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TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD

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"To love another person is to see the face of God." ---Victor Hugo

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"Ellison. Sandburg. My office, please," Simon Banks ordered as he walked through the doors of Major Crime.

The two detectives glanced at their retreating captain's back, looked at each other, shrugged, and rose to follow.

"Have a seat, Gentlemen." Banks poured two cups of coffee and handed them out.

"So what's up, Simon?" Jim Ellison took a sip of his drink, raised his cup slightly and nodded.

"Do you two still have valid passports?"

The two detectives exchanged glances. "Yeah. Jim and I went on an ice fishing weekend a couple months ago up near North Vancouver."

"Good." Simon smiled. "Chief Warren has informed me that he's chosen you two to attend the International Detectives Workshop and Conference being held in Toronto at the end of May." As expected, Ellison rolled his eyes and groaned. Banks ignored him and continued, "Sandburg, the organizers want you to give a presentation on how anthropology can help solve crimes by understanding cultural differences."

Blair's eyes grew wide. "Wow, Simon, that's fantastic! I am so there."

"Here's the name and phone number of the workshop coordinator. Call her. She'll give you the details for your talk."

He took the slip of paper. "Thanks."

"So why do I have to go, Simon?"

"Because Chief Warren wants our 'Officer of the Year' to attend and give a presentation to the department's detectives upon his return."

Jim looked down as he scuffed his shoe on the floor. "Swell."

"I knew you'd be thrilled with the idea." The captain chuckled, taking a sip of his coffee. "Human Resources will have a packet for you in about three weeks with the conference agenda, hotel reservations, plane tickets and rental car. The conference runs from Thursday through Sunday, so why don't you both plan to take a couple weeks off afterward and enjoy yourselves? Do some sightseeing. The vacation will do you good."

"Come on, Jim, it'll be interesting. And besides, Toronto is a great city. There's a lot to see and do." Blair bounced in his chair.

"Okay," Ellison sighed. "I guess it could be worse."

"Yeah, it could." Simon smiled. "All right. Time to get back to work."

Sandburg held up the slip of paper. "Thanks again, Simon." The tall man nodded.

The two detectives rose and walked to the door.

"Uh, Jim ... a minute please." Simon pointed to a chair.

"Sure."

Sandburg opened the door. "I'll go see if the forensics report is ready on the Taylor case. Catch up with you later."

"Okay, Chief."

Banks waited until the door closed. "Good performance there, Jim." He chuckled. "So will you have enough time to get everything done?"

"I should." Jim grinned. "The only delay I can see is with the divorce papers I have to file, but they assure me it will go fast once they receive them. The Foreign Divorce Kit should be arriving any day now."

"I'll let you know when it comes. Sandburg still in the dark?"

"Yup, thanks to your help. I appreciate you letting me use your home address to keep Blair from seeing all this stuff." Jim smirked and shook his head. "He hasn't got a clue."

Simon snorted. "Wish I could be there to see his face."

"I'm sure it'll be something to see. I can't wait." He laughed.

"I'll bet." The captain clapped him on the shoulder. "Did you find rings yet?"

"As a matter of fact I did."

"About damned time." Simon rolled his eyes.

"I know. I know. But I wanted something different ... special. Something just as special as he is. And I finally found it in a little jewelry store down on Tillicum Street."

"So what did you get?"

"Titanium rings. They have a dark grey interior that curves around to the front of the ring forming outer bands of dark grey. Then there are two bands of inlaid sterling silver with a central band of inlaid 18 carat yellow gold." Jim pulled a picture out of his pocket and handed it to Simon. "What do you think?"

"You're right. They're definitely different." Banks smiled. "I really like them, but more important, I'm sure Sandburg will love them."

Jim grinned. "Thanks. I sure hope so."

"So where are you going to propose?"

The grin never left Ellison's face. "At the Royal Botanical Gardens outside of Toronto. By the time we go, it'll all be in bloom. I'm going to suggest a picnic for Monday after the conference is over as a way to unwind and relax."

"That sounds right up Sandburg's alley."

"Yeah.Exactly. But it will be nice to get out of the city and relax after being cooped up for four days in a packed conference room."

"I hear you."

"Well, I better get back to work before Blair wonders what's going on."

"All right. Keep me up-to-date with everything." Simon grinned.

"You got it."



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Blair had accepted the badge Simon offered him and went through the police academy. Despite some harassment and bullying over the dissertation fiasco, he earned the respect of his fellow cadets and instructors through hard work and the Sandburg charm. Jim had helped him get used to carrying and firing a gun by giving him extra training on the range.

Graduating at the top of his class, Sandburg was made detective and Ellison's official partner. The cops of Major Crime had held a luncheon celebration in Blair's honor. That night Jim had taken him out to dinner for a personal celebration. When they returned home, Jim confessed his love. Blair admitted the feelings were mutual.

The two men had taken things slowly, building a warm, loving, trust-filled relationship. Eventually they'd told Simon, who'd told them he'd already figured it out and that if they kept it quiet at work, it wouldn't be a problem. Their colleagues figured out what was going on also, and were happy for them. By maintaining a professional demeanor at work, they were able to remain partners, even though they should have been separated according to departmental rules. Captain Banks did not want his best detective team broken up. Due to their superb record, he knew the chief would look the other way if he found out.

Once the dust had settled, Sandburg was reinstated to Rainier University, wrote his dissertation on the "Thin Blue Line" and was awarded his Ph.D. The entire department threw him a graduation party. Chief Warren was thrilled. He now had a detective with a doctorate in anthropology whose partner was five times "Officer of the Year." Their solve rate was the best in the state, giving him much-desired bragging rights.

It was now nine years since Sandburg had accepted the badge—2008—and Washington state still didn't have legal same-sex marriage. Although the two men had never really discussed it, Jim knew that was what he wanted. He was sure Blair felt the same. Now he was going to do something about it. Simon had learned about the conference, told Jim, and together they'd hatched a plan.

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The next day at work, while Blair was doing an inservice for beat cops working with the homeless, Simon handed Jim the Foreign Divorce Kit that had been waiting in the mailbox when he'd arrived home. Ellison opened it immediately and started reading.

"Damn!"

Already halfway to his office, Simon turned at the outburst. "What's wrong, Jim?" He walked back to his detective's desk.

"Look at this. They want this marriage license application filled out and signed by both of us and this other document that has to be signed by both of us. This is supposed to be a surprise. What am I going to do now?" He sighed deeply and pouted.

Simon took the documents and looked them over. "Damn is right." He read a bit more then placed the papers on Ellison's desk and tapped his finger on them. "Give them a call and see if they'll make an exception."

"Yeah. Good idea. Can't hurt to try. I'm good at begging when my back's against the wall."

"Go in my office and use my phone. Don't want that call showing up on your cell phone bill. Blair might see it. Get it straightened out. I've got to go down to see the Chief."

"Thanks, Simon. Yeah, Blair often gets the mail before I do."

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Jim sat down and dialed the Service Ontario Marriage Office phone number.

"Marriage Office. Mrs. Mohindra speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Mrs. Mohindra. I'm Detective Jim Ellison calling from Cascade, Washington. I just received the Foreign Divorce Kit, and I've got a bit of a problem."

"Hi, Detective Ellison. I'll try to help you. So, you're an American citizen?"

"Yes. My partner, Blair Sandburg, and I will be attending the International Detectives Workshop and Conference being held in Toronto at the end of May. Washington State doesn't have same-sex marriage. Ontario doesn't have a residency requirement and has same-sex marriage. So, when we were there for the conference, I wanted to surprise him and ask him to marry me at the Royal Botanical Gardens and then have the wedding somewhere in Toronto. But the Divorce Kit requires both of us to sign the marriage license application and the Statement of Sole Responsibility, so there's no way I can surprise him. Is there any way I can just send my divorce decree and file the other papers while we're there, and still be able to get married before we leave?"

"That sounds so romantic!"

"Thank you." Jim smiled. "We've known each other for 12 years and have been together for eight. We never thought we'd be able to marry, so this is really important to me—that I surprise him."

"Detective Ellison, let me see what I can do. Please hold while I talk to my supervisor. There should be a way to make this work for the two of you."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Mohindra returned a few minutes later. "Detective Ellison, good news! Do you have a pen and paper handy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Write down this case number ... 513112325. Now please give me your full name and your partner's full name as they'll appear on the marriage license."

As Jim provided the requested information, he could hear it being entered into a computer.

Mrs. Mohindra told him to contact the Ontario attorney of his choice to get the required legal opinion letter. He was to tell the attorney to reference the case number she'd given him. All he'd have to do then is send his divorce decree and unsigned marriage license application to the attorney who would then write the letter and courier the documents back to him. Once he and Blair arrived in Toronto and Jim proposed, they could then fill out the other forms and courier them overnight to the Marriage Office, marking it to her attention. She would personally see to it that authorization to marry was couriered back to them in just two days.

"Mrs. Mohindra, I can't thank you enough for all your help. This means a lot to me ... and will to Blair, too."

"You're quite welcome, Detective Ellison. I do understand your situation. My gay son lives in the States. He and his partner can't legally marry either, but they'll be coming up here this fall to get married."

"Congratulations! You must be thrilled."

"Oh yes! I can't wait. And congratulations to you and Detective Sandburg. I wish you all the happiness in the world."

"Thank you."

Once Ellison hung up, he used Simon's computer to locate an attorney. He found one in Ottawa who only charged \$300. He was about to call when the office door opened. Looking up, he saw Banks enter.

"So, Jim, how'd it go?"

"Great! I just have to hire an attorney now." He waved the receiver. "I was just about to call. We'll be able to get married, just as I'd planned. No delay. And it will still be a surprise."

Simon thought Jim's face would split in two; his smile was so wide. "That's wonderful. Go ahead and make the call. I can sit here to read this file." He pulled a chair up to the conference table and then looked at his watch. "Sandburg should be back in half an hour."

Ellison dialed. A woman answered the phone. "Law office of Lévesque, Rotenberg and Wong. Olivia speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Olivia. My name is Jim Ellison. I'm an American looking to re-marry in Ontario. I need to hire an attorney to get a legal opinion letter for a foreign divorce."

"Certainly, Mr. Ellison. Let me have you speak to Mr. Lévesque. Please hold."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

After a minute of listening to music, Jim heard the attorney come on the line. "Mr. Ellison?"

"Yes."

"I'm Denis Lévesque. Olivia tells me you're seeking a legal opinion letter."

"Yes, hi. I have a bit of a special case. The whole thing is to be a surprise for my partner." Jim went on to explain everything. The attorney put him on hold while he checked out the case file with the Marriage Office.

"Mr. Ellison?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Okay. Everything checks out. You can courier your divorce papers to me and send a filled out marriage application without Mr. Sandburg's signature. I'll write the legal opinion letter and courier all the documents back to you. The fee is \$300 Canadian. You can pay with a credit card now if you wish. You won't be charged until I send the documents back."

"Okay. Sure." Jim gave the attorney his card number and told him he'd send the papers the next day.

Simon looked up when he heard the handset drop onto the phone's cradle. "All set?"

"Yup! I just have to fill out one form and send it with my divorce papers to the lawyer."

"Great. That's a load off." Banks grinned.

"Sure is." Jim sighed.

The captain looked at his watch. "You still have time before Sandburg gets back. Why don't you fill out the form now and then leave the papers in my top left-hand drawer? I'll make some separate busy work for you and the kid tomorrow, so you'll have time to run to the post office."

"Thanks, Simon. I can't tell you how much I appreciate all your help." Jim gathered up all the paperwork, except for the marriage license and began filling it out.

Shrugging, Banks replied, "Hey, what are friends for?"

-oOo-

When Sandburg returned from the conference room, Ellison was again seated at his desk working. He looked up. "So how'd it go?"

"Really well." Blair sat down at his desk and put his notes in a drawer. "I think the guys'll find they'll get better cooperation from the homeless, now that they understand them better. They do have their own culture after all."

"Of course." Jim smiled. "Ready to hit the street?"

"Those interviews for the Strakowski case?"

"Yup."

"Let's go!"

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Three weeks passed. During that time, Jim had received the legal opinion letter and had secretly gone down to Human Resources and arranged reservations for a room and vehicle. He

explained that he and Blair were going to take their vacation in Toronto right after the conference. He would pay the department the difference for the preferred upgrades and the extended stay, if they would handle all the arrangements. He reminded them they would need to ask the hotel not to put any toiletries in the room due to his allergies. That was acceptable, so they took care of everything. Jim was relieved he had one less thing to do.

Meanwhile, Sandburg had spoken to the workshop coordinator about his talk and had spent his spare time writing.

The two men worked on clearing their caseload before leaving for Toronto. Upon achieving that goal, Banks assigned them to assist the other detectives with their cases. Since they often worked on different cases, Ellison had time to bring the marriage papers home and hide them in the bottom of his suitcase. He also spent time looking into a venue for the wedding. It would need to be something that could be put together on a few days' notice.

Human Resources gave them a packet with all the workshop information, hotel and car rental reservations and airline tickets.

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They were all set when Wednesday, May 21st rolled around. The captain had agreed to drive them to Cascade International Airport and picked them up at 5:00 a.m. Their flight on Air Canada was scheduled to leave at seven.

