim continued. "But I'm afraid of risking you again. I don't think I could live without you, Blair. You're my other half. You complete me."

"We can do this, Jim," Blair responded, also keeping his voice low. "We know what to expect. I'll be fine."

"I meant what I said a while back about loving your pregnant body," Jim said, allowing his hands to return to the low mounds of Blair's breasts.

"Do they make me seem more feminine?" Blair asked, wondering what it was about pregnancy that turned Jim on.

"Not at all!" Jim protested, surprised by his own reaction. "It's odd, you know," he mused. "But your breasts--there's nothing feminine about them. If anything, they emphasize your masculinity to me."

"What about my waistline? Once that starts to expand, there's nothing masculine about it," Blair pointed out.

"Au contraire," Jim argued. "To me every beautiful change in your body just emphasizes your manhood. I can't explain it," he continued. "I know it sounds weird, but that's just the way I feel. It's a miracle. And it's a part of you."

"So, um, does this mean you agree?" Blair asked tentatively.

"I've thought about it, like I said I would," Jim told him. "And today, during your presentation and defense, it dawned on me. Ever since we met, I've treated you like a big kid. Even after we became lovers, on some level, I saw you as not quite mature . . . emotionally, I guess." When Blair opened his mouth to protest, Jim placed two fingers against his lips to silence him. "It surprised me, too. I don't think it was ever a conscious thought on my part. But watching you up there, wowing your committee and the rest of the audience, I realized that you are mentally and emotionally as mature as you are physically. You're more than capable of making a reasoned decision, without my interference. I just have one request."

Blair stared up at him, blue eyes asking the question.

"Before we make the final decision, I'd like for you to think about it. Give my concerns some real thought; don't just toss them aside. Consider both the pros and the cons equally. Then tell me what you want."

Blair nodded his assent. His lips parted, and Jim released him, moving his hand to cup a cheek, tracing the delicate curve of an ear with one finger. "Have I told you lately that I love you?" Reaching up with both hands, Blair pulled Jim down in a tender, but passionate, kiss.

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Sweaty and spent after over an hour of passionate celebrating, the two men snuggled together, spooned back to front, with Jim's arm protectively wrapped around Blair's waist. He nuzzled his face into Blair's long hair. "Don't cut it."

"What?" Blair's voice was groggy with sleep.

Jim ran his hand down the length of Blair's hair, which he hadn't trimmed since the pregnancy. It now hung halfway to his waist in a riot of auburn curls. "Don't cut your hair," he muttered against

Blair's neck.

Twisting to get a look at the crazy man behind him, Blair chuckled. "And have you start calling me 'Rapunzel'? I don't think so. Besides, I'm a professor now. I need to look the part."

"Not short, okay?" Jim conceded.

"No, not short, Jim," Blair agreed. "Now go to sleep."

June - Pacific Beach, Washington:

"I like the hair," Jim commented, brushing his hand through curls that bounced just above Blair's shoulders--long enough to tie back, while short enough to feel "academic."

"Not too short?" Blair adjusted the baby carrier on his chest, before lifting Laurene out of her car seat.

"Well, you know I liked it longer, but this is nice," Jim conceded.

Blair proceeded to tie the coveted hair back into a ponytail. "What?" he said, when he saw Jim watching him. "You think I'm going to walk on the beach with my hair down? I'd never get the tangles combed out."

Jim just shook his head and gathered their supplies from the back of the truck. "Think we have enough stuff here, Chief?" he asked, unloading a picnic basket, blanket, buckets and sand shovels, a rubber beach ball, and a bottle of Baby SPF 40 sunblock.

"I just hope we didn't forget anything," Blair commented, taking the picnic basket and leaving Jim to carry the rest of the paraphernalia.

As they headed across the parking lot to the beach access, Jim's mind drifted back to the previous evening.

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Chapter 42 by NatalieL

"Finally! A day off." Jim sighed. "How about a hike up into the mountains? Maybe we could get a little fishing in."

"We've pawned Laurene off on Flo a lot recently," Blair mentioned. "I thought it might be nice doing something we could all do as a family."

"We can hike as a family," Jim argued. "We like the mountains. Maybe we could camp out."

"Can you imagine camping with Laurene along? I don't think so, Partner." Blair was shaking his head.

"Well, what do you suggest then?"

"How about a day at the beach?" The very thought animated the younger man. He began excited hand gestures as he spoke. "We could pack a picnic lunch, take along some beach stuff, and have a great time. Laurene would love the ocean. The sound alone is soothing. You've said so yourself."

"Well, Chief," Jim dragged out his thought, "a day at the beach. . . ."

"You don't like the idea." Blair sat back against the couch cushions and crossed his arms, a pout



curving down the corners of his expressive lips.

"It's not that I don't like the idea," Jim began, making the mistake of looking over at the man on the other end of the couch. "Oh, don't give me that look!"

"What look?" Blair asked, continuing the slightly affronted pout.

"That look," Jim said, exasperated. "Okay. Okay. The beach it is." He threw up his hands in defeat.

Blair was suddenly animated again. "You won't be sorry, Jim. We'll have a great time. You'll see."

"Can I surf?" Jim asked, hopefully.

Blair gave him the Look again, and handed the baby to him. "What do you think?"

"I'll leave the board at home," Jim sighed.

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Once out on the sand, they wandered down near the water, laying the blanket out in the sand several yards above the water line. Blair took Laurene out of the carrier and proceeded to coat her liberally with the sunblock.

"You should use some of this, too," Blair said, handing Jim the bottle. "With your sensitive skin, we wouldn't want you burning."

"It's cloudy," Jim pointed out.

"That doesn't matter, especially at the beach," Blair reminded him. "Besides the forecast calls for mostly sunny by the afternoon. Better be prepared."

Jim took the proffered sunblock, and began smoothing it over his skin. He looked over at his partner and daughter as Blair began babbling at the baby.

"What do you see, Muffin? Huh?" Blair tickled Laurene's tummy, as the child giggled and pointed down the long beach. "What is it? You hear something, don't you?"

"Dogs," Jim commented dryly, looking in the direction of Laurene's gaze. "There's a couple walking a pair of Dalmatians about a half mile down the beach."

"Really?" Blair said, squinting against the ocean's glare at the specks coming toward them. "Wow. I guess Laur really is a sentinel. She noticed that before you did. Hey, maybe this would be a good time to test her abilities a bit--see what she can really do with her senses."

"For heaven's sake, Blair, this is supposed to be recreational, not a laboratory for your sentinel experiments," Jim protested. "Besides, I thought you were through with that now that you got your doctorate."

"Are you kidding?" Blair looked up from where he sat next to Laurene. "I've got two sentinels to study, now. And with Laurene, I can find out just exactly how the senses develop over time. This is an extraordinary opportunity."

"I am not going to let you use our daughter like some damn Guinea pig. She's not a lab rat for your experiments!" Jim tossed the sunblock down and snatched Laurene off the blanket.

"Geez, Jim, you don't have to go postal on me," Blair countered, looking angry and a bit hurt, as



well. "I need to study her senses in order to be able to help her. She's too young to learn control yet, so, somehow, we have to do it for her. The more I know, the more I can help."

"Just one more reason against you getting pregnant again," Jim muttered, turning his attention toward setting out their other supplies. "What're the buckets and shovels for?" he asked, changing the subject before Blair could launch into another argument. "Laurene's too young to dig in the sand."

"I thought we could build a sand castle," Blair replied, allowing Jim to change the subject in order to not completely spoil the day.

"You could, maybe," Jim returned sarcastically. "I'm no architect."

"What's to know?" Blair asked, grabbing a bucket and moving toward the slightly damper sand near the water line. He filled the bucket, then came back near their blanket to tamp out the turret-shaped sand, before returning for another bucket-load. "Come on, Jim. This is fun! Ever heard of fun?"

"Fun is watching you make a fool of yourself," came the acrid reply.

"Oh, come on, Jim. Lighten up. Help me!" Blair returned with yet another load of sand. He formed a circle of the bucket-formed silicate, then started on a second layer. Finally, Jim settled Laurene on the blanket and picked up a bucket and shovel, figuring Blair wasn't going to let this go until the castle was finished.

Once they had the basic form, they began smoothing out the sides, cutting crenelations in the towers, and windows and doors in the thick walls. They then dug a moat around the formation and built a bridge across it.

Laurene laughed and clapped her hands from her viewpoint on the blanket. She pushed herself up on her knees and rocked back and forth, not quite ready to crawl, but wanting to get closer to the four-foot-tall structure.

"Look, Jim! She's trying to crawl!" Blair exclaimed, swooping down to scoop up the curious baby and bring her closer to the castle. Busy hands patted at the wet sand, little fingers digging in, making her own small marks on the structure.

"How about a nice walk down the beach?" Jim asked, standing and rescuing his hard-built castle by claiming their daughter from Blair's arms. He started a southward trek, facing a distant lighthouse on an outcropping of rock.

Laurene squirmed in her papa's arms, cooing and pointing to the sand. Partially buried near the water line was a gleaming white shell. Blair bent to dig it out, pulling out a whole sand dollar and washing it in the lapping waves.

"Cool! Looks like Laur has an eye for seashells," Blair exclaimed, tucking the shell into his shirt pocket and surreptitiously keeping an eye on Laurene's ability to spot the elusive treasures. As they continued to wander down the beach, his pocket began to bulge with the small sea offerings.

They finally turned, and headed back toward where they had laid out their blanket. Jim began rifling through the picnic basket, setting out their lunch. Laurene munched happily on her Cheerios, while her daddies dug into sandwiches and Terra Chips.

"Terra Chips?" Jim looked forlornly at the bag of colorful snacks. "What the hell are Terra Chips?"

"Something semi-good for you," Blair explained, grabbing a handful. "They're made from taro, sweet potatoes, and parsnips, among a few other things. Tasty. Try some."

"What else we got in here?" Jim asked, digging through the basket. "No potato salad, no coleslaw?"

"Jim! Are you kidding? We can't refrigerate that stuff, and you know how sensitive your stomach is. I wasn't going to risk food poisoning. Try the chips." He shoved the bag at his reluctant partner.

Jim sighed, taking a handful and popping it into his mouth. After chewing slowly, savoring the mixed flavors, he swallowed. "Not too bad. Take some getting used to, but not too bad." He reached in for another helping while Blair smiled.

When Blair had finished with his sandwich, he opened a jar of chunky beef stew for Laurene. Her little mouth flew open and her arms flapped happily. She looked for all the world like a baby bird receiving an offering from its mother. She wolfed down the stew in record time, washing it down with a few ounces of apple juice.

While Blair cleaned up the lunch mess and repacked the basket, Jim picked up Laurene. He walked down to where the ocean waves flowed gently up onto the sand, just before retreating back, and dangled his daughter's feet in the water.

Laurene laughed as the water tickled her toes, and drew her legs up to keep her feet dry and warm. Crouching down, Jim set her near the water's edge, watching as she splashed at the incoming waves.

Blair came to crouch next to them. "Hi there, Muffin," he said, tickling a finger under her chin to make her look up. "Having fun?" The baby giggled in response.

Another wave rolled up, lapping at their feet. "I think we'd better move the blanket back," Blair suggested. "Looks like the tide's beginning to come in." He lifted Laurene out of the water and carried her several yards away, setting her down on a large beach towel.

With a little effort, they managed to move the blanket and their supplies. Jim watched forlornly as the tide began to lap at the edges of their sand castle, filling the moat and encroaching on the foundation of the structure.

To help take Jim's mind off the erosion of their morning's hard work, Blair picked up the beach ball and sat on one corner of the blanket, spreading his legs wide and positioning Laurene between his thighs, with the ball in front of them both. "How about a little game of catch, Jim? You sit on the other side, and we'll roll it to you."

Obediently, the Sentinel settled opposite the two, with his own legs spread wide. "Bring it on!" he said, laughing.

"Okay, Muffin, let's roll the ball to Papa." He placed her waving hands on the object, and helped her propel it toward Jim.

Giving the ball a gentle push, Jim returned it, causing Laurene to giggle as she batted at it, making it roll off course, bumping into Blair's foot. Blair gently guided the ball back on course, and they soon had a lively game of catch going.

"You surely didn't mean what you said about us not having another baby," Blair commented at the height of the game.

"Hmmm?" Jim looked up from rolling the ball to Laurene.

"You said," Blair reminded him, "that Laurene's senses were another good reason for us not to go through with the pregnancy."

"Well, don't you agree?" Jim countered. "I mean, Laurene's been enough of a handful. To have to deal with two infant sentinels at once. . . ."

"Jim, the chances of our next child being a sentinel are slim. We got a lucky roll of the dice this time. The odds are against it happening again," Blair argued.

"And you want to take that chance?"

"Why not? Jim, life is about taking chances. Everything is pretty much a roll of the dice. I don't think this is a strong enough reason to rethink our decision," he added. "If we were talking about something like MS or cystic fibrosis, then, yeah, maybe. But the possibility of another sentinel? That's not reason enough in my book."

"You're not the one who has to cope with senses run amok," Jim countered. "It's hell on earth some days."

"But you weren't nurtured in the use of your senses as a child, Jim," Blair reminded him. "Laurene may never suffer the way you did. From what you tell me, as a child your senses never really bothered you. It's just been since they were repressed and brought forward again."

"I don't want my kids going through what I've gone through." Jim caught the ball and stowed it in the picnic basket. "I think we'd better get going. It's getting chilly." He stood up and began gathering up their things.

"There are no guarantees in this world, Jim," Blair said, standing and picking up Laurene. "But there's no reason to believe that this is going to be a bad thing. We just have to take it one day at a time."

"Famous last words," Jim grumbled.

"You'll see. I can't promise you there won't be problems, but I'm really confident that between us, we can make this work. We can help Laurene to grow into someone really special. And if her brother is the same, well then, we're twice blessed."

Jim wrapped his arm around Blair's shoulders as they made their way back through the thick sand to the pickup. "You're quite a piece of work, Dr. Sandburg," he said with a shake of his head.