Simon pulled up in front of the entrance and helped unload their luggage. He hugged each man and wished them a good vacation. When hugging Jim, he whispered "Good luck" into his ear and patted him on the back.

The two men presented themselves at the Air Canada counter, checked their luggage (a large duffel bag for Blair and a suitcase for Jim) and went through security quickly after showing their police IDs. Sandburg carried a backpack containing his laptop, four granola bars, his cell phone, a digital camera, both men's passports, and assorted papers and brochures, while his partner carried only his cell phone.

After grabbing a large breakfast in the airport restaurant, they passed the time sitting by a large picture window, watching planes land and take off while discussing how they would spend their vacation. Their conversation was interrupted by an announcement. "Your attention please. Your attention please. Air Canada Flight 1228 is now boarding at Gate 3. Air Canada Flight 1228 is now boarding at Gate 3. Thank you."

Blair grabbed his backpack and rose. "That's us."

They made their way onto the plane and took their seats in Economy Class. Both men slept for most of the four hour and 22 minute flight.

Half an hour out from Toronto, a flight attendant approached Jim's aisle seat and handed him a form. "Sir, you'll need to fill this out for customs and present it along with your passport upon arrival."

Ellison took it and recognized the CBSA Declaration Card from his information search on the Internet. He pointed to the still-sleeping Sandburg. "Thank you. We're together, so one is all we need."

"Very good, Sir. You're welcome." She smiled and moved on.

Jim began filling it out when he heard the lump next to him begin to stir.

Blair cracked an eye open and muttered, "What's that?"

"Ah ... he rises from the dead." A glare greeted him when he looked over at his partner. "Customs form. You need to get out our passports. We'll need them as soon as we land."

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It was nearly 2:30 p.m. when Air Canada Flight 1228 made its final approach to land at Lester B. Pearson International Airport. The passengers looked up when they heard the ding of the intercom. "Ladies and Gentlemen, if I could have your attention please. We'll be landing in just a few minutes. The current temperature is a pleasant 21 degrees Celsius or 70 degrees Fahrenheit. The time is 2:25 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Please adjust your watches accordingly. Please have your passports, Declaration Cards and other identification ready. When you disembark, please follow the signs to the first customs checkpoint, after which you'll be able to retrieve your luggage. On behalf of Captain Griffin, myself and the rest of the crew, we hope you had a pleasant flight. Thank you for flying Air Canada. To those Canadians returning from outside the country, welcome home. To the rest of you, welcome to Canada. We hope you enjoy your stay. Thank you."

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Jim and Blair stepped off the plane and followed the signs to Customs. After a brief wait in line, it was their turn.

"Next, please."

The two men stepped up to the counter and said hello. Jim handed their passports and Declaration Card to the border officer.

"Good afternoon, Gentlemen. Thank you." The officer began to look over the papers. "I see you checked both personal and business as the reason for your visit. Would you please explain that?"

"Sure," Blair replied. "We're here for the International Detectives Workshop and Conference being held in Toronto." Both men held up their shields and police ID. "We decided since we're here already, and Toronto is such a great city, we'd just stay for our two week vacation."

The officer looked at their police credentials and smiled. "Must be a big conference. I've already had several others through here today."

"Supposed to be the biggest in the world," Jim told him.

"You ought to check out the Toronto Police Museum. I think you'll find it quite interesting."

"Thanks," Blair replied. "We will."

"Do you have any weapons to declare?"

Jim shook his head. "No. We were told it's illegal to bring our service weapons into the country, so we left them home."

"That's true. You would have had to apply for special permission, but it's rarely given. It'd be a different story if you were competing in a shooting competition, like the Olympics or something." The officer looked at the Declaration Card again. "You've marked down that you're bringing food into the country?"

Blair dug in his backpack, pulled out four sealed organic granola bars and set them on the counter. "It's okay if you need to throw them away."

The officer chuckled. "Those are fine. We're more concerned about raw and unprocessed products that carry pests and disease." He handed them back to Sandburg. "Okay." He stamped their passports and handed them and the Declaration Card back to the detectives. He pointed to the right. "Just go through there and follow the signs to baggage claim and on to the second checkpoint. Welcome to Canada. Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," the two men replied.

They picked up their bags and breezed through the second customs checkpoint. Stopping at a currency exchange bureau, they converted their American dollars into Canadian, then after getting directions, they headed to the car rental desk to pick up the Ford Explorer SUV that Jim had reserved.

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It took them about 25minutes to drive the 18 miles to the Fairmont Royal York Hotel at 100 Front Street West in downtown Toronto, during which time, they ate a couple of Blair's granola bars. They pulled up to the entrance. A doorman took their bags, while a valet parked their car. Checking in at the desk, they then continued up to their room, a bellhop carrying their bags.

They stopped in front of a door that read 1529. The bellhop ran a keycard through the lock and opened the door. He set the bags just inside at Jim's direction and handed him the card plus a spare.

Ellison watched Blair step into the room and his mouth drop open. "Whoa, Jim. No way the department paid for this! This place is incredible."

"You're right. They didn't. I did." He grinned as Blair turned to face him. "I wanted us to have a nice vacation."

Jim handed the bellhop a five dollar bill, who took it, thanked him and quietly left.

Continuing to walk around the room, Blair examined everything. "This must have cost a fortune."

"Not really. I got a good deal due to the conference. It's called a Signature Room."

"Well why didn't you tell me? I would have chipped in."

"I wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?" Jim wiggled his eyebrows.

"Smart ass."

Ellison turned and shook his rear end. Running up behind him, Blair smacked Jim on the butt and started to run away. An arm reached out wrapping around his waist, pulling him back. He was turned around and thoroughly kissed.

The two men pulled apart and stared into each other's eyes. "Thanks, Jim. This is great."

"You're welcome." He leaned down and kissed the tip of Blair's nose. "Why don't we get unpacked and relax?"

"Sounds good."

Jim opened his suitcase and pulled out some plastic bags containing their soaps, shampoo and conditioner. Blair grabbed them and headed for the bathroom. He waited until Blair shut the door before emptying his suitcase and placing the marriage documents and rings in the in-room safe. He knew his partner would never look in there. Sitting down on the couch, he waited.

A couple minutes later Blair reappeared and joined him. "Hey, Jim, the hotel didn't provide any toiletries as you'd requested. I put our stuff in the shower caddy."

"Good. Thanks."

Sandburg looked at his watch. "It's quarter to four now. I don't know about you, but I'm really hungry. That granola bar didn't do much."

"Yeah, me, too, Chief." Jim ran his hand over his head. "We could go out to eat or just order something from room service, if you're too tired."

"Mmm ... room service sounds good to me."

"Okay. I wasn't really in the mood for going out either." Jim rose and walked over to the desk, opening the top drawer. "Here's a menu." He took it out and sat back down next to Blair.

"Wow! This is amazing. The hotel has its own beehives and herb garden on the roof."

Jim smiled. "They serve organic food, too. Right up your alley."

"Hey, organic food's good for you, too. And it tastes so much better." He poked his partner in the ribs.

Blair chose the eggplant lasagna with Ontario vine ripened tomatoes, zucchini, tofu, roasted pepper, Portobello mushroom, and tomato basil sauce, while Jim decided on the Ontario Free Range Chicken Supreme with seasonal vegetables, Canadian wild rice and Café de Paris butter. Their meals arrived half an hour later, and they tucked into them as if they hadn't eaten in a week. For dessert, they shared a Royal York Classic Five Layer Chocolate Fudge Torte with raspberry coulis. It was incredible.

Afterward they shared a shower and cuddled in bed watching some television before turning in for the night. They were exhausted and a bit jet-lagged. The next day was going to be extremely busy.

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Blair was set to speak first thing on Friday, the second day of the conference. He and Jim got up early, ate breakfast downstairs in one of the hotel restaurants and made their way to the auditorium.

They took their seats up front. "You all set for this?" Jim knew his partner was anxious to begin. Sandburg loved to lecture, and he was damned good at it.

"Yup! It's really no different than lecturing a bunch of students or beat cops back home." Sandburg dug his notes out of his ever-present backpack.

Jim patted him on the thigh as the workshop chairman began his introduction for Blair's talk. "... and now without further ado, I present Dr. Blair Sandburg, detective with the Cascade Police Department, Cascade, Washington."

"Knock'em dead, Chief," Jim whispered as his partner rose. Blair smiled down at him and nodded.

An hour had flown by before the enraptured audience realized. Sandburg wrapped up his talk. "So, in conclusion, we should always remember that we need to take into consideration cultural differences whether dealing with criminals or crime victims. Thank you."

The audience began applauding and rose to their feet, giving the anthropologist a deafening standing ovation. Once the workshop chairman was able to get them seated and quiet again, he invited them to ask Sandburg questions, which he answered for the next half hour.

Blair looked down at the first row to see Jim beaming proudly and giving him a thumb's up.

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The long weekend of workshops, lectures and panels was finally over. Jim was ready to set his plan in motion. Monday morning he awoke early. Blair was still asleep.

Quietly, he slipped out of bed, took a shower and dressed. He retrieved the rings and marriage documents from the safe, putting the papers in his inner jacket pocket, the ring box in his pants pocket, and then went out to the sitting area desk. Picking up the phone, he dialed.

"Front desk. This is Martin. How may I help you?"

"Hi Martin. This is Jim Ellison in room 1529."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Ellison?"

"I'd like to get a picnic lunch for today. I understand that's possible."

"Yes, Sir. Would you prefer fried chicken, sub sandwiches, or chef's salads?"

"The subs sound good. How about two roast beef? And can you put extra tomatoes, peppers and lettuce on them?"

"Sure. Provolone, cheddar or Swiss cheese?"

"Umm ... provolone on both."

"Would you like some sort of chips?"

"Yeah, potato chips would be good."

"For dessert, we offer apples, large chocolate chip cookies or assorted puddings."

"Could I get two apples and two cookies?"

"Certainly. Now what sort of beverage would you like?"

"Do you have bottles of champagne? Good champagne."

"Yes, Sir. How about a bottle of Moët and Chandon Brut Imperial at \$125?"

"Perfect." Jim smiled. "And also a couple bottles of water, please. Do I pick that up at the front desk?"

"Yes, Sir. What time would you like it?"

"Ten o'clock would be good."

"It'll be waiting for you. The champagne will be in a separate cooler."

"Thanks. Can you transfer me to room service, please? I'd like to order some breakfast."

"Certainly, Mr. Ellison. Please hold."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Jim pulled the menu out of the drawer and looked it over as he waited. Two items caught his eye:

THE HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE

Breakfast Parfait with Low Fat Yogurt, Organic Granola, Seasonal Berries, Niagara Honey, Fruit Preserves

Choice of Multi Grain Toast, Fresh Bran Muffin, Multigrain Bagel or English Muffin

Your choice of Juice

A Personal Pot of Freshly Brewed Coffee, Tea or Hot Chocolate

It wasn't an algae shake, but would be a good substitute. Sandburg would approve.

THE ROYAL OMELETTE

Three Egg or Egg White Omelet with choice of 3 fillings: Ham, Cheddar Cheese, Mushrooms, Scallions, Red Peppers, Smoked Salmon

Seasoned Breakfast Potatoes and Broiled Plum Tomato

Choice of White, Multigrain, Whole Wheat, Marble Rye or Gluten Free Toast with Butter and Preserves

Your choice of Juice

A Personal Pot of Freshly Brewed Coffee, Tea or Hot Chocolate

Blair was going to kill him for this, but he couldn't resist. It sounded like heaven.

"Room Service. This is Joyce. How may I help you?"

Jim was jolted out of his reverie. "Hi, Joyce. This is Jim Ellison in room 1529. I'd like to order two breakfasts."

"Sure, Mr. Ellison. What would you like?"

"One 'Healthy Alternative' with a fresh bran muffin, orange juice and coffee. And one 'Royal Omelette' with ... umm.... Oh what the hell ... make it an egg white omelet."

Joyce chuckled and Jim laughed.

"What would you like in the omelet, Mr. Ellison?"

"Cheddar cheese, mushrooms, and smoked salmon, and I'd like whole wheat toast, with orange juice and coffee."

"Very good, Mr. Ellison. It'll be 30 minutes."

"That's fine. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Next, Jim opened the desk drawer and pulled out a phone book. He looked up the number for the CN Tower and dialed. Back in Cascade, Ellison had done an Internet search for a nice restaurant at which to celebrate their engagement. He came across the tower restaurant and loved how unique it was. Even though he knew Blair was terrified of heights, he believed his partner would enjoy this. It was also a convenient five to ten minute walk from the hotel.

"360 Restaurant reservations. How may I help you?"

"Good morning. If possible, I'd like to reserve a table for two at the window for dinner tonight at seven o'clock."

"All right. One moment, please, while I check availability for you."

He could hear the man typing on a computer keyboard.

"Sir, you're in luck. We had a last-minute cancellation. May I please have your name?"

"Wonderful! Yes, it's Jim Ellison."

"All right, Mr. Ellison, your reservation for two for dinner at seven is all set. We'll see you then."

"Thank you."

Jim put the phone book away. Time to wake Sleeping Beauty. He smiled.