Blair threw him a saucy grin, then leaned into the embrace, resting his head on Jim's shoulder.

Early August, Offices of Dr. Lynne Casey,  
Caitlin Infertility Clinic:

"Blair. Jim. It's good to see you again," Lynne greeted the couple. "Congratulations on your degree, Doctor Sandburg." She smiled at Blair.

"Thanks." Blair blushed slightly, still taken slightly aback by the title.

"So, I'm assuming you're here because you want another child?"

"You assume correctly," Jim told her. "It took a lot of convincing on Blair's part. I didn't want him going through that again."

"If either of you is at all ambivalent about the procedure, I'll have to decline your application," Lynne reminded them.

"Oh, no. It's not that, exactly," Jim hastened to assure her. "We both really want a son--a brother for Laurene. It's just that after what Blair went through last time. . . . Well, I guess I'm just concerned, that's all."

"You're wondering if the problems Blair had with his first pregnancy are going to be problems again," Lynne clarified.

"I almost lost him, Doc. I've never been so scared in my life. I can't go through that again. I can't lose him."

Lynne turned to Blair. "And how do you feel about this?"

"I know there are risks," Blair explained. "But every pregnancy is different, right?" Lynne nodded. "I've tried to convince Jim that we're not stepping into the totally unknown this time, that what happened last time can be avoided or coped with."

"There are always the unexpected complications," Lynne reminded him. "Things that happen that could threaten your health or your life. Male pregnancy is inherently risky. But because you've been successful once before, I would say the odds of anything catastrophic happening are much reduced. But, that said, you know I can't give you any guarantees."

For a few minutes, no one spoke. Blair studied his hands, which were lying in his lap. Finally, he looked up. "Jim?"

Jim took a deep breath, and returned Blair's gaze with conviction. "It's your body, your life . . . your choice. I want this baby, but I have my fears, too. You know that. But I'll back you one hundred percent on any decision you make."

Blair released the breath he'd been holding, and turned to Lynne. "I want to do this."

"All right," Dr. Casey agreed. "Because this is a voluntary procedure, you pretty much have your choice of when to start. Any preferences?"

After a quick glance toward Jim, Blair answered. "Well, the one thing I really don't want to do again is go through my third trimester in the heat of the summer."

Dr. Casey got out her calculator and plugged in a few numbers. "Okay. Well, if we were to start you on the hormone treatments now, you could be ready for the implantation on the first of September, which would make the birth happen in early June. That's the best we can do for this year. If you want to wait, we could schedule a birth for earlier in the year. It's up to you."

"What do you think, Jim? I don't really want to wait over six months to start this."

Jim reached over and took Blair's hand, squeezing gently. "If you're ready, go for it."

"Just one more thing," Lynne interrupted. "Have you weaned Laurene yet?"

"No, but she's nursing less and less now that she's eating solid foods and drinking juices," Blair replied.

"If we start you on the hormones, you're going to have to go cold turkey on the weaning. The extra hormones will leech into the milk, which could be very bad for Laurene's growth and development. Did you ever find a formula she'd tolerate?"

"As a matter of fact, we did. But she still prefers breast milk." Blair looked nervously over at Jim.

"It's a tough decision," Lynne agreed. "I can understand your not wanting to wait, but there are the three of you now. Laurene's needs have to be considered as well."

"Would Laurene suffer physically or mentally if Blair weaned her so abruptly?" Jim asked.

"There wouldn't be any physical problems, so long as she can digest the formula and is willing to take it. She might be a little fussy at first. She'll smell the milk leaking, and may refuse to take the bottle." She turned to Jim. "You may have to be the one who feeds her the formula. She too closely associates Blair with another form of nourishment." She turned to Blair, who looked stricken. "Don't worry. You don't have to lose the closeness you've developed with your daughter. You will still be her primary caretaker, and feed her all her other meals."

"Actually, I start my professorship in September," Blair told her. "I can have her at daycare at the university, or have our neighbor watch her."

"Is September going to be bad for you, then?" Lynne asked. "You'll have to be hospitalized for a couple days, then have bed rest at home for a week. After that, you'll have to take it easy. Teaching may prove too stressful during your first trimester."

"The university is aware I want to get pregnant again, and are willing to work with me on it," Blair told her. "But the very beginning of fall term. . . . That's going to be stretching their generosity a bit," he admitted.

"If we wait, we'll have to wait at least eight months," Lynne reminded him.

"If we start the injections now, and I can't make the arrangements for September, we can stop, right? With no real side effects?"

"That would work," Lynne agreed. "So you want to start?"

"Yeah. Let's get this show on the road." Blair stood up. He gave Jim's hand a tight squeeze before he turned to walk into Lynne's exam room.

"Strip and put on a gown," Lynne called after him. "I'll be right in." After Blair had closed the door, she turned to Jim. "You're on board with this? Seriously, Jim. He's going to need your full support. If you're too worried about him to give it, we'd better break the bad news to him right now."

"I'm okay. I'll be okay with it," Jim assured her. "I want this as much as he does. I just happen to want him even more."

"I'll take the very best care of him. You know that."

Jim nodded and tilted his head toward the exam room. "You'd better get in there. He catches chills easily."

Lynne smiled and buzzed Raymond, her male nurse, to join her in the exam room.

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"All right, Blair," Lynne said, approaching him and pulling the gown down around his waist. "I'm

just going to give you a quick physical, then you'll get your shot." She pressed the stethoscope to his chest. "Take a deep breath for me. Exhale. Good." She moved the stethoscope. "Again." And around to his back. "Once more, please." She hung the instrument around her neck and began probing his neck with her fingers. "Everything looks good so far," she commented.

"Because you're still nursing--or were until just now," she corrected herself, "you still have reasonably high hormone levels. I'm going to be reducing the dosage to begin with, and monitoring your progress closely. You're not going to lose these," she said, patting one small breast. "And because you're lactating, expect that to continue as well."

Blair groaned.

"I wish I could tell you differently, but I'm afraid that by overlapping your pregnancies like this, that's just something you're going to have to put up with. Could you lie down for me, please?"

Blair complied, swinging his legs up onto the table and scrunching himself up nearer the head end of the bed.

"Now for your favorite part. Knees up, please."

Reluctantly, Blair bent his knees, grateful that Dr. Casey was a pure professional while doing her exams.

She pushed the gown up to his waist, and began probing the lymph nodes in his groin. She did a quick exam of his genitals, finishing up with a digital rectal exam.

"All done," she said, smiling and pulling the gown back down. "You can go ahead and get dressed. When you're ready, I'll have Raymond draw some blood for the lab tests."

After Lynne had gone, Blair dressed quickly and sat in the chair next to the small desk. Raymond knocked on the door and cracked it open. "Come on in," Blair invited.

"You're a braver man than I am, Dr. Sandburg," Raymond chuckled. "Back for a second go around, eh?"

"Second, and last," Blair told him.

Raymond laid out his supplies and found himself a good vein. "I really admire Dr. Casey's patients," he said as he slipped the tiny needle neatly into the blood vessel and began to draw the first of three vials of blood. "You guys have some set of balls to go through that hell just to have a baby."

"It's not all unpleasant," Blair told him. "There were rough spots, true, but there were great times, too. It's not for everyone. I'll be the first to admit that, but don't knock it till you've tried it." He grinned.

"All done," Raymond announced. "Dr. Casey should be right back in."

Five minutes later, Lynne returned, syringe in hand. "Roll up your sleeve. Here we go." She jammed the needle home and depressed the plunger.

"You're probably not going to have quite the reaction you did the first time," she informed him. "First of all, you already have a moderate level of female hormones in your system, and secondly, the dosage I'm giving you is less than before. Just remember to take it a little easy at first, just in case."

"Okay. I'll be careful. Thanks, Lynne."

"Drop in anytime tomorrow morning for your next injection."

Blair waved his assent as he breezed out of the room. "Jim, Lover, take me home," he said as he waltzed past his partner, heading for the exit.

Jim smiled at Lynne and shook his head. "Those injections make him even weirder than normal."

Lynne chuckled in return. "Good luck!"

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"God! I'd forgotten how horny these injections make you," Jim panted on hands and knees as Blair thrust harder and faster, climbing toward orgasm.

Bracing himself against Jim's hips, Blair felt himself come deep inside his lover. He collapsed over Jim's back, wrapping his arms around him and pulling them both onto their sides, still joined. He began nipping at the tender junction of Jim's neck and shoulder, sucking hard enough to leave his mark.

"My turn," he whispered in Jim's ear.

"My God, Blair! After that, I'm not so sure I can!" Jim groaned.

In answer, Blair let his hand stroke the still rigid cock. "Why do you think I didn't bring you with me?" he whispered.

"I don't know, Chief. You didn't leave all that much for me to work with."

"What do you mean? You're still hard as a rock."

"Maybe you could just suck me off?" Jim suggested hopefully. He couldn't believe how drained he felt after Blair's aggressive lovemaking.

"Aw, Jim. . . ." Blair pouted. "I'm not going to be able to do this much longer. Three months with no sex, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember all too well." Jim pulled himself free of Blair's embrace and rolled over to face his lover. His left hand rested against Blair's cheek, his thumb brushing at an errant lock of hair. He leaned in to capture the willing mouth, sucking on a full lower lip, then diving in to do battle with his tongue.

Blair pressed himself along the length of hard muscle, rubbing flesh against flesh. Jim released his mouth to rain a trail of kisses down Blair's throat to his chest. Warm lips fastened on one hard nipple, nipping and tugging until his lover cried out.

"Jiiim! Oh. . . Ah! Ah! Ahhhhh. . ." He writhed beneath Jim's talented mouth as it continued its relentless trail down his abdomen to contact his partially revived cock.

"Roll over, Sweetheart," Jim whispered, stroking at the soft curve of a hip. "I want to take you on our sides."

Obediently, Blair rolled away from Jim, allowing his lover to spoon up behind him. "I'm ready, Jim. Just take me. Now. Please." His voice was soft, aching with the desire to be claimed.

Jim reached back for the tube of lubricant, generously coating his throbbing member, then

positioning himself at the entrance to Blair's body. With a firm but gentle pressure, he tested Blair's assertion that he was ready. The swollen head of his cock pierced the small opening with relative ease. Moving slowly, Jim inched his way inside, stretching the pliant passage as he went.

Blair moaned, and thrust his hips back against Jim, urging him to action. With slow, rhythmic movements, Jim began to make love to the man in his arms. He stroked the hardening erection with one hand, while kissing moist trails along Blair's shoulder. His lover groaned and shuddered as the angle of his entry hit the small pleasure nub deep inside.

Jim's thrusting became more intense as he felt the hot channel clench around him, bringing him to the edge of orgasm. His hand pumped with delicious friction along the length of Blair's cock as he angled in to hit his prostate once more. That electric touch was his lover's undoing. With throbbing pulses, hot semen sprayed his hand and his lover's belly. Blair's orgasm caused his passage to clench tightly around Jim's cock, milking him to his own pinnacle. Jim's cry blended with his lover's as he emptied himself within the satin warmth.

Both men collapsed in a pile of sated bliss. Unwilling to move immediately, they lay joined and content. Finally, Jim sifted, pulling out carefully. Pushing up on one elbow, he leaned over his satisfied younger partner. "Happy now?" he teased, kissing temple and cheek, seeking full lips.

"Mm-hm," Blair answered contentedly. "Love you."

"Love you too. Forever." He finally captured the mouth he sought, savoring a long and gentle kiss.

September:

Jim walked beside the gurney as it was slowly rolled down the hallway towards the surgery suite. One hand held tightly onto Blair's, while he stroked lightly across his forehead with the other.

"Here we go again, huh?" Jim said softly to his lightly drugged partner.

"It's going to be fine, Jim," Blair assured him. "I'm gonna be okay."

"Promise?" Jim smiled down at the sleepy man, trying not to let his nervousness show.

"Can't promise," Blair murmured through the drug haze.

Shoring up his resolve, Jim took a deep breath and let go of the hand he was holding. "Just remember how much I love you."

"Love you," Blair answered as the orderlies wheeled him through the double doors into the surgical center.

Jim turned and walked back down the hallway. He was met at the nurses' station by Simon Banks and Megan Connor.

"How is he?" Megan asked.

"He's fine," Jim answered. "I'm the one who's a nervous wreck."

Simon slapped a hand down on his shoulder. "How about coming with us to the commissary and having a cup of coffee?"



"Yeah, sure," Jim agreed, not really convinced that caffeine was what his shattered nerves needed at the moment.

Megan hooked an arm through Jim's, coming along for the ride. "Sandy's a strong one, Jim. He's going to be fine."

"It's not the surgery I'm worried about," Jim clarified for her. "It's the nine months that come after it."

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Chapter 46 by NatalieL

Two hours later, Jim sat at the bedside of his mate as he lay in recovery.

Eyelids fluttered and opened, searching for and finding his anchor. "Hey, Jim."

"Hey, yourself." Jim stroked a hand across Blair's forehead, brushing stray wisps of hair from his eyes. "How're you feeling?"

"Sore." Blair grinned up at him.

Jim grimaced. "Besides that, Ace."

"Pretty good," came the response. "Still too many drugs to feel much of anything."

"Do you think you feel up to some company when they get you back to your room? Now that we don't have to keep your pregnancy a secret, you've got a whole fan club wanting to wish you well." Jim chuckled, knowing half of Major Crime and a representative liaison from Rainier waited anxiously to see the new father-to-be.

"Sure," Blair agreed. "Sleepy right now," he muttered.

"You just rest, then, Sweetheart. Our friends can wait." Jim leaned over the bed to place a chaste kiss on Blair's forehead. Blair let his eyes slide closed with the gentle reassurance.

An hour later, settled in his private room, Blair began receiving visitors.