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Tiptoeing into the sleeping area, Jim carefully sat down upon the bed and just watched his beloved partner for a couple minutes. He looked so peaceful and oblivious to the plans just made that would completely change his life in just a few hours.

Leaning over, Jim kissed him on the lips. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty, time to awaken," he called softly.

A pair of intense blue eyes fluttered open. "Is it morning already?"

Ellison ruffled the younger man's curls. "It sure is. Breakfast will be here in about 20 minutes. Why don't you go shower and get dressed. We have a big day ahead of us."

Blair yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Okay."

-oOo-

By the time Blair was dressed, breakfast had arrived. "This looks great! Thanks for ordering for me."

"You're welcome." Jim uncovered his meal.

Sandburg's eyebrows rose. "An egg white omelet? I do believe I am corrupting you."

Ellison laughed. "What can I say, Chief? But it does contain cheddar cheese, smoked salmon and mushrooms." He grimaced.

"Actually, Jim, those are pretty good choices. Salmon has heart healthy fat. Mushrooms are rich in minerals and Vitamin D. And the cheese has a lot of calcium."

"And here I thought you were going to yell at me." He laughed again.

-oOo-

By the time the two men had finished eating and gotten directions to the Royal Botanical Gardens from Google maps, written them down, and decided what they wanted to see, it was time to hit the road.

Stopping at the desk, they picked up the coolers. "What's all this, Jim?" Blair grabbed one.

"Lunch."

"Seems like an awful lot of food for two people."

"They put our drinks in a separate cooler so it wouldn't squash the sandwiches."

Sandburg nodded. "Good thinking."

Jim smiled as they walked out the door toward valet parking. He was getting good at obfuscation.

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The drive out to Burlington took about 50 minutes. Blair took photos of some of the buildings they passed in Toronto. "Beautiful architecture." He even took a photo of Jim driving.

"I would have thought you see enough of me driving at home."

Blair laughed. "This isn't home."

Jim couldn't argue with that and laughed, too.

-oOo-

It was eleven o'clock when the two paid their admission fees and drove to the parking lot at the Rock Garden. Getting out of the car, Blair asked about lunch.

"I thought we ought to tour the Seasonal Plantings and Permanent Shrub and Evergreen Display first," Jim pointed to the brochure map, "and then go eat in the Arboretum by the Maze. What do you think?"

"That sounds good to me. Let's go."

-oOo-

Both men enjoyed the profusion of color, scents and amazing plantings. Blair snapped photos like crazy. They took photos of each other standing by various flowers and bushes and were able to get other visitors to take a few photos of them together.

After exploring the various paths for an hour, they decided it was time to move on. They returned to the car and made the short drive to the Arboretum, where they parked and unloaded the coolers.

It was a leisurely walk to the lawn where they found the Maze. They spread a blanket on the ground and sat down. Jim opened the food cooler and took out heavy paper plates, the subs, two individual size bags of potato chips, two apples, two chocolate chip cookies and two bottles of water.

Blair unwrapped the sandwiches and put them on the plates. "These look great!"

The sun was warm, but a cool breeze made the temperature perfect. Feathery cirrus clouds floated high above. The two detectives ate a leisurely meal and discussed other places they wanted to visit. Blair had forgotten about the other cooler much to Jim's relief.

They finished eating. Sandburg began gathering the trash and turned away to put it in the cooler. He turned back around to find his partner gone. Frowning, he glanced all around. "Jim?" No answer. "Hey, Jim! Where are you?"

"In here!"

Blair turned toward the sound of his voice. It was coming from the hedge. "Jim, what are you doing in the Maze?"

"Come in here and find out."

Chuckling and shaking his head, Sandburg rose. "Okay. Here I come!"

The spot they had chosen for their picnic was just outside the entrance to the Maze. Blair noticed that the Arboretum was virtually empty. He took the chance and set his backpack between the two coolers then went in search of Jim.

After a couple of false starts and back-tracking his steps, he followed his partner's voice to the center of the Maze. Coming around the final corner, Blair stopped dead, his mouth dropping open. Before him was his beloved partner on bended knee holding an open ring box. All he could do was stare.

Jim smiled. "Blair Sandburg ... I love you with all my heart and soul. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Blair stepped closer and dropped to his knees. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you." The two men hugged and kissed.

When they pulled apart, Jim took a ring and slid it onto Blair's right hand ring finger. Blair then took the other ring and slipped it onto Jim's right hand. "We'll switch them over to the left when we marry."



Sandburg frowned. "But we can't get married at home."

"No, we can't. But we can get married here." Grinning, he pulled the marriage documents from his inner jacket pocket. "We just have to fill these out, get them in the mail, and we'll be able to get married in a few days."

Blair's eyes grew wide. "You had this all planned before we left, didn't you?"

Jim's head lowered. "Yeah ... I did." He then looked up and gazed into his partner's deep blue orbs. "But I had help. Simon."

"Simon? Really?" Blair's eyebrows rose.

"Yup. He's been hoping Washington would pass a law so we could get married. Since they haven't, he told me about this conference when he found out that Ontario had same-sex marriage and no residency requirement. It was perfect." Jim rose and held out his hand to Blair, who took it. He then pulled him up. "Let's go fill out these papers and enjoy what's in the other cooler."

They walked out of the Maze holding hands.

"Yeah, what's in that other cooler anyway?"

"You'll see."

They settled on the blanket. Jim opened the cooler and took out the chilled champagne and glasses. Popping the cork, he poured the bubbly and handed one of the glasses to Blair.

"A toast. To us, Chief. May we always be in love with each other."

"Hear, hear!"

They clinked their glasses together, kissed and then sipped the champagne.

Blair fingered his ring. "It's beautiful, Jim. What's it made of?"

"The grey interior and outer bands are made of titanium. The silver bands are sterling silver, and the yellow band is 18 karat gold." Jim grinned. "I'm really glad you like it. It took me a long time to find just the right rings."

"I love them." He picked up his partner's hand and turned his ring around. Looking up, he smiled and kissed Jim on the lips. Pulling back, he said, "So, let's fill out those papers." Blair pulled a pen out of his backpack and took another sip of champagne. "We better not drink too much of this. We still have to drive back to the city."

"One glass each." Jim put the cork back in and returned the bottle to the cooler. "We'll finish it tonight."

They filled out and signed the papers.

Once they'd cleaned up their area, they walked back to their car. They stopped at a post office in Burlington and sent the documents to the Marriage Office via Priority Mail. The postal official guaranteed it would get there overnight.

-oOo-

The detectives arrived back at the Royal York around four o'clock. They returned the empty food and champagne coolers to the front desk and took the open bottle upstairs with them. As they walked into their room, Jim closed the door and grabbed Blair by the arm. He spun him around and pulled him close. Kissing him thoroughly, he pulled back a bit without letting go. "Chief, I have something very special planned for dinner. We have to be there for a seven o'clock reservation."

Sandburg's eyes lit up. He put the bottle of Moët in the mini-fridge. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see when we get there. It's a surprise. Just don't forget to bring your camera."

"I don't think I can be much more surprised than I was this afternoon."

Jim laughed. "I guess not." He kissed his partner on the nose and released him. "Let's rest a bit then shower. Dress for this evening is the sports suits we brought. No tie necessary."

"Dressy casual, huh? Must not be the Ritz then." The laughter danced in Blair's eyes.

"No, but this is better than the Ritz."

"Now you've got me intrigued. And why bring my camera?"

"You'll see."

-oOo-

While the two men waited for the elevator, Jim noticed that Blair was twisting his ring. He smiled. "Something wrong there, Chief?"

"Huh?"

Jim cocked his head toward his partner's hand. Blair followed the motion and blushed. "No. Nothing's wrong. Not at all. I'm still just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that we're actually going to get married. I'm beyond happy."

"Good!" Jim gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

The car arrived with a ding. Ellison and Sandburg got in and went down to the ground floor. Walking out the door, Jim took Blair's hand. "Ready for a nice walk?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"You'll see. Come on."

They hustled across the street and into Union Station.

Blair looked around. The place was beautiful and reminded him of Grand Central Station in New York City. "So we're taking the train?"

"Nope."

"Come on, Jim. Why are we here then?"

Ellison pointed to a hallway on the right side of the immense room.

"Okay, but let me get a photo of this place first." Blair snapped a couple shots. "Thanks for telling me to bring my camera."

"You're welcome." He took Blair's hand. "Come on."

They walked to the end of the hall. A sign above the entryway read "SKYWALK." The two men followed the signs around a couple of corners.

Blair's mouth dropped open when he saw the curved glass and metal roof stretching out before him. "It looks like a cathedral." He stopped to take some pictures.

"It is incredible, isn't it?"

Hand in hand, they strolled up two flights of stairs, gawking at the ceiling. The corridor turned into a square passageway that crossed above the train tracks. Blair stopped to take more photos as a locomotive passed beneath them, then they continued on their way.

Eventually, they reached the end of the Skywalk and emerged by the CN Tower. Jim smiled and gestured at the spire. "We're here!"

Blair tipped his head all the way back. "Wow. It's really tall." He took a photo.

"That's the understatement of the year, Chief." Jim laughed and clapped his partner on the back. They walked into the low building to the left of the tower's base.

Staff showed them to a separate elevator that whisked them up 1,152 feet. Even with his fear of heights, Blair couldn't help looking out the glass front as they rose. The sight was breathtaking. They stepped out and were greeted by a cheerful young woman. "Good evening, Gentlemen! I'm Katie. Welcome to 360 Restaurant, the world's highest and largest revolving restaurant."

"Revolving?" Blair glanced around.

"Yes. The restaurant revolves once every 72 minutes giving you a view of the entire area. You're in luck today. It's crystal clear. You can see the Skylon Tower in Niagara Falls, Ontario. It's 72 kilometers away."

"Wow! I'll definitely look for it." Blair grinned.

Jim smiled. "We have a reservation for 7:00 o'clock under the name Ellison."

Looking at her reservation book, Katie pointed to an entry. "Here it is." She grabbed a couple of menus. "Right this way, Gentlemen. I have a lovely window table for two."

The two men were seated. "Your waiter's name is Steve. He'll be by once you've had a chance to look over the menu. Enjoy your meal and the view."

"Thank you," the two detectives replied.

After perusing the selections, Blair looked up. "Jim, this menu is amazing! How did you even know about this place?"

Ellison winked. "Obviously I did my homework." He chuckled at the blue eyes rolling at him from across the table. "Seriously, after Simon told me about the conference. I got a guidebook and started reading it whenever you weren't around."

"You did a good job. This is wonderful." He glanced out the window and then stared into the distance, pointing. "Katie was right. Look, there's the Skylon Tower!"

"It sure is." Jim studied the edifice. "I can see the mist from the falls."

"Wow. Wish I had your vision." Blair picked up his camera, zoomed all the way in and took a photo.

"Wish I could share it with you."

They returned to their menus and discussed what they would have to eat. Finally, for the amuse bouche (a single, bite-sized hors d'oeuvre), Jim decided on the Crispy Eggplant "Olivada" with Rosemary Oil, while Blair opted for the Watermelon and Feta Cheese with Fig Vincotto. For the appetizer, Blair picked the Bay of Fundy Maple Wood Smoked Atlantic Salmon with Yukon Gold Potato, Dill Crème Fraîche, and Honey Dijon Vinaigrette. Jim chose the Truffle, Potato, and Oyster Chowder with Shaved Fennel Salad, Smoked Bacon and Chive Oil. They both chose Roast Nagano Pork Tenderloin with Spaghetti Squash Gratin, Caramelized Apples, Sweet Onion Mashed Potatoes, and Kozlik's Maple Mustard Jus for their main course. And for dessert, Jim settled on the Orange Ricotta Cheesecake with Valrhona Anglaise and Iced Chocolate Yogurt, while Blair selected the Dark Chocolate Tower with Summer Berries, Raspberry Coulis and Vanilla Crème Anglaise.

Just then the waiter arrived and set down two glasses of water. "Hello, I'm Steve. I'll be your waiter this evening. Ready to order, Gentlemen?"

"Hi, Steve. Yes, we are." Jim pointed to the menu and began reciting their selections.

"Excellent choices. I'm sure you'll both be pleased."

"The menu's amazing," Blair remarked.

"I'd like to get some champagne with the meal," Jim added.

Sandburg piped up. "I have a better idea. How about a fine local sparkling wine instead?"

Ellison nodded. "Okay. What would you suggest, Steve?"

"We have a wonderful Hinterland Rosé from Prince Edward County."

Blair cocked his head. "Is that near here?"

"You're not locals, are you?"

The two men shook their heads. "We're from Washington State," Jim told him.

Steve grinned. "I hope you're enjoying our city."

"We are." Sandburg smiled back.

"Well, Prince Edward County is about 217 kilometers, uh, 135 miles west of here. It's actually an island in Lake Ontario ... close the western end of the lake. They produce excellent wines there."

"That sounds perfect."

"Two glasses then?"

Ellison and Sandburg looked at each other. Jim spoke up. "We walked here, so we'll take a whole bottle."

-oOo-

The meals and wine were superb. The partners had tasted each other's food as they ate and watched the scenery slowly drift by. Blair took more photos throughout the dinner and even enlisted their waiter to take a few photos of them together at the table.