Dr. Casey was the first to greet him. "Everything went very well, Blair," she assured him. "You're well on your way to having that son." She smiled. Then, glancing out the door to the small crowd in the hallway, added, "Keep the visits short. You need lots of rest right now."

Blair nodded. "Thanks, Lynne."

"You're more than welcome. I'll be back to check on you in a couple hours. Meanwhile, take it easy, and don't forget to rest."

"I will."

Dr. Casey patted his hand and turned to leave. As she reached the hallway, she admonished the visitors. "Keep it short. Blair will tire easily for a while and I don't want him overly stressed. Go on in, congratulate him, and get out. He'll feel more up to longer visits tomorrow."

"How long will he be in the hospital?" Simon asked.

"I'm keeping him three days," Lynne answered, "just to make sure everything's good to go. Jim is more worried this time out, after what happened with Blair's last pregnancy, so I intend to keep a closer eye on him."

"But everything's fine? You don't expect complications?" Simon prodded.

"No, I don't expect anything out of the ordinary, but with male pregnancies, the chance always exists. It pays to be vigilant. You can go in now, if you like."

"Thank you, Doctor." Simon took Megan by the elbow, and steered her into the room. "I guess congratulations are in order." He grinned at the man in the bed. "At least this time, I know a little better what to expect."

"Hi, Simon, Megan. Yeah, thanks," Blair greeted his friends. "It's kind of a relief not to have to keep it a secret."

"I can imagine," Megan agreed. "Can we see your scar, Sandy?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Jim? Wanna help here?" Blair asked. His hands sported enough IV tubing to make fine motor skills difficult.

Jim pulled the blanket down to Blair's waist, then hiked the thin gown up until the small incision, just below Blair's navel, showed.

"That's our son in there," Blair announced proudly.

Megan's hand hovered over the fresh wound, stitched together with black silk. "Amazing," she breathed. "Does it hurt?"

"No. They've still got me on pain meds," Blair answered. "I'll be a little sore tomorrow. It's not too bad." He let his eyes drift shut as a wave of nausea hit him.

"Sandy? Are you all right?" Megan grew concerned as Blair paled, turning his head away from his visitors.

"He'll be fine," Jim said, stroking Blair's hair soothingly. "The general anesthesia makes him a little queasy." Leaning down to be on a level with his lover, Jim crooned at him softly. "It's okay, Sweetheart. It's okay. You need me to get the bowl for you?"

Blair shook his head, swallowing the rising bile and turning back to his visitors. "Sorry," he apologized.

"No need, Sandy. We'd better go. You have some other well-wishers, and you look like you could use some rest," Megan told him.

"Yeah. Thanks," Blair said weakly.

"Take care, kid," Simon said in farewell as he and Megan made way for Joel Taggart.

"You look beat." Joel stood uncertainly by the side of the bed.

"Yeah. Guess I don't feel so hot right now," Blair said, valiantly trying to keep the nausea under control.

"I won't stay, then," Joel said. "I just wanted to let you know everyone supports you. Rafe and Brown wanted to come, but Simon said someone had to stay and hold the fort. I'll tell them to wait until evening visiting hours."

"Thanks, Joel." Blair reached up to take the big man's hand and give it a squeeze. "You're the

greatest."

"You take care of yourself, okay?" Joel said, reluctantly letting go of his friend's hand and turning to leave.

Rhonda arrived next with a huge bouquet of flowers and balloons from the female contingent of Major Crime. She stayed only long enough to give her congratulations, and kiss Blair on the cheek.

When Rhonda left, Blair rolled onto his right side, facing Jim, with his back to the door and groaned.

Jim stroked his hair soothingly. "Feeling a bit queasy?" At Blair's nod, he grabbed the emesis bowl and placed it on the bed. "You want me to tell everyone else to wait until later?"

"How many are left?" Blair wondered.

Jim looked up, noticing Simon herding the small crowd toward the exit. Only one man remained. "It looks like Simon told them all to come back later. There's only one visitor left--Dr. Stoddard."

"Eli?" Blair asked, opening his eyes. At Jim's nod, he pushed himself back up. "Tell him it's okay."

Jim motioned, and Eli Stoddard entered the room. "Hello, Blair. I hear you're not feeling too well right now. I won't stay."

"That's okay, Eli. I'm glad you came." Blair managed a weak smile.

"I'm just here to let you know that Chancellor Devereaux has put you on maternity leave for this term. Because you haven't actually begun your new position, the leave will be without pay, but your insurance and benefits are in force, so you don't have to worry about medical bills."

"Thanks, Eli. That's good news," Blair said. "I have to take it pretty easy the first trimester, so this works out all right."

"The Chancellor expects you back to work in January."

"That shouldn't be a problem. The second trimester is usually the grace period." Blair grinned.

"You take care of yourself, Blair," Eli told his young colleague, placing a hand on Blair's shoulder. "And congratulations. Everyone is very excited for you. Come visit us when you can."

"You bet," Blair agreed.

"Good-bye, then," Stoddard said, turning to leave.

"Good-bye," Blair called after him. After Stoddard had gone, Blair closed his eyes again.

"Time to get a little shut-eye, eh, Chief?" Jim said softly.

Blair nodded, and smiled, eyes still closed. "Sit with me?"

"Just try to get rid of me," Jim agreed, settling himself in the chair next to the bed.

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Chapter 47 by NatalieL

"Man, it's good to get home again!" With Jim at his side, supporting him, Blair walked into the loft

and looked around with obvious pleasure. "Home never looks better than right after getting sprung from the hospital."

Jim chuckled in complete agreement. "Yeah, but it's the couch for you, mister," he said, steering Blair over to the indicated piece of furniture.

"Aw, Jim. . . . I've been in bed for the last three days," Blair complained.

"You know the rules," Jim reminded him. "Complete bed rest for the next week. You can get up to pee, and that's it. You'll have your meals in bed, and if you get too smelly to stand, I'll give you a sponge bath."

"Be still, my heart," Blair said fervently, crossing his hands over his chest. He settled on the couch, allowing Jim to fluff pillows under him, and cover him with a warm throw.

Handing Blair the remote, Jim looked at him sternly. "Now, if you'll behave yourself for a few minutes, I'll go over to Flo's and pick up Laurene."

"Sir! I'll behave myself, sir!" Blair quipped, snapping off a mock salute.

"Smartass." Jim walked out of the apartment shaking his head and trying, unsuccessfully, to suppress a grin. He returned fifteen minutes later with an armful of squirming baby.

"I think someone's anxious to see you," he told Blair. Walking to the foot end of the couch, he began to place Laurene on the floor. "I want to show you something she started doing while you were off getting pregnant again." He dropped the tiny feet to the floor, leaning small hands on the coffee table. Letting go, he grinned triumphantly as the child began to scoot down the length of the table on two feet, braced by her hands on the table.

"Jim! She's cruising!" Blair reached out for their daughter when she reached the other end of the table, before she could turn the corner and head away. Laurene tentatively allowed her hand to be taken, and took a wobbly couple steps over to the couch where her proud daddy waited for her. "You did great, Muffin," he congratulated her.