When they were finished, Jim picked up the over \$200 tab and added in a generous tip for Steve. In return, Ellison received a receipt and two tickets each for the Lookout and Glass Floor/Outdoor Sky Terrace levels.

"Uh ... glass floor?" Blair shivered. "Jim, you know how I hate heights."

"Let's go down there. You don't have to walk on it, Chief, but I want to stand on it and look straight down eleven-hundred twenty-two feet to the ground. People should look like ants." He grinned. "Then I can zoom in on them and see who they are."

"That's easy for you to say," Sandburg muttered. "I don't want to lose the fine dinner I just ate."

"I heard that." Ellison laughed, kissed his guide on the top of the head, and took his hand.

-oOo-

The glass floor was 1,122 feet above the ground. Jim dragged Blair near to the edge of the horizontal windows, but the Guide planted his feet and would go no further.

Ellison walked onto the first pane and bounced up and down, holding his hands out. "Look, Chief, I'm bigger and heavier than you. It's solid. No give." He looked down. "The view is incredible. Come see what you're missing. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

Gazing up into sincere blue eyes, Blair's legs started to quake slightly. He took a deep breath and looked down at the glass near his feet. The ground was so far below. Backing up a step, he started shaking his head.

The Sentinel stepped forward and reached out for his guide's hand. "Trust me."

Gazing down again and then back up into beseeching blue eyes, Blair took the hand before him. Cautiously, he slid one foot onto the glass. The eyes that met his were filled with warm encouragement. He took a deep breath and slid his other foot forward.

A huge grin met his wide-eyed pale face. Jim turned Blair around and pulled him against his chest. "I've got you," he whispered in his guide's ear. "You're safe with me."

Without saying a word, Sandburg moved his feet apart and peered down. Ellison felt a tremor run through his partner and hugged him tighter. Blair continued to stare, while Jim rested his head on his guide's right shoulder.

The Sentinel watched as a small smile began to spread across the younger man's face and slowly grow wider. "Wow. You're right. They do look like ants."

"Told you." He kissed Blair's cheek and received one in return.

After a bit more "ant-watching" and a few photos, Sandburg suggested they check out the Outdoor Sky Terrace before going up to the LookoutLevel. They spent a half hour enjoying the breeze and then the view further up at 1,136 feet. Lots of photos were taken, including ones of the two of them snapped with their camera by other tourists. They returned the favor.

The sun was beginning to sink toward the horizon by the time the two men returned to the ground. They decided to browse in the gift shop before heading back to the hotel.

"Hey, Chief!"

Blair looked up from the book he was leafing through.

"I'm going to buy this for you." Jim was holding up a tee shirt that had a graphic of the glass floor with the words 'I Survived The Glass Floor' written across the chest. A graphic of the CN Tower ran up the right side.

"Wow! Cool, Man. I like it."

After paying for the shirt, they strolled back through the Skywalk, across the street and up to their room.

As they were undressing and getting comfortable, Blair retrieved the remainder of the champagne from the mini-fridge and poured a couple glasses. He handed one to Jim. "This was an absolutely perfect day. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They curled up in bed with the champagne, polished off the bottle and fell asleep watching television. The light from the changing scenes made the two rings glint in the darkness.

-oOo-

The next morning, the two awoke, dressed and got some breakfast downstairs. Blair was proudly wearing his new tee shirt. Over eggs and oatmeal, they decided to walk to the Museum of Inuit Art and then take the bus to the Toronto Police Museum and Discovery Centre.

Since the museum didn't open until ten o'clock, they decided to explore the hotel. They really hadn't had the chance since they'd arrived. The conference had taken all their time. After wandering around for an hour or so and checking out the lounges, fitness center and various shops, it was time to get going.

The day was clear and beautiful. The air was a comfortable temperature with a light breeze coming off the lake. Strolling down York Street, it took them about ten minutes to arrive at the art museum. Blair paid their admission.

The next hour and a half was spent perusing the displays while Sandburg explained Inuit culture and customs and how it influenced the art they were seeing. Ellison was completely entranced by both his partner and the objects before him. They both admired how the stark whiteness of the building's interior evoked feelings of being in the desolate Great White North.

Stopping at a nearby restaurant, they grabbed a quick lunch and then walked east on Queen's Quay West, turned left on Bay Street and walked north to the bus stop just south of Harbour Street. Blair opened his wallet and discovered he was nearly out of cash. "Damn! Uh ... Jim?"

"Yeah, Chief?"

"You'll have to pay the fare. I've only got two dollars left. I forgot to stop at the bank in the hotel to cash some traveler's checks."

"No problem." Jim pulled out his wallet and took out six dollars. "I've got plenty cash."

"Okay. Thanks."

-oOo-

The bus drove up Bay Street from the waterfront, heading to College Street where the Toronto Police Service Headquarters and the Toronto Police Service Museum and Discovery Centre were located.

Jim and Blair were sitting on the right-hand side of the bus. As they passed a large building, Sandburg pointed it out. "Look, Jim. A bank. We can walk back there so I can cash some of my traveler's checks."

"Sure thing."

The bus pulled up to the stop at the corner of College and Bay where the two men disembarked. They began the walk back on the east side of the street.

"Hey, Chief, look." Jim pointed to a sign indicating the Second Cup Coffee Shop was located in the mall at 777 Bay Street, just across a pedestrian walkway from the bank building. "I'll go get us a couple cups while you're in the bank."

Blair continued on to the Bank of Montreal's entrance and went inside. He got in line and then looked around. It wasn't too crowded, being that it was after lunch. In front of him were two men around his age both dressed in suits, an elderly man dressed in casual slacks and a cardigan, and a pregnant woman with a toddler in a stroller. She smiled at him, and he smiled back, waving at the giggling little boy.

In the next line over was another young mother with two small children about four and six years old, a middle-aged woman dressed in a business suit and two men dressed like construction workers.

Bank employees were sitting at desks doing paperwork. One was conferring with a casually-dressed female customer clad in jeans and button-down blouse.

As Blair turned back to face the teller's window, he heard a commotion coming from his left. Looking over, he saw a man in uniform holding a gun on two women—one obviously pregnant—and one man walking in front of him as they came down a hallway into the main area of the bank.

"All right, everyone listen up!"

Heads turned. At the sight of the gun, women started screaming, children crying, and men shouting.

"Everyone, SHUT UP NOW! Shut up, and no one gets hurt." The man maneuvered his hostages over to the teller windows. He waved the gun at the others. "All of you—over here. Stand here and be quiet. No heroics. I've disabled the security system, so don't even bother."

The adults settled down, but the children continued to sob softly as their mothers comforted them. Employees and customers hustled over to stand in front of the teller windows.

"Vince, why are you doing this?" pleaded Paul Mbutu, the bank manager.

"Shut up, Paul! You know why. You ruined my life when you denied me that loan!" He waved the gun in the tall black man's face.

"I'm sorry for what happened, Vince, I really am, but there was nothing I could do. It's bank policy."

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT BANK POLICY! YOU KILLED MY DAUGHTER!" Vince Reynolds took a deep breath. "Now you're going to pay. Go lock the front doors and pull down all the shades." He tossed the key to Mbutu, who did as he was told and then returned to his place.

"Now, I want you to go sit in front of the doors. Take the stroller with you." He pointed the gun at the pregnant woman. "Paul, push a chair over there for her. Put it up against one of the doors and the stroller up against the other one."

Once she was in position, Reynolds stationed a hostage in front of each window and had them sit on a chair or stand. The woman with the two children was placed in the hallway, blocking it. A second pregnant woman, a bank employee, was placed at the window next to the stroller at the front door.

Blair was on the far end of the main floor area, near the corridor, watching carefully. He noted that Vince was covering all the access points with hostages. He'd obviously thought this out, and he meant business. Without his gun, there wasn't much Sandburg could do. If I can just let Jim know what's going on, he thought.

While Vince was distracted on the other side of the bank, Blair started talking under his breath. "Jim ... Jim, can you hear me? Don't come in the bank. We've been taken hostage. Jim, if you hear me, ring my cell phone once. It's on vibrate." He repeated his plea over and over.

-o0o-

Jim had bought two cups of coffee and was walking toward the bank. Out of habit, he homed in on Blair's heartbeat and was surprised to hear him talking to him over commotion in the background. Stopping in his tracks, he listened. "Crap! Chief, how on Earth do you manage to get yourself into these situations?"

He threw the cups into a nearby trashcan, pulled out his cell phone, dialed and let it ring once. He listened again.

"Good, Jim. The guy with the gun, Vince, is apparently bank security. He's angry about being denied a loan and is accusing bank employee, Paul, of killing his daughter because of it. Says he wants revenge. Vince has placed hostages at every access point and has disabled the security system. There are 16 adults plus me; two of them are pregnant women, and there are three small children. Better call 911, okay? I'll try to calm him down." Blair waited and felt his cell

phone vibrate once in his pocket. He sighed in relief. He turned to face Vince and began to talk to him.

-oOo-

Ellison dialed again.

"911. What is your emergency?"

"Hi, this is American Detective Jim Ellison. My partner went into the Bank of Montreal at 763 Bay Street, and is now being held hostage along with 19 others. Two are pregnant women and there're three small children."

"You're a detective, Sir?"

"Yes, here for the International Conference at the Royal York Hotel."

"Okay, Detective. Where are you?"

"Outside the bank."

"So how do you know this?"

"My partner was able to let me know."

"Okay, Detective, I'm dispatching uniformed officers to cordon off the area. I want you to stay on the line for me. I'm going to connect you to the SRU - Strategic Response Unit - so you can tell them what's going on. Hold on, please."

"Okay." Jim assumed the SRU was a S.W.A.T. team.

-oOo-

At the headquarters of Toronto's elite Strategic Response Unit, the constables of Team One were busy with various tasks. Team Leader/Sniper Ed Lane and Sniper Julianna "Jules" Callaghan were working in the weapons locker cleaning guns and restocking ammo. Bomb/Tactical Tech expert Michelangelo "Spike" Scarlatti and Tactical Entry/Less-Lethal Weapons expert Lewis "Lou" Young were repairing a tread on "Babycakes", Team One's anti-explosives robot. Team Sergeant/Lead Negotiator Gregory Parker, Tactical Entry/Close Quarters Combat (CQC) expert Kevin "Wordy" Wordsworth, and Sniper Sam Braddock were in the briefing room discussing negotiation techniques. Just a typical day.

The sudden whooping of the klaxon shattered the quiet.

"Team One, gear up. Hot call. Hostage situation. Bank of Montreal. 763 Bay Street."

Greg Parker trotted out of the briefing room toward the Communications Desk where SRU Dispatcher Winnie Camden sat.

"Sarge, the 911 dispatcher said an American detective, Jim Ellison, called it in from outside the bank. I've got him on the line for you." She held the receiver up. "The Unis are already there blocking off the street."

"Thanks, Winnie." He took the phone. "Hi, Detective Ellison. I'm Sergeant Greg Parker with the Strategic Response Unit. Can you tell me what's going on there?"

"Hi, Sergeant. My partner went into the bank to cash some traveler's checks when apparently the bank's security man pulled his gun and took everyone hostage. He's threatening to kill them. There are 19 hostages, plus my partner. Two are pregnant women and three are small children."

"And you're outside the bank? Were you inside and able to escape?"

"Yes and no."

"So, how do you know what's happening in there?"

"Ummm ... I'm in contact with my partner. He's—"

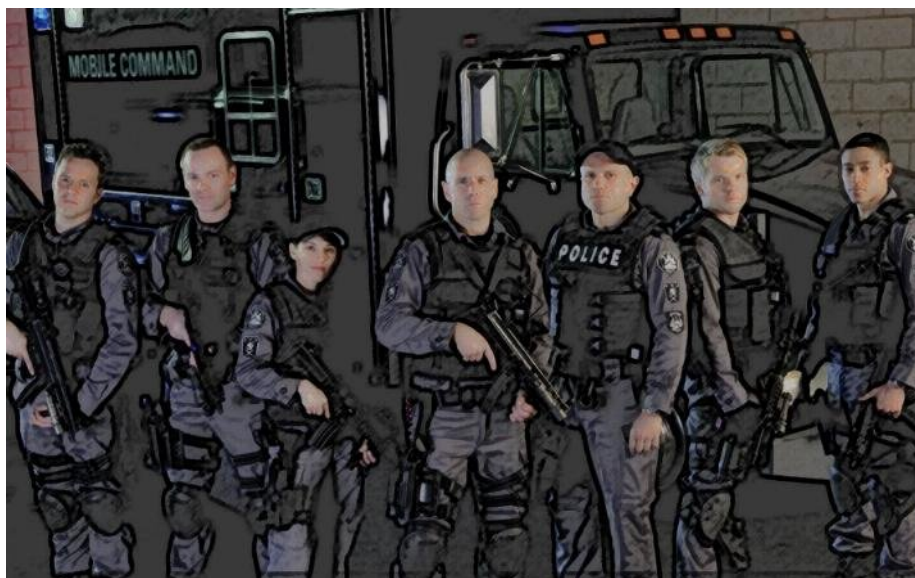
"How?"