"You know what this means, Jim." Blair turned to his partner. "We have to start baby proofing the house. You know, those little plug thingies for the electrical outlets, locks for the cabinet doors, put all the caustic cleaning stuff up high, or lock it away . . . turn the handles in on the cooking pots so she can't reach up and grab them . . ."

"Whoa, Chief. Whoa! Done." Jim smiled. Looking at the surprised face before him, he explained. "You're not the only one reading the baby books, you know."

"Can I hold her?" Blair asked, still holding two chubby little hands.

"Okay, but no lifting," Jim reminded him, picking up the baby and placing her in Blair's lap. "Comfortable?"

"She's getting heavy," Blair observed. "I'm okay," he added quickly when Jim made a move to lift her away.

"Just be careful," Jim said, hovering protectively. "You don't want that bundle of energy sitting on your stitches." He perched himself on the coffee table and leaned across the intervening space. "How's Papa's little girl?" he asked, tickling the baby's side.

Laurene giggled. "Papa," she said, then blew a big raspberry.

Blair nearly burst his stitches laughing. "Ow! Ow. . . !" he complained, trying to hold onto the squirming baby and place a hand over his aching mid-section at the same time.

Jim snatched Laurene from his arms, allowing Blair two hands to cradle his stomach.

"She's got you down pat," Blair said, still chuckling slightly.

"You just wait," Jim threatened. "Your turn's coming."

Blair blew a big, slobbery raspberry in Jim's direction, causing the small family to once again erupt into laughter.

Four days later:

Blair twisted and squirmed in the bed. "Jiiiiim," he called out plaintively.

"What is it now?" the beleaguered detective asked.

"I have to pee."

Jim climbed the stairs and lifted Blair into his arms. "You sure seem to have to pee a lot."

"Gets me out of bed," Blair teased.

"You're turning into quite the smartass, you know?" Jim set his lover down in the bathroom and stepped out, closing the door. "Call me when you're done."

"Jim?" The call came sooner than he expected.

Opening the door, he found Blair still standing in front of the toilet. "What'd ya need?" he asked.

"Can I stay downstairs? Maybe help you with dinner?"

"Are you kidding? What part of 'complete bed rest' don't you understand?" Jim asked, amazed.

"Have you got any inkling how boring it is?" Blair pulled himself back together and flushed the toilet. "You don't even let me walk in and out of the bathroom."

"You bet your sweet bootie I don't." He walked in and swept Blair up in his arms just as the younger man finished washing his hands. "How about a bath? That would be nice change of pace, right?"

Blair thought about it a minute, then agreed. "Sure. Sounds nice. Up in the bedroom?"

"That's the easiest. Then you can just roll over and take a nap." He began climbing the stairs with his precious load, slowly, so as not to jar him unnecessarily.

Once Blair was safely deposited back in bed, Jim returned to the bathroom to get the bathing supplies. He returned to their bedroom a few minutes later, towels and cloths over one arm, and a big bowl of water and some natural soap in his hands.

He set his supplies aside and helped Blair out of his t-shirt and boxers. The sight of Blair, naked on the bed, sent shivers up Jim's spine. It had been only a week since the implant surgery, but already he was feeling the sexual withdrawal symptoms. Clamping down on his emotions, he determined to get through this as professionally as possible.

He wet the cloth and began by gently wiping down Blair's face and neck. He washed the lightly-furred chest, swiping very gently at the extra-sensitive nipples.

Blair groaned. "Ahhhh . . . harder, Jim." He pressed Jim's hand down firmly on his breast. "Believe it or not, it hurts less with more pressure."

Jim scrubbed a bit harder, hearing Blair's groan turn to moans. He washed down the still-flat stomach, taking care with the stitches that were scheduled to be removed in another couple of days.

As he moved lower, he bumped into a firm column of flesh. Letting his eyes follow his hands, he found himself washing a very erect penis.

"Blair. . . ."

"Gosh, Jim. Just because I'm not allowed to have sex for three months, doesn't mean I've lost interest in it." He grinned a wolfish grin.

"You're bad, you know that? Really bad." Jim continued to wash the rigid column, moving lower to give Blair's scrotum equal treatment. He felt the firmness of the sac, and felt compelled to comment. "You know what Lynne said about orgasms stressing you this early in your pregnancy."

"Yeah, yeah, just get on with it," Blair hissed, enjoying the intimate touch far too much.

When Jim finally finished, he tucked the blankets under Blair's chin and kissed his forehead. "Think you can get a little sleep?"

"Maybe," Blair acknowledged, his body rocking slightly under the covers.

"Get those hands out here where I can see them," Jim ordered dryly. Blair complied with a slight blush. "I'm sorry if my bathing you aroused you, but you're going to have to let it die a natural death." He grinned. "Want me to stretch out here beside you until you go to sleep?"

"I don't think that's going to help," Blair replied, equally dryly.

Jim stood up and patted Blair's hip. "Okay, then. I'll be downstairs. Holler if you need me."

"I need you," Blair whispered under his breath, closing his eyes as he tried to sleep.

Three weeks later:

"Ohhhhh . . . man!" Blair sighed, kneeling over the toilet bowl. "I was hoping this time might be different."

Jim held Blair's hair with practiced ease as the young man heaved into the bowl once more. He finally collapsed on the cool tiles.

"I think that's it," he panted.

Jim wet a wash cloth and brought it over for Blair to clean himself up. "I think we'd better talk to Dr. Casey. You should get on the anti-nausea meds so you don't lose weight like you did with Laurene."

"Call her for me? I've gotta feel better by tomorrow night--it's Rosh Hashanah and I have to go to

services."

"No way, Blair. The way you're feeling, you shouldn't be out of the house."

"Jim, you don't understand. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the Jewish New Year. It's our Day of Judgment. I've got to go to services and pray for a better year. I so do not want to go through what I went through with Laurene." Blair looked up from the floor, his eyes large and round.

"Oh, don't give me that look," Jim said disgustedly, turning away from the puppy dog eyes.

"Jim, it's important to me. I told you I felt drawn back to my spiritual roots after Laurene's birth. This is our time to repent and pray."

"I just don't think you should be going out," Jim argued.

"I've been penned up here for a month, the first two weeks of which I spent flat on my back. Come on, Jim. This is important."

"Let's call Lynne about the prescription. If she thinks it's okay for you to go out, you can go."

"It's a deal."

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Lynne handed Blair a sample packet of anti-nausea pills to tide him over until he could get his prescription filled. "If the pills do the trick, and you take it easy at your worship service, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be able to go. I realize this is an important time of year for the Jewish people."

"Yes, it is," Blair answered simply. "There's something about having kids that makes you want to reestablish your religious roots."

"Not me," Jim inserted himself into the conversation. "Can't say that I've had the least compulsion to go back to the Church."

"Then come to the Synagogue with me," Blair said. "We can bring Laurene. If she gets too fussy, you can take her outside." Then, as a special incentive, "There's food."

"What?" Jim asked, looking surprised.

"Sure. Our Temple always has a big potluck spread after holiday services."

"In that case," Jim chuckled, "get busy taking those pills. We have a church service to attend!"