"Ummm ... long story. Look, could you just hurry up, please? Neither of us has our service weapon. We weren't allowed to bring them into the country. This guy is extremely volatile. I'm afraid he's going to start shooting. My partner's trying to calm him down."

"All right, Detective Ellison. Stay on the line. We're on our way." Greg handed the phone back to the dispatcher. "Winnie, patch him through to the headsets," he shouted as he ran toward the garage to join his team.

"You got it, Sarge!"

-oOo-



Team One arrived on scene and began unloading gear. Two ambulances pulled in to position on the street just beyond the bank building. Parker had gotten the details from Ellison during the drive over. The Unis had cordoned off the street and pushed the onlookers and press back to a safe distance. Greg hopped out of his SUV with a bullhorn. "Okay, let's keep the peace. Jules, you're my second today. Get me a name for this Vince and for Paul. Spike, see if you can get eyes in."

"Copy that, Boss." She took off for the Command Truck.

"Yeah, Boss. I'm on it!" He ran after Jules.

"Eddie?"

The team leader was studying the bank's floor plan on his PDA. "There's no rear entrance. No access from the roof due to all the condos above the bank. Ellison said the subject has hostages covering all the windows and front door. Sam, I still want you to establish a sniper's perch across the street."

"Yes, Sir." Braddock grabbed his gear bag and loped across the now-empty street, entering the building there.

"The shades are pulled. We can't use gas or flashbangs due to the pregnant women. We can't use explosive entry. Our hands are kind of tied here, Greg. Looks like this one is all yours."

Parker looked around and saw a tall man dressed in civilian clothes inside the police barrier facing the bank door and assumed it was Ellison. "All right, yeah." He shook his head. The others had gathered around.

Spike's voice came over the headsets. "Hey, Guys, bad news. The subject, one Vincent Reynolds, head of security, disabled the security cameras along with the alarm system. I can't

get them back up. They're completely off-line. This guy really knows his stuff. I'm gonna call the security company that installed the system and see if they have any ideas."

"Swell." Wordy kicked a pebble that had been lying at his feet. "I'll see if I can get a snake in somewhere." He grabbed a small bag containing the gear and started off for the side of the building.

"Okay, Spike, thanks. Lou, you go help Wordy."

"Copy that." Young took off after Wordsworth.

"Boss?" Callaghan called over the headsets.

"Go ahead, Jules."

"I got hold of Etta Lambert. She's on a late lunch break. She's the branch manager. Spike already told you who Vince is. Lambert said he's a 38-year-old white male. His record is clean. He's been a good employee for ten years. No family except his wife and now-deceased daughter. She died last year—age nine. I found out his wife filed for divorce. Lambert said she didn't know about the divorce. He apparently kept that to himself. She said he seemed fine when he came into work this morning. She's truly shocked by what's happening. The divorce was granted yesterday."

"There's the stressor."

"Yeah, Boss. Paul is Paul Mbutu. He's the manager of the loan department. Mr. Mbutu is a 44-year-old black male. His record is also clean. He's worked for the bank for 16 years. Good employee. Lambert said he denied Reynolds a loan, because he already had a mortgage and a car loan. It's bank policy. Reynolds was angry about that. He wanted the money to go to the States to get treatment for his daughter. She had cancer."

"Okay. Thank you, Jules." He turned to face Ed. "Great. A man with nothing to lose. I don't see this ending well."

Constable Lane frowned and nodded. "This is not going to be a good day."

The sergeant pointed to his right. "Come on. Let's go talk to Detective Ellison."

The American turned to face them as they approached from behind. "You must be Detective Ellison. I'm Sergeant Greg Parker. This is my team leader, Constable Ed Lane." They all shook hands.

"Jim. Yeah. Nice to meet you both." He flashed his gold shield.

"Same here. Wish it was under better circumstances." Greg smiled. "So what happened?"

"We decided to do some sightseeing in the city today. Police museum." He waved toward the building up the street. "Blair needed to cash some traveler's checks, so he went into the bank. I went to get us some coffee." He pointed in the direction of the mall. "I was coming back when I discovered the situation in the bank."

"And just how did you do that?" Ed's eyes drilled into Jim's.

Jim hesitated, glanced at his feet and then back at Lane. "You won't believe me if I tell you."

Parker caught Ed's eye. "Why don't you try us?"

The American took a deep breath. "I can hear what's going on in there."

"How?" Greg and Ed asked simultaneously.

"I have extremely acute hearing."

-oOo-

With his hands raised, Blair took a few steps forward and called out. "Vince, my name is Blair Sandburg. I heard what you said about your daughter. I'm so sorry. Can you tell me what happened?"

The security chief whirled around, gun pointing at Blair's chest. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Blair Sandburg. An American tourist. I'd like to try to help you so we can all get out of here safely. You, too. Tell me what happened?"

The gun lowered slightly. Blair exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"My little girl had a rare form of cancer. The doctor said I should take her to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, but we couldn't afford it without a loan, even though the treatment was free. The bank," he turned to glare at Paul then looked back at Blair, "wouldn't give us one." Vince idly waved the gun. "We took her to the local hospital. They did all they could, but it wasn't enough." He sniffed and wiped at his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Vince."

"Yeah, well, after she died, my wife blamed me. She demanded a divorce. I wanted to work things out. She refused. The divorce became final yesterday. I've lost everything. And he's to blame." He turned and waved the gun at Paul. "I have nothing to lose now. He's going to pay."

Blair kept his hands up and took another few steps forward, muttering under his breath. "I hope you're listening, Jim." He felt his cell phone vibrate. Once he stopped moving, he spoke to the security chief again. "Look, Vince, I understand you're angry with Paul, but all these other people have nothing to do with that. Why don't you let them go before the police get here and everything gets out of hand? You locked the bank doors and pulled all the shades. When

customers can't get in, someone's gonna call the police. Besides, the children are scared. You don't want to scare them, do you?"

The continuous soft whimpering made him frown. He shook his head. "No, I don't want to scare them. They don't deserve it."

"How about you let them and the pregnant women go?"

-oOo-

"You expect us to believe you can hear what's going on in that bank?" Ed pointed to the building that was over 30 feet away. "What game are you playing here?"

"I'm not playing games. I can hear everything. If a person has an irregular heartbeat or a murmur, I can distinguish them from others in a crowd. In this situation, I can single out Vince by his voice and heartbeat in relation to the others in there. So long as he doesn't mingle with the others, I can track his movements even when he's not speaking. I can and have blindly shot suspects and taken them out this way when there were no other options." Jim threw his hands up. "Look, I don't expect you to believe—" Jim suddenly raised his hand. "Hold on."

The two SRU officers watched the detective cock his head toward the bank then dial a number on his cell phone and let it ring once. He raised his hand again when they started to speak, and then continued to listen.

Parker's right eyebrow rose. Lane frowned. They glanced at each other.

"Vince's little girl died of cancer. His wife divorced him. He blames Paul and wants revenge. It sounds like Blair might have convinced the subject to release the children and pregnant women. I just let him know I heard him and what was said."

The SRU constables looked at each other, then at Ellison.

"Spike, get me the bank's phone number."

"Copy that, Boss." There was a brief pause. "It's on your PDA. Also, the security company said there's no way to get eyes in once the system's disabled from the main panel in the bank."

"Okay. Thanks, Spike." Parker raised the bullhorn. "Vincent Reynolds, this is Sergeant Gregory Parker with the Police Strategic Response Unit. I'm going to be calling the bank's phone. Please pick it up so we can talk." He then dialed the number.

-oOo-

The phone on the desk next to Vince began to ring. He picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hi, Vince. Thank you for answering the phone. This is Sergeant Gregory Parker with the Police Strategic Response Unit. Is it okay if I call you 'Vince'?"

'Yeah.'

"Vince, can you tell me who's in the bank with you?"

"I have 20 other people in here with me."

"Okay. Thank you, Vince. Thank you for that information. Now, can you tell me what's going on—why we're all here today?"

"Yeah. Paul cost me everything. Now he's going to pay!"

"I can tell you're really upset, Vince. I want to help you. I want to make sure that everyone gets out of the bank safely—including you. Tell me what Paul did. I want to understand what happened. Can you help me out here?"

"My little girl had cancer. The doctors said she had to go to the States for treatment. We needed a loan, but Paul refused." He sniffled and took a deep breath. "My little girl died. My wife blamed me. She demanded a divorce. It was just granted. I've lost everything, and it's all Paul's fault! Now he's going to pay!"

Reynolds' shouting upset the children, and they started to cry again. Greg could hear them over the phone. "I'm really sorry about your little girl, Vince. I can't imagine how you must feel." He took a deep breath. "I can hear children crying in the background. They sound scared, Vince. Do you think maybe you could let them go? I know you don't want to scare them, Vince." Parker could hear breathing and the children's cries. He waited.

"Yeah. All right. Yeah. I'll let the kids and their mothers go. Everyone else stays."

"Thank you, Vince. You've made a good choice."

"Here's the way it's going to happen. I want all of you to stay across the street. I'll have one of the hostages unlock the front door and let them out. Once the door is closed and locked again, you can come forward and get the women and their children. Okay?"

"Okay, Vince."

"Give me five minutes. If I see any cops on this side of the street, no hostages."

"Understood, Vince." Parker hung up and turned to the cops milling around. He raised the bullhorn. "Everyone move to the west side of the street now! Clear this area." He joined Ed and Jim. Together they walked across the street.

"I'm glad to hear he's releasing the mothers and their kids. The children sound quite scared." Ellison locked gazes with Lane.

Parker's head snapped around. "How did you know that? You couldn't have possibly...."

Jim's eyebrow rose as he cocked his head and smiled.

"Yeah. Right. You've got super hearing." Ed sneered.

-oOo-

"You ... Blair." Vince waved his gun. "You're going to open the door."

"Okay, Vince." Sandburg stepped forward. He gathered the two mothers and their children and herded them to the front of the bank. "What about the other pregnant woman?" Blair already knew what the answer would be.

"She stays as insurance. They can't use flashbangs or gas as long as she's here." Reynolds turned to her. "When the door's closed, you sit in front of the door." He waved the gun between her and the front of the bank.

The trembling pregnant bank employee swallowed, nodded and crept from the teller windows to join the women and children.

"Go ahead and open the door. Look out and make sure there are no cops lurking around. If they're all across the street, you can let them out." He pointed the gun at Blair's head. "One false move, and I'll shoot. Got it?"

"Got it." Blair held his hands up. He then turned toward the door and unlocked it.

-oOo-

Jim, Greg and Ed watched as the door slowly opened. Ellison focused in on Blair. Sandburg stared at him and confirmed, under his breath, what he knew Jim was wondering. He was fine.

"No joy, Boss. No joy," Sam called over the headsets.

"Copy that, Sam," Parker replied.

They watched as Blair pulled back inside the bank and two women, one pushing a stroller and the other holding the hands of two small children, exited. The door closed. Jim heard the lock click.

Wordy and Lou, who had returned from their unsuccessful reconnaissance, rushed forward to hustle the hostages to safety.

-oOo-

When Blair re-entered the bank, closing and locking the door, he saw the two construction workers signaling to each other behind Vince's back. Aw crap, he thought.

Walking past Reynolds to return to his spot, he caught the eye of one of the men, glared at him and subtly shook his head.

The man ignored him and sprung forward with a yell. Vince spun round and fired just as Blair lunged for the foolhardy would-be hero shouting "NO!" Both cried out in pain.

-oOo-

Listening intently, Jim suddenly froze like a dog on point. "Shit!"

"What is it?" Ed asked just as a muffled shot rang out.

Ellison clutched his ears and grimaced.

"Shots fired! Shots fired!" officers shouted.

Recovering quickly, Jim again listened.

Parker dialed the bank. The phone kept ringing. "Come on. Pick up the phone." He finally hung up.

Ellison began pacing in a tight circle. "Blair's hurt and one man's dead. Sounds like he tried to jump Reynolds and Blair got in the bullet's way trying to stop him."

"Guy trying to be a hero. We don't need that. I hope no one else gets any bright ideas." Looking at the ground, Ed stamped his foot.

Parker shook his head. "Look—"

Ellison froze again, holding up his hand. "Vince is angry. Shouting. He didn't intend for anyone to die. Just Paul. But he will shoot anyone else who makes a move. Blair says he's okay." Jim blew out a huge breath. "Flesh wound in his left upper arm. Vince is holding his gun on Paul, threatening to kill him." Jim turned to face Parker. "I know you think I'm playing some kind of game here, but I'm not. Blair's hurt. I want him out of there. I can take Reynolds out with one shot by focusing on his heartbeat. He's isolated from the others. It's what I do."

Ed smirked. "Yeah, sure."

"Look, you don't have to take my word for it." Jim handed Constable Lane a business card he pulled from his wallet. "Call my captain. He'll vouch for me. Call him." He could barely stand still.

"All right." Greg took the card from Ed and studied it. "Winnie."

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"I need you to place a call to Captain Simon Banks in Cascade, Washington, pronto."

Ellison waited for what seemed an eternity while the call was made, keeping one ear on Sandburg the entire time.

"Boss, I've got Captain Banks on the line."

"Thanks, Winnie. Patch him through."

"Go ahead, Boss."

"Hello, Captain Banks. This is Sergeant Greg Parker with the Police Strategic Response Unit in Toronto, Canada."

"Oh, God. What have they gotten themselves into now? Just what I need—an international incident."

Parker couldn't help chuckling. "Well, Sir, Detective Sandburg is being held hostage along with a number of civilians in a bank. He'd gone in there to cash some traveler's checks." He rubbed his brow with the back of his index finger. "Detective Ellison is out here with me. He claims to be in contact with Sandburg, who's telling him what's happening in the bank. He says he can hear everything happening in there. My men are blind here. Your man is claiming he can distinguish people by voice and heartbeat, and if necessary, can use those to aim and take a shot."

"Ellison told you that?"

"Yes, Sir, and that if I didn't believe him, I should call you. He's extremely worried about his partner. The subject is volatile and has shot and killed one hostage already. Your Detective Sandburg was grazed while trying to protect him, according to Ellison."

"Damn. Yes, Ellison's telling the truth. He and Sandburg are going to get married in a few days. So yeah, he has to be extremely worried for him to have told a complete stranger what he can do." Banks took a deep breath. "Jim has special abilities. He was born that way. His five senses are greatly enhanced. If he says he can take the guy down, believe him. He's our 'secret weapon' that we don't talk about. If criminals found out his vulnerabilities, they could use his senses against him."

"Thank you, Sir, for telling me the truth. You've been a big help. We're going to do our best to get your man out alive."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Please let me know the outcome as soon as possible."

"I sure will."

Greg dialed the bank again. "Come on. Come on. Pick up already!"

There was a click as the phone was answered. "Listen to me, Sergeant Parker, and listen good. A guy tried to jump me. He's dead. Sandburg is wounded, but he's okay. I never wanted to hurt anyone, except Paul. He's got five minutes left to live. Then I'll let everyone go."

"Vince, thank you for that information." He took a deep breath. "You know I can't let you kill Paul. And I can't let you hurt or kill anyone else. Please, put down the gun and come out with everyone. No one else has to die today, Vince. Let's all go home safe today."

"Sorry, Sergeant Parker, but there's no home left for me to go to."

"Vince, please. I know it feels that way now, but you're not thinking clearly. You're upset and not looking at your options, not looking at the future. I don't want to shoot you. I want to see you walk out of there alive."

"There's nothing else to say. Goodbye, Sergeant Parker."

The click of the phone sounded like a bomb going off in Greg's ear. He turned to his team leader, raising an eyebrow, and then they both turned to Ellison.

"Are you sure you can take him out with one shot?"

Jim turned to the bank and concentrated. "Yes. He's isolated right now. Paul's about 10 feet away. There's no one behind him, and there's at least six feet between the hostages at the windows. It's an easy, clean shot for me."

"Greg, this goes against every regulation in the book." Lane stood with his rifle pointed at the ground, his other hand on his hip. "Let Inspector Stainton make the call."

Jules piped up. "He's at a big drug bust in Scarborough right now."

"Copy that, Jules."

"I know, Eddie, but what other choice do we have? We don't have time to wait for him." He glanced at his watch. Two minutes left.

The team leader shook his head. "Fine. We'll figure out the legal stuff when this is over." He handed his weapon to Ellison. "Good luck."

"Thanks." Jim took aim. "Ready."

"Fire only on my command of 'Scorpio'."

"Yes, Sir."

Greg dialed the bank one more time. The phone rang and rang. Parker hung up.

"He hasn't changed position, but his heart rate just rose. He's speaking. 'It's time to pay for what you did, Paul'."

"Scorpio."

Ellison fired. The glass shattered with a loud BANG! Screams filled the air. The hostages dropped to the floor, covering their heads.

Parker, Lane, Wordsworth, Young and Ellison rushed forward.

"Paramedics! We need paramedics now!" someone shouted.

"Subject's not moving," Sam Braddock reported from his sniper perch. "That was one hell of a shot."

"Copy that," Parker replied. He reached Vince first. There was a wound in the left side of his chest, right over his heart. He reached for the carotid. "No pulse."

Jim raced past the body and knelt by Blair who was sitting on the floor leaning against the wall. He hugged and kissed his partner, not caring who might see. "Are you all right?" He began running his hands over his partner.

"Whoa, Jim!" He batted at the roving fingers. "I'm fine. It's just a flesh wound. See?" He removed the tie that was being used as a bandage.

Meanwhile, Constables Callaghan and Scarlatti had approached the bank.

"Hey Spike!"

The bomb expert looked to his right to see two paramedics approaching. The heavysset one carried an equipment bag. His face broke into a wide grin. "Hey, Oz! Toby! Good to see you guys again."

"Hey guys!" Jules grinned.

They all shook hands.

"The subject and a hostage are dead, but we've got a wounded American detective." Spike pointed to the shattered window.

Walking into the bank, they passed unis leading trembling hostages outside. Oz handed off the bag to his partner and went over to examine the pregnant bank employee. A uni had her sitting in a chair, telling her not to move until a paramedic checked her out.

Spike and Toby approached the two Americans.

"Detective Ellison, Detective Sandburg, this is my buddy, Toby Logan. He's going to take really good care of you." The three shook hands while Spike went to check on other hostages.

"Please, it's Jim and Blair."

"Good to meet you both. Let me take a look at that."

A brief examination revealed it was merely a bad graze. "Looks a lot worse than it is. These things often bleed a lot." He rummaged in his bag. "I'll clean it up, disinfect it and bandage it. No stitches needed."

Jim sighed and smiled.

Blair grinned at Toby. "Thanks, Man. That's what I like to hear!" He cocked his head at Jim. "Now the worry-wart can relax."

"I heard that." They all laughed.

Swabbing the area, Toby glanced around. No one was nearby. He cleared his throat. "Uh, Jim?" He kept his voice low.

"Yeah?"

"Uh, I know what you are ... a Sentinel."

Ellison rocked back on his heels. Blair's mouth dropped open.

"I'm sort of like you—special. I'm telepathic."

"No way!" Sandburg's eyes grew wide.

"That's how you know?" Ellison's eyes narrowed.

"Yes. That was amazing work—both of you. The death toll could have been so much higher. And don't worry. Your secret is safe with me. I have one, too, after all, so I understand." Toby's smile was genuine and lit up his warm, expressive blue eyes. He finished patching Blair up as the three spoke.

Putting on the final piece of tape, Toby clapped Blair on the shoulder. "That'll do it. Keep it dry. The bandage should be changed tomorrow and the wound checked for any sign of infection."

"Okay, thanks." Blair shook his hand.

Jim shook his hand, too. "Thanks. Will do. I'll pick up some supplies later. I was an army medic, so Blair's in good hands."

They said goodbye. Toby took off to find Oz.

-oOo-

After checking the status of the subject, Greg went back outside for privacy. He knew they were in real trouble for what he'd allowed to happen. Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed the number for Frank McAndrew, the union lawyer.

"McAndrew."

"Hey, Frank. Sergeant Greg Parker."

"Hello, Greg. What can I do for you?"

Parker explained what had happened and why, knowing that Ellison's secret would be considered privileged information.

"Wow. Good thing you called me. Let me make a few calls, and I'll meet you at headquarters. Until I get there, no one utters a single word. Got it?"

"Got it." Greg exhaled. "Thanks, Frank."

"Don't thank me just yet."

-oOo-

Greg went back inside. Ellison and Sandburg were still sitting together against the wall in the far rear corner. "Jim, Blair. I need to talk to you."

"Sure. What's up?" Sandburg sat up straight. He'd been leaning on his partner.

"What happened here is unprecedented. I'm probably in a lot of trouble for allowing it." He looked down and kicked at a piece of glass dragged in by someone's shoe. "Here in Canada, when a police action occurs that involves serious injury, sexual assault or death to a civilian, the SIU—Special Investigations Unit—investigates to be sure the police didn't use excessive force or do something wrong. You two, along with me, will be part of that investigation for this incident."

"But, Sergeant, I can't be part of anything that will reveal—"

Parker held his hand up. "Hold on. I already spoke to our union lawyer and explained the situation. He's going to handle everything. We keep silent from now on until we speak to him back at headquarters. Okay?"

"Okay," both Americans replied.

"Now let's go out and wait for our ride."

-oOo-

The three men were standing near the front door of the bank when a marked patrol car pulled up. A uniformed officer and Inspector Stainton got out.

"Sergeant."

"Inspector."

"I received a call from Director Iski informing me of the unusual nature of this incident. I'm assuming all three of you were involved."

"Yes."

The uni pointed to the rifle Jim was still holding. "I'll take that, Sir." Jim handed it to him.

Stainton escorted the three to the car and got them seated in the rear of the vehicle.

The drive to SRU headquarters passed in silence.

-oOo-

Upon arrival, the three men were escorted upstairs to an empty conference room by the uni who'd taken the rifle from Jim. A long table had four chairs along one side and two on the other. The walls were bare cement. They sat down in three of the four chairs. The uni took up position by the door. They waited in silence.

Half an hour later, the door opened and four men entered.

One walked around the table and approached the seated officers. "I'm Frank McAndrew, your lawyer." He shook hands with Jim and Blair, handed Ellison a large brown paper bag, and then took a seat next to Greg.

"I'm SIU Director Seth Iski, and this is SIU Attorney Todd Bradshaw." They all acknowledged each other. "Officer Sawyer here will take your clothes, Detective Ellison."

"My clothes?" Jim turned to McAndrew.

"Standard procedure. You'll get them back in a few days. Constable Wordsworth said you two are about the same size. There's a tee shirt, jeans and shoes of his in the bag."

Sawyer stepped forward. "Please stand, Detective Ellison and remove your shirt."

Jim rose and removed his shirt, pants and shoes, then put on the loaned clothes. Each item was bagged. He again took his seat. Officer Sawyer thanked him and left.

"Due to the unusual nature of this incident, I'll be conducting this interview myself." Director Iski pulled a file folder from his briefcase and opened it. "I've had a chance to review the transcript and have spoken with Mr. McAndrew. I fully understand the sensitive nature of this situation."

Ellison shifted in his chair, blew out a breath, and glanced at Blair who merely raised an eyebrow in response.

"Sergeant Parker, do you believe that every option was exhausted before resorting to using Detective Ellison's 'unique skills'?"

"Yes, Sir. There was no way in. Hostages were stationed at every window and the door, so explosive entry was impossible. Gas and flashbangs could not be used due to the presence of a pregnant hostage. The shades were drawn. The CCTV disabled. We had no eyes in. Mr. Reynolds had already shot and killed one hostage and wounded Detective Sandburg." He gestured toward Blair. "Mr. Reynolds stated to me that he was going to kill Mr. Mbutu in five minutes. I had no reason to disbelieve him. There was no other way to prevent Mr. Mbutu's death.

"I had spoken to Detective Ellison's captain, Simon Banks. He confirmed that Detective Ellison could indeed neutralize the subject without any risk to the hostages. I saw no other option."

"Thank you, Sergeant Parker." The director made some notes. "Detective Sandburg, you had negotiated the release of the children and their mothers. You witnessed the fatal shooting of the hostage and were yourself wounded in an attempt to prevent that death. Do you believe that all options had been exhausted?"

Blair cleared his throat. "Yes, Sir, I do. Mr. Reynolds told me he had nothing more to lose. His daughter was dead and his wife had divorced him after blaming him for their little girl's death. He refused to listen to me any further. He was intent on killing Mr. Mbutu. The officers ... uh, constables ... outside had no visual access. Even if they'd shot out a window to get a view inside before firing on Mr. Reynolds, they could have hit a hostage and Mr. Reynolds still would have had time to kill Mr. Mbutu. Jim, uh, Detective Ellison was Mr. Mbutu's only chance of coming out of this alive. I've witnessed him make similar shots many times before. He never misses."

Again, the director wrote in the file, and then looked up. "Detective Ellison, I checked into your background a bit before coming here. Quite impressive. You were a captain in the United States Army Rangers assigned to covert ops. You've been a highly decorated police officer for seventeen years. You have these amazing enhanced five senses that you have used for the good of society. You saved Mr. Mbutu's life and probably others' today by using your gift to assist the constables of the SRU's Team One." Iski flipped through a couple pages in the folder and scribbled quickly. "I hereby find that the actions taken today were justified and all options had been exhausted. I wish to thank both of you, Detectives Ellison and Sandburg, on behalf of the citizens of Toronto for your bravery and risking your lives and reputations without hesitation to protect the lives of the hostages. We are in your debt."

"Thank you, Sir," Blair and Jim replied in unison.

"Detective Ellison, I'll see that your clothes are returned to you at the Royal York tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sir."

-oOo-

Once the director and the attorneys left, Parker led Jim and Blair downstairs to the briefing room where the rest of Team One waited. They'd all changed into civilian clothes.

Upon entering the room, Wordy piped up, "Hey there, Detective Ellison. You're looking mighty fine in those fancy duds." His grin made his eyes twinkle.

"Why Constable Wordsworth, thank you so much!" Jim did a slow full turn and took a bow. Everyone burst out laughing. "Seriously, thanks for the loan. Everything fits really well, even the shoes. I'll drop these off to you tomorrow."

"No problem. And don't worry about laundering them. The Royal York will charge you a fortune."

Spike stood up after noticing Sandburg's shirt was stained with blood. "Blair, come with me. I've got a tee shirt you can borrow."

For the first time, the American looked down at himself and saw the mess covering the sleeve and his side. "Aw, Man, my new shirt!"

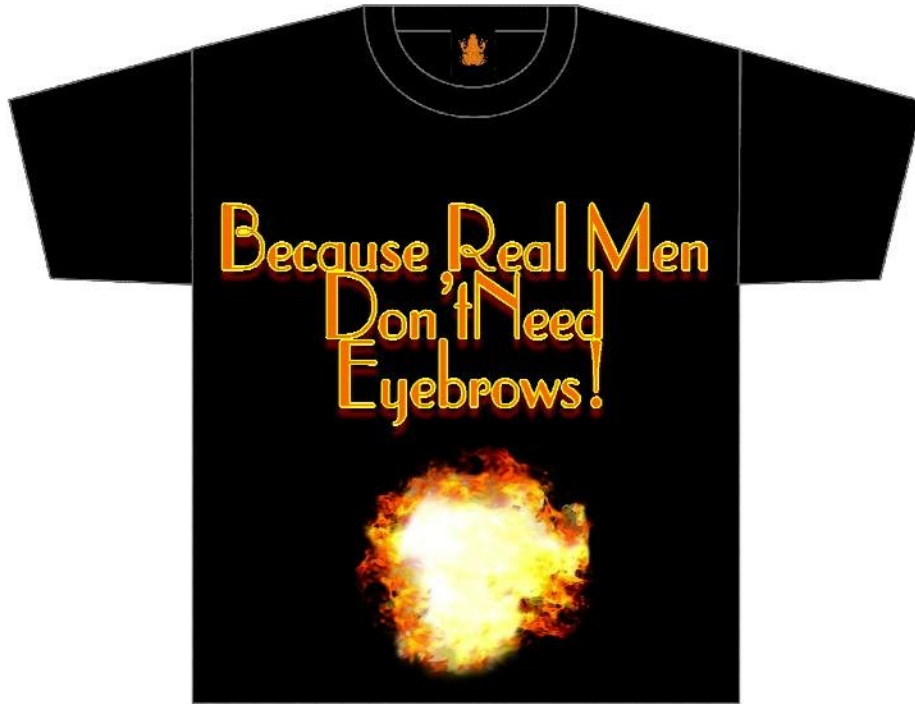
Jim put his hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll go back to the gift shop, and I'll buy you a new one. You really earned it." Brows furrowed on everyone's faces. "Blair's terrified of heights, but he walked on the CN Tower's glass floor, looked down and even took a picture."

"All right! Good man." Ed smiled and gave Sandburg a thumb's up.

"Come on, let's go get that shirt." Spike led Blair to the locker room.

Parker then excused himself for a few minutes while he went out to the Communications Desk and had Winnie place a call to Simon Banks to inform him that he need not worry about an international incident. Everything had worked out just fine. Sandburg had received a minor flesh wound, which the paramedics had patched up at the scene. His men were unsung heroes. The SIU was going to handle the publicity that would keep Ellison's secret safe. The captain was relieved.

Greg returned to the group just as Spike and Blair re-entered the room. Jim took one look at his partner and burst out laughing. The younger detective was wearing a tee shirt that had a photograph of a huge explosion and fireball. Across the top, it read: "Because Real Men Don't Need Eyebrows."



"It was a birthday present from Lou." Spike grinned and sat down next to his best friend.

"All right, Gentlemen ... and Jules." She nodded. "Let's get this briefing done." Parker sat down. Jim and Blair sat on either side of him.

With the debriefing finished in half an hour, Greg signed off on the report.

Ed Lane spoke up. "Jim, Blair, we're all going down to the Goose for drinks and to unwind. Come with us."

They all headed out together.

-oOo-

Team One sat down at their usual large round table in the back. Everyone ordered beer, except the Sergeant. He got a soda. Ellison was sitting next to him, his eyebrow rose when the waitress put the can of Coca Cola in front of Greg.

Parker noticed Jim's reaction. He lifted the can and popped the top. "Recovering alcoholic. Nine years sober."

"Wow. Congratulations."

"Thanks. It cost me my marriage and my son. It nearly cost me my job. There was no place to go but up."

Jim simply nodded.

"You did a fantastic job today, Blair." Ed patted him on the back. "Better watch out, Boss, he'll take your job as lead negotiator."

Greg laughed. "I wouldn't talk, Eddie. Jim will replace you as Sierra One."

"Touché!" Spike piped up, and everyone laughed.

"So what's this I heard on the headsets about you two going to get married?" Lou put his beer bottle down.

"Yeah," Jim replied, grinning from ear to ear. "Coming here for the conference was more of a ruse than anything. Washington State doesn't have same-sex marriage, but Ontario does—with no waiting period or residency requirement. Blair and I have known each other and lived together for 12 years. We've been together now as a couple for 8 years." He took a sip of his beer. "I wanted to get married, and I was sure Blair did, too, so I wanted to surprise him. The conference was the perfect excuse to get him here. My captain helped me plan this whole thing."

Sam put his bottle down. "So when's the big day?"

"Well, we're waiting to receive our paperwork from the government." Blair picked at the label on his bottle. "We're supposed to have it by tomorrow. Then we have to figure out where we want to get married. Maybe just city hall—"

"Oh no way!" Callaghan banged her beer bottle down. "Now just a minute. This is your big day, Boss, why can't we hold it at the barn? We could use one of the conference rooms upstairs. Make it nice...."

Greg's lips slowly turned up into a smile. "Good idea, Jules. We could get the police chaplain to officiate. I'm sure he'd be happy to do it. He doesn't get to attend too many happy occasions."

"My wife, Sophie, is a caterer. We have a really nice yard. The reception could be held at my house. She'd love to do it," Ed volunteered.

Everyone started chattering at once.

Jim held up his hands. "Whoa! Hold on. Now look, we don't want to put anyone to any trouble here. You don't even really know us. And while we appreciate the offer, it's just too much. We don't want to put you out."

"Hey, you're fellow cops, and you really helped us out. We want to return the favor." Spike banged his bottle on the table, his jaw set. "So just accept."

Everyone started to chuckle and then howl.

"I think Constable Scarlatti has made his point." Greg stifled his laughter. "So, Detectives, you pick the date and we'll get things together. No further arguments."

"Yes, Sir!" the two Americans replied.

"But you all have to bring your families or a date." Blair raised his bottle to the group and then took a sip.

-oOo-

The paperwork arrived the next day, just as Mrs. Mohindra had promised. She had included a note wishing them well. Jim and Blair gathered up the documents, packed up Wordy and Spike's clothes in a plastic bag the hotel distributed for dirty laundry, grabbed a quick breakfast downstairs, had the valet bring their Ford Explorer around, and they were off. First stop was the CN Tower gift shop. Blair walked out smiling, carrying a bag with his replacement shirt.

Next stop was Toronto City Hall at Nathan Phillips Square. Blair was fascinated by the architecture and took several photographs from a number of different spots. Jim patiently indulged him. Finally, the two men went inside. They handed the clerk the completed marriage license application; Jim's foreign divorce kit documents; their passports, police ID and U.S. driver's licenses; and Jim's credit card, which was charged \$130.00. After waiting approximately 15 minutes, they received their license to wed.

The two men, each holding a corner of the document, just stared at it. "So this is really happening." Blair smiled without looking away.

"Yup. It's really happening." Jim couldn't take his eyes off the piece of paper.

The clerk behind the counter beamed.

Shaking his head, Blair let go of the paper. "Well, let's go plan our wedding!"

-oOo-

The next stop was SRU Headquarters. When the two detectives got off the elevator, they found Winnie sitting at the Communications Desk.

"Hi, Guys! Team One's in the gym."

"Thanks!" Blair winked at her, and she blushed.

Walking in, they were greeted by Spike's announcement. "Hey, Guys, look what blew in off the street!"

Everyone gathered around the two Americans. Jim handed the bag of clothes to Wordy and Spike. Digging out his tee shirt, the bomb tech threw it over his shoulder. Blair pulled the marriage license out of his pocket and held it up for all to see. The constables whooped and cheered, slapping the detectives on their backs.

"All right! Time to pick a date." Jules took a good look at the document.

Greg spoke up. "I cleared everything with Commander Holleran. We can use one of the upstairs conference rooms, and the police chaplain is thrilled to officiate. He said this will be a wonderful change from doing funerals and visiting the wounded in the hospital."

"I'll bet." Blair laughed.

"What are you two going to do for tuxes?" Wordy asked.

"We were planning to rent," Jim replied.

Ed stepped forward and put an arm around Wordy's shoulder. "Well, we'll just have to take you two to over to Moore's."

Jules nodded. "Good store. Hey, Guys, I'm going to take care of decorating this place. Any preference for a color scheme?"

"Umm, I'm thinking blue and white." Blair turned to look at Jim.

"Whatever you want, Chief. Blue and white sounds good to me." He grinned at his partner who was bouncing on the balls of his feet. Jim could feel his heart swell.

"Blue and white it is!" Jules patted Blair on the back.

"By the way, I talked to Sophie last night. She's really excited about having the reception at our house, so it's all set." Ed's face was lit up by a huge grin.

Lou was smiling. "So when is the big day going to be?"

Ellison scratched his head, shrugged and raised an eyebrow. Sandburg shrugged in return.

"When's a good day for all of you? Any day is good for us."

"How much time do you need to pull all this together?" Jim wondered.

"We have off Friday and Saturday, so why don't we make it for Saturday afternoon? That should be enough time, don't you think?" Spike looked around at everyone.

They all agreed.

Parker stepped forward. "Come with me to meet the chaplain. You can make arrangements with him right now, so that will be out of the way."

-oOo-

Greg knocked on the door to the chaplain's office.

"Come in."

The three men entered.

"Chaplain Aidan O'Neill, this is Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg. The American detectives I told you about."

Rising from his desk, the gray-haired older man came forward to shake hands. "It's truly an honor to meet you. Greg told me what happened at the bank. Thank you for risking your lives to save so many."

"It really isn't a big deal. We were just doing our job like any other officers would have done." Blair blushed.

"Two cops, off duty, basically on vacation in a foreign country? You were under no obligation."

"Well, it's kind of hard not to get involved when your partner is being held hostage," Jim replied.

O'Neill laughed. "I see your point. Why don't we sit down and discuss the ceremony."

"I'll leave you three alone. I've got to get back to work. Come back down to the gym when you're finished here."

"Will do." Blair saluted.

Greg left, closing the door behind him.

"Now, have you two decided on a day?"

"Yes. This Saturday, if that's all right with you." Jim sat forward in his chair.

The chaplain consulted the calendar on his desk. "That's perfect. I have the whole day free. What time would you like to start?"

The two detectives looked at each other. "How about three o'clock, Jim? That way everyone will be ready to eat by the time we get to Ed and Sophie's."

"Sounds good to me. Chaplain?"

"That works for me." He marked it down. "Do you have your marriage license?"

"Yes." Blair pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to O'Neill.

"Good. Now, let's discuss the ceremony itself."

-o0o-

Back downstairs, Ellison, Sandburg, Lane and Wordsworth made plans to meet at the Royal York after shift to take the two Americans shopping for their tuxes. Winnie and Jules made plans to shop for decorations for the conference room.

-o0o-

The four men were greeted as they entered Moore's. "Good afternoon, Gentlemen. My name is Carter. How may I help you?"

"I'm Ed. This is Wordy. And these two," he placed a hand on each man's shoulder, "are Jim and Blair. They're getting married Saturday and need tuxes."

"Congratulations!" He shook the Americans' hands. "It'll be my pleasure to assist you."

"Thank you," the couple replied.

Carter led them to the rear of the store and directed the men to take seats that were situated around a raised platform with mirrors and two fitting rooms. "Now how dressy are you thinking?"

The two detectives exchanged silent looks. Blair responded. "We'd like tuxes without tails. With vests, not cummerbunds. Ummm ... we want to match, yet be a little different..." He waved his hands aimlessly.

Carter thought for a moment while he studied them, then beamed. "How about one of you wears a bow tie and the other a regular tie? We have vests that offer both."

Jim grinned. "That's perfect!" Blair nodded.

"All right. I have something in mind. Now what colors?"

"Black suit. Blue vest and ties. White shirts with black studs," Blair stated, glancing at Jim, who nodded.

Carter asked their sizes. "I have the perfect suit. I'll be right back." He started to walk away, then suddenly turned. "Gold or silver studs and cuff links?"

"Gold," Jim and Blair responded without thinking. They all laughed.

Carter returned in a few minutes and hung the items he'd gathered on the rack near the platform. He showed off each piece of clothing. "A black Ralph Lauren Three-Button Super 100s Notch Lapel Tuxedo, black flat-front pants, white microfiber point collar shirt, Bella Luna Horizon vest with a Euro tie and bow tie, black and gold stud and cuff link set and black round-toe shoes. What do you think?"

All four men nodded. "Try'em on," Wordy encouraged.

Ellison and Sandburg entered the dressing rooms while Lane and Wordsworth sat waiting. "It's amazing how that blue vest matches Blair's eyes."

Ed stared at his best friend, brow furrowed. "You going all Martha Stewart there on me, Buddy?"

"Geez." Wordy shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I'm just sayin'." He smacked his team leader on the shoulder. The two laughed.

Finally, Jim and Blair emerged.

"Wow," the two constables breathed.

Ellison and Sandburg echoed that sentiment when they caught sight of each other. They were dressed identically, except Jim had chosen the bow tie and Blair had chosen the regular tie without consulting each other.

Carter stepped forward, checking the fit. "So, what do you think?"

Blair's smile stretched from ear to ear. "You look amazing." He stood in front of his partner, gazing into ice blue eyes.

"So do you." Jim stared back.

"Oh come on, Ellison. Kiss him already," Ed chided. Wordy snickered.

Jim blushed, but complied.

Wordy started clapping, followed by Ed. Even Carter joined in, grinning.

Turning to face their audience, the two detectives took a bow. "We'll take these," Blair announced.

"Excellent! I'll write up the rental agreement. When do you need them?"

Ed jumped in. "I'll stop by Friday evening right before you close."

"Very good."

-oOo-

The next two days were spent with Team One planning the wedding in their spare time.

Blair and Jim met with Sophie to choose a menu for the reception and decide on a wedding cake. When she asked what they wanted for the entrée, Jim immediately replied, "Wonderburger!"

Blair's mouth dropped open. "For our reception dinner? Are you crazy?"

Before his partner could say another word, Jim's stoic face cracked, and he dissolved into uproarious laughter.

Sandburg blinked several times while Sophie gaped, wide-eyed, at his partner.

"You're going to catch flies, Chief." Ellison was still chortling.

Blair shook his head, picked up the food lists they'd been perusing and began smacking Jim over the head. "You dog! You utter dog!" He broke up in a fit of laughter.

"Uh, Guys? Care to let me in on the joke?" Sophie scrutinized first one then the other.

When Sandburg finally caught his breath, he explained his partner's penchant for junk and fast food, how he's strived over the years to get him to eat healthy, and how when they'd first met, the detective had been virtually living on Wonderburgers, his favorite.

Sophie's puzzlement morphed into a gale of laughter. "Sorry, Jim. No Wonderburgers this time." She swiped at her eyes with a couple fingers. "Besides, this being Canada, you're completely out of luck."

"Thank God," Blair whispered, gazing up.

"I heard that." Jim grinned.

"Yeah, yeah." Sandburg waved his hand. "Let's get down to it, so Sophie has some time to prepare."

Just as they were finishing, Clark came banging through the front door, dragging his cello case. "Mom! I'm home!"

"In the kitchen, Clark."

He entered the room to find his mother seated at the table with two strange men. "Uh ... hello." He looked from one man to the other.

"Clark, these are the detectives from Washington State I told you about. This is Mr. Sandburg." She gestured at him.

"Hi, Clark. Call me Blair." They shook hands.

"And this is Mr. Ellison."

"Jim. Nice to meet you, Clark." They shook hands.

"We're just finishing up the plans for the reception Saturday," Sophie said.

"Cool. What are you guys doing for music for the ceremony?"

Blair and Jim looked at each other and shrugged. "We haven't even thought about it," Sandburg said.

"I could play for you. Check it out." He ran back out to the living room and retrieved his instrument. Clark sat down and began to play Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring."

The three adults' mouths dropped open, enthralled by the performance. When the boy had finished, they burst into applause.

"You're hired!" Sandburg declared.

"That was magnificent. You're definitely hired," Ellison grinned.

"That was beautiful, Honey. You've really been practicing."

Clark suddenly found his feet interesting; his cheeks took on a rosy hue. "Uh, sure, I'll be glad to play for you."

-oOo-

Jim and Blair decided they would share their secret with their new friends, since many questions would be raised when they saw the wedding cake. They'd already told Sophie who was amazed and promised not to say a word to anyone.

Arrangements were made to meet at SRU Headquarters immediately after end of shift in the conference room that would be used for the wedding.

The two detectives were a bit nervous, but agreed that Team One seemed to be quite open-minded. They had certainly accepted their relationship and Jim's Sentinel abilities once Sergeant Parker had spoken with their captain.

-oOo-

Ellison and Sandburg arrived in the conference room just as Team One and Winnie Camden were filing in.

Everyone took a seat around the table, curious expressions focused on the Americans.

Clearing his throat, Blair addressed the group. "Jim and I are so grateful for your friendship and all you are doing for us. You guys have been amazing."

Jim was nodding, a smile on his face.

"We met when I was working on my doctorate in anthropology..." Blair went on to explain what had happened. He told the group about Sentinels and Guides, Incacha and Peru, animal spirit guides—the wolf and panther, teaching Jim how to control his senses, and their work together.

Spike looked from one detective to the other. "Wow." He turned to Lou and hooked his thumb in Jim's direction. "He could put Babycakes out of business!"

Ellison and Sandburg exchanged glances and shrugged.

Parker laughed. "Babycakes is our bomb robot—Spike's pride and joy."

Furrowed brow relaxing, Jim nodded. "Yes, I can detect explosives by smell, and I can hear the timers. Even the digital ones have a characteristic hum."

"Awesome!" Scarlatti's eyes grew wide and lit up, a smile spread across his face.

"But you don't go public, because your senses could be used against you," Sam remarked.

"Exactly," Jim replied. "If my senses are wide open, a sudden loud noise or a bright light, for example, could deafen or blind me temporarily. It's happened a few times, so I've learned to be careful. Keeping my abilities secret prevents criminals from using my senses against me."

"Hey, Blair," Winnie piped up, "how do you get any privacy around him?" She cocked her head at his partner and grinned.

"Good question!" Blair smirked and patted Jim's back. The big detective was pouting.

Everyone laughed.

Sandburg gave Ellison a quick peck on the cheek. "He's good about that, actually. He doesn't normally listen in to what I'm doing when we're at home, but I'm sure glad he does when we're on the job."

"Yeah, gotta keep him out of trouble." Jim winked.

Once the laughter died down, Ellison asked, "Is Sophie going to be able to attend the ceremony?"

"Yeah," Ed replied. "She has plenty of time to get everything ready before we leave. Clark's helping her out. She didn't even have to ask." Lane smiled, proud of his son.

"Good. We'd hate for her to miss it."

Blair turned to Wordy. "How about your family?"

The constable looked down. "Uh, well, Shelley's going to stay home with the girls."

Blushing, Sandburg shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. We understand if you don't want your young daughters seeing two men get married. It's a lot to explain at their ages."

Wordy's head snapped up. "What? No!" He shook his head, eyes wide. "Things have been tight lately. We can't afford a babysitter. We have no problem with same-sex marriage. We just tell our girls that when two people love each other they get married. They accept that."

Jim had been talking to Jules, but overheard. "Wordy, bring the girls. They're more than welcome."

"Thanks, but they can be quite a handful at times. I wouldn't want them ruining anything."

"Don't be silly," Blair said. "They'll be just fine. We want everyone to celebrate with us."

"Well ... if you're sure...."

"Absolutely," Jim nodded, "we're sure."

"Thanks."

"You bet!" Blair grinned.

They all talked a little longer then went their separate ways.

-oOo-

Saturday dawned sunny with a cool, light breeze blowing in off the lake. A perfect day for a wedding.

The two detectives rose early, showered, dressed casually and went downstairs for breakfast.

"We don't need to be at SRU Headquarters until one-thirty. What do you want to do until then?" Blair sipped his coffee.

Jim shrugged and stuffed a chunk of sausage in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed. "I don't know. Just hang out?" He shrugged again. "After Tuesday, I think we ought to just lay low until the wedding's over." The grin that spread across his face made his partner laugh.

"Hey! That wasn't my fault."

"Did I say it was?"

After they finished eating, they went back to their room to watch television until it was time to go.

-oOo-

Ellison and Sandburg walked into SRU Headquarters. They were met by Sergeant Parker already dressed in a tux. "All set for the big day?" His warm smile lit up his chocolate brown eyes. He led them upstairs.

"Yup. Been waiting a long time for this." Jim put his hand on his partner's shoulder. His grin was as big as a three-alarm fire.

Sandburg nodded and gazed at his Sentinel. "I could never be more ready."

"Eddie brought the tuxes here last night." They stopped outside the men's locker room. "Jules and Winnie are putting the final touches on the conference room. They stashed all the boutonnieres in the kitchen refrigerator next to it, so we'll get those when we get up there. So, Gentlemen, you can go on in and get changed." Greg pointed to the door.

Suddenly, a loud, deep, booming familiar voice erupted from the locker room. "Ellison! Sandburg! Get your butts in here right now and get changed!"

The two detectives quickly glanced at each other and then at Parker, who'd started chuckling. "Simon?" they asked.

Pushing inside, they saw their tall captain dressed in a tux, hands on his hips, simply beaming.

"Simon!" They rushed over for quick hugs and back slaps. Greg watched, smiling and nodding.

"What a great surprise!" Blair bounced on the balls of his feet.

"But how did you...?" Jim just waved his hand aimlessly.

"Did you two really think I was going to let my two best friends get married without me being there?"

"Uhhh...."

"Well...."

Simon chuckled at their befuddled expressions. "Greg helped me with the arrangements, picked me up at the airport yesterday, put me up at his place, and will drive me to the airport tomorrow for my flight back."

The two detectives shook hands with and thanked the team sergeant. He just shrugged. "I told you we owe you a great deal. Without your help, who knows how many lives would have been lost on Tuesday."

Simon's chest swelled, his face beaming like the sun.

Blair stepped forward. "Simon, we'd love for you to stand with us and be our ring bearer."

"I'd be honored." The captain's smile couldn't grow any larger.

"And, Greg, we would love for you to also stand with us," Jim offered.

"I, too, would be honored."

-oOo-

Ellison and Sandburg, looking resplendent in their tuxes, along with Simon and Greg took the elevator up to the conference room. Walking inside, their mouths dropped open.

Winnie and Jules walked over. "So, Guys, what do you think?" Callaghan waved her arms to encompass the whole space.

"Wow," was all Blair could manage.

"Incredible," was Jim's response.

The large room was hung with royal blue and white cloth bunting. Chairs were arranged in rows, forming a central aisle. Each one on the aisle had a royal blue or white gros-grain ribbon bow tied to it. At the front was a raised platform with stairs on one side and a chair and cello on the other, surrounded by pots of alternating red and white miniature rose bushes in full bloom. Rising above the platform was a white canopy trimmed with royal blue bows and streamers.

Sandburg finally found his voice. "It's magnificent."

"And here we were just going to get married at city hall. This is amazing." Jim hugged both women, followed by Blair.

"Wait right here, and I'll get your boutonnieres." Winnie left the room. She quickly returned with four plastic containers. Inside each one was a blood red rose with a couple sprigs of Baby's Breath. She and Jules pinned them on the men's lapels.

When Ed and Wordy and their families, and Spike and Lou arrived, the men all received matching boutonnieres, including Clark. Wordsworth introduced his family to Ellison, Sandburg and Banks, and Ed introduced his family to Simon. The girls immediately took to Blair. That made Jim smile.

A man in his late thirties entered the room and looked around. Jules spotted him and hurried over to meet him. Bringing him over, she introduced him to the three Americans. "Jim, Blair, Simon, this is Daniel Black. He works in Forensics as a photographer. He's volunteered to photograph the wedding."

They shook Black's hand. Ellison chuckled. "Must feel good to get a couple of live ones for a change!"

Daniel's laugh was infectious. "Actually, I ran a photo studio before I got into police work. Did quite a few weddings. This feels like coming home. Glad I could help out." He glanced from Jim to Blair. "I heard what you two did on Tuesday. This is my way of saying thanks. And don't worry—it was a lucky shot." He winked.

Captain Banks nodded. "Thanks."

-oOo-

Once everyone was seated and quiet, Clark began to play Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." The door at the back of the room opened and Jim, accompanied by Simon, walked down the aisle to the platform. They ascended and took their places in front of Chaplain O'Neill.

The door opened again, admitting Blair, accompanied by Greg. They walked down the aisle and joined the others on the platform.

With Jim and Blair standing together, facing the chaplain, and Simon and Greg standing off to the left, Clark finished playing.

O'Neill began to speak. "Dear friends, we have gathered here today to celebrate the love between Blair and Jim. It is with careful thought and a deep realization of their bond to each other that they have chosen to stand before you to make this declaration of love and commitment.

"As we gather to share this most important moment in their lives, let us surround them with our love and best wishes for them, their wedding day and their journey in their new life together."

The Chaplain glanced at each man as he spoke. "Jim and Blair, you have chosen to be married and this ceremony serves to symbolize the magic of two hearts joining as one. It represents two people in love. It speaks of passion and fire, of hearth and home, and creates a new light and space within which you both will live.

"This light burns bright and hot much like a flame, and is imbued with a unique spirit which characterizes both of you, and when fused together shines twice as bright. May the eternal flame of your love continue to burn brightly for as long as you both shall live."

The two detectives smiled at each other.

"This wedding ceremony is, by your intent, both a celebration of your love for each other and an exchange of promises to each other. You two are a good pairing and complement each other. Your enjoyment of life together is more than it is when you are apart. With the love you have for each other, everything