October 8, 2000, Sunset 

The beginning of Yom Kippur:

"Dinner'll be ready in about ten minutes," Jim called out.

Poking his head from the nursery room's door, Blair shook his head. "Couldn't eat a bite, man. Sorry. I stuffed myself at lunch."

Jim looked disappointed. "You sure? I made that lemon baked salmon you like so much."

"Sounds great, but I couldn't, really. We can wrap my portion, and I'll eat it tomorrow."

"Come out and keep me company, at least?" Jim pleaded, dishing up his dinner and heading for the table.

"I could do that." Blair made one last quick check on the napping baby, and came out to join his partner at the table. "I'm going to services tonight. Want to come?"

Jim looked up with a patented "Do I have to?" look, and took a deep breath. "Well, there's this Jags' game on TV. . . ."

"That's all right, Jim," Blair assured him. "You don't have to make excuses. Besides, Laurene's sleeping. It would be a shame to disturb her."

"Aren't you late?" Jim asked, looking out at the darkened sky, which threatened rain.

"Yeah, actually, I am," Blair admitted. "Do you mind?"

"Just take it easy. If you start feeling nauseous or something, come on home."

"I'm a big boy, Jim," Blair teased. "I think I can take care of myself."

"Then you'd better get going."

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Chapter 49 by NatalieL

"How was the service?" Jim asked as Blair walked in, hanging up a dripping coat.

"Nice," he answered, unwrapping his scarf and hanging it on a hook to dry. "Really nice. So, how're the Jags doing?" He came to settle next to his lover, who put an arm around him and pulled him close.

"Up 71 to 68." He heard the quiet rumble of a stomach next to him. "Need anything?"

"Nope. I'm fine," Blair answered, snuggling into the embrace. He laid his head on Jim's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"You sure?" Jim was concerned at the continued gurglings he heard coming from Blair.

Blair nodded. "Don't worry about me, Jim. Watch your game." He adjusted his position a bit in Jim's embrace and closed his eyes again.

"If you're tired, we can go to bed," Jim suggested.

"I can go," Blair said, reluctantly untangling himself from his comfortable position and standing. "It's awfully early for you. Me, I get tired easily these days."

"I don't mind keeping you company," Jim insisted, starting to rise.

Blair pushed him back down. "No, really, Jim. It's okay. I'm shot, no good for anything but sleep. You watch your game. Enjoy yourself."

"You sure, Chief?" Jim looked up at his lover.

"I'm sure. Good night, Jim."

"Night, Hon."

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## Chapter 50 by NatalieL

Jim rolled over, reaching an arm out, only to find Blair's side of the bed already vacant. From downstairs came the smell of pancakes and eggs. Drawn by the delicious scents, he got up, put on his robe and headed downstairs.

"Morning, Jim," Blair greeted him upon his arrival in the kitchen. "Hope you're hungry." He placed a plate full of steaming pancakes and eggs in front of his partner, and sat opposite him.

Laurene was sitting in her highchair, delightedly flinging oatmeal around the room with her spoon.

"No, no, Muffin," Blair said, capturing the spoon from messy hands. "Like this." He scooped up a small amount, and making airplane noises, flew the bite of cereal straight into the laughing mouth.

"Aren't you eating?" Jim asked.

"I ate earlier," Blair explained, flying another bite into Laurene's waiting mouth. "So, you have to go in today?"

"Yeah," Jim sighed. "It may be Columbus Day for the rest of the world, but the Police Department has to work. What are your plans?"

"Well, it's still Yom Kippur until sunset, so if I can get Laurene down for a nap later this morning, or this afternoon, I'll probably try meditating.

"That sounds like a plan," Jim agreed. "You don't look so good. A day of taking it easy should help."

"Yeah, I'm feeling a little nauseous, dizzy," Blair agreed. "Don't worry, I'll take it easy."

"Why don't you let me clean up the breakfast dishes? I'll even give Laurene her bath," Jim offered. "You head back to bed for a few extra winks."

"Sounds like a deal," Blair agreed, wearily pushing back from the table and standing. "You be good for your Papa," he admonished their daughter, who laughed and sprayed an oatmeal raspberry at her daddy. "She's all yours," Blair said, wiping the cereal spatter from his face. "Good luck." With that, he gratefully headed upstairs for a few extra minutes of sleep.

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## Chapter 51 by NatalieL

Jim breezed in at lunch, carrying a bag from Leibowitz's Deli. The apartment was quiet, except for the soft strains of east Indian music floating from the CD player. The nursery door was pulled shut, and Blair sat cross-legged on a pile of pillows in front of an array of candles, meditating.

Knowing better than to disturb his lover in this state, Jim began to set out the sandwiches and chips he'd purchased for their lunch. Halfway through his own sandwich, Jim heard the welcome voice.

"Hey, Jim. When did you get home?" Blair uncurled himself from the pillows and stood, walking into the dining area.

"Oh, about fifteen minutes ago. Didn't want to disturb you. Come on, sit down." Jim gestured at the plate across from him. "Thought I'd come home for lunch . . . bring you a little treat."

Blair briefly examined the sandwich before him. "Tongue. Thanks, Jim. You know how I love a good Leibowitz tongue sandwich. . . ."

"Then why aren't you sitting and eating?" Jim asked, perplexed.

"I, uh. . ." Blair looked around, stalling for time as he tried to come up with an answer Jim would accept. "I had a snack with Laurene, and with the nausea, well . . . I just don't feel like a sandwich right now. Maybe I can put this away for my dinner."

"Did you eat the salmon earlier?" Jim wondered, remembering last night's leftovers.

"Uh, no. I guess the salmon would make a better dinner," Blair hedged. "I can put the sandwich in the fridge for tomorrow's lunch."

"Blair, what's going on?" Jim pushed his chair back and stood, walking around the table to where the younger man swayed ominously.

"Nothing, Jim. Everything's fine. I'm just not hungry now." He took a step away from the table and stumbled. Immediately, he found himself in Jim's arms.

"Out with it, Blair," Jim commanded.

"There's nothing to tell," Blair lied. "I'm fiiinnneeee. . . ." His eyes rolled back in his head, and suddenly Jim found himself with an armful of unconscious anthropologist.

Sweeping Blair up in his arms, Jim carried him over to the couch, kicking aside pillows so he could lay his burden on the cushions. He went into the bathroom, returning with a cool, damp cloth for Blair's forehead.

He sat patiently on the couch next to Blair, until his eyes finally fluttered open.

"How, how'd I get here?"

"You passed out," Jim told him, a hint of frustration in his voice. "Care to tell me what's going on now, or do I have to hustle you off to see Dr. Casey?"

"Oh, geez," Blair groaned. He closed his eyes, then opened them slowly. "I'm fine, Jim."

"You're not fine," Jim insisted. "You passed out."

"Yeah, well. . . ."

"Out with it, Darwin, and it had better be good," Jim growled.

"It's customary to fast on Yom Kippur," Blair confessed, then rushed on before Jim could comment. "I knew you wouldn't let me do it if you knew, so I lied. I really did eat a big lunch yesterday, but that was just to hold me through the night." He took the cool compress and pressed it against his aching eyes with a sigh. "I guess I screwed my karma over pretty good with this one," he moaned. "I shouldn't have lied to you about it."

"Damn straight, you shouldn't have," Jim agreed. "You're pregnant, for God's sake! You can't afford to fast."

"I just wanted everything to be right," Blair sniffled. "I just wanted so much for this coming year to be perfect. For you. I know how you worry, Jim."

"Oh, Sweetheart," Jim said, suddenly solicitous again. "You shouldn't risk your health for me. Any God worth worshipping would forgive a pregnant man for not fasting. I just want you to stay

healthy."

"I really blew it, huh?" Blair asked, fighting back tears that threatened. "Shit!" he exclaimed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "I really hate those hormone injections. They make me so damn emotional."

"It's okay," Jim comforted, pulling the hand away from Blair's eyes and cradling it in his own. "How about some of that sandwich and a glass of milk?"

Blair nodded, and started to get up.

"You stay right here. I'm not going to risk you passing out on me again." He helped Blair into a semi-upright position, cushioned by several pillows at his back. "You wait. I'll be right back."

Jim retrieved the sandwich from the refrigerator, quartering it and putting half the sandwich on a plate. He poured a glass of milk and put the meal on a lap tray. Carrying it back into the living room, he placed the tray in front of Blair.

"Take it easy, now," he warned. "Try a quarter of the sandwich. If that goes down okay, you can eat the rest. Save the other half for later in the afternoon. Okay?"

Blair nodded around a bite of the delicious lunch.

Jim sat with him until he'd finished, then helped Blair settle back down on the couch. "Take a nap while you can," he said, knowing Laurene would wake before long. "And take it real easy until I get home tonight, okay?"

"Yeah, Jim. I'm sorry."

Jim leaned down to kiss the pouting lips. "You're forgiven. Just don't do anything else stupid."

"I won't. I promise." Blair snuggled down under the blanket and closed his eyes.

"Sleep tight," Jim told the somnolent man before grabbing his coat and heading back to work.

October 31, 2000 - Laurene's first birthday:

Jim came home from work to find the loft festooned in polyester spider web and orange and black crepe paper streamers and balloons. Blair was once again up to his elbows in an extraordinarily large pumpkin, cleaning it out before carving a grinning, toothy face. Laurene sat on the floor a few feet away, playing with a large toy spider. She was laughing and mangling the twelve-inch long legs of the posable creature.

"You two look like you're having fun," Jim commented, laughing at their daughter's antics. "Should I be concerned that we're raising a child who'll be pulling wings off flies?"

Blair just laughed. "I'm keeping an eye on her. She took a shine to that thing. There's no small parts, so I let her play with it. She is a Halloween baby, after all." He pulled his arms out of the pumpkin, wiped himself off, and began to carve out the face. "When's everyone coming by for the party?"

"They'll be here any minute. You gonna have that thing ready?" Jim asked, pointing to the jack-o'-lantern.

"Just take a sec," Blair said, hacking away with a frenzy. "Mr. Leibowitz was thrilled to cater the

party for us. The fridge is packed. Wanna start setting some of it out?"

"Sure thing." Jim stepped up behind Blair, wrapping his arms around his love and peppering kisses along his neck and shoulder before going into the kitchen to deal with the more mundane task of setting up the buffet.

"Wanna help with this thing?" Blair asked, when the jack-o'-lantern was finished.

"Where do you want it?" Jim asked, picking up the absurdly large squash.

"Center of the buffet table," Blair instructed, picking up his mess and depositing the gutted remains in the garbage before washing up. When he was finished, he placed a battery-operated safety light inside the pumpkin, which lit up with a ghastly glow. "Perfect."

The doorbell rang, and Jim went to let in the guests. Megan came in first, followed by Simon, Joel, Rafe and Brown, all bearing gifts. Jim was about to close the door when he spotted Flo McGinty hurrying down the hall with a brightly wrapped package.

"Am I late?" she puffed.

"Not at all, come on in," Jim invited.

"Oh, I wouldn't have missed this for the world," the old woman cried, swooping in to pick up the birthday girl from the floor. "Happy Birthday, Sweetie." She nuzzled Laurene's cheeks, kissing and hugging her.

"Help yourselves, everybody," Blair announced, indicating the buffet table which groaned under the weight of the food crowded onto it.

Once everyone had a plate full of food, they all gathered in the living room area to watch as Laurene opened her gifts. The birthday girl sat on the floor inside the loose circle of Blair's legs. Her daddy offered her the gifts in turn, but had to patiently help the child tear into the paper. True to form, Laurene continued to be more interested in the wrappings and boxes than in most of the gifts themselves.

Jim roamed the room, videotaping the entire event.

Eventually, it came down to the cake. Blair settled Laurene in her high chair, and carried in the cake, decorated to look like a laughing jack-o'-lantern. In the center was one large candle, glowing brightly. He set the dessert in front of the youngster as the group joined in an off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday."

Standing behind their daughter, Blair encouraged her to blow out the candle. Leaning down so that his face was next to hers, he puffed out his cheeks and blew gently. The flame flickered. Mesmerized by the dancing fire, Laurene stared at the candle.

"Come, Muffin, blow," Blair encouraged. When there was no reaction from the child, he began to be concerned. "Laur, Honey?" He rubbed a hand up and down one chubby arm. "Muffin, listen to Daddy. It's time to make a wish and blow out the candle. Come on, help me." He gave the candle another soft puff. Laurene blinked, then giggled. Coming out of the light zone, she reached for the dancing flame, only to have both her hands captured and held still by her daddy. Blair tried again. This time she puffed, but without enough force to blow out the candle.

"Let's try it together. How does that sound?" Blair whispered in her ear. Laughing, Laurene puffed out her cheeks, but it was actually her daddy who ended up blowing out the flame.

Laurene clapped delightedly, then reached for the cake, which Blair managed to lift away from her grasp just in time.

He took the cake over to the buffet table and began to cut it into serving-sized pieces. He picked up two plates, and walked back to the guest of honor, placing one plate on the high chair tray. "Help yourselves, everyone," he told the assembled guests, sucking icing from his fingertips.

Balancing his own plate in one hand, Blair picked up the toddler fork and placed it in Laurene's pudgy fist. She promptly abandoned the utensil and grabbed a handful of the cake, cramming it into her mouth. Jim, who was still behind the camera, had to stifle his laughter at the sight. Laurene was smeared with chocolate cake and orange icing--face and hair getting equal treatment as she happily ate with her hands.

"Hey, that looks like a lot more fun than I'm having," Blair exclaimed, picking up the cake in his fingers and jamming it into his mouth, much to Laurene's delight. She grabbed what remained of her cake, and tried feeding that to her daddy as well. Blair nearly choked on the mouthful, swallowing with difficulty.

Once he had managed to clear his throat enough to speak, Blair looked up into the camera, face still smeared with cake crumbs. "If you think this is good," he laughed, "just wait. This is only the beginning!"

THE END

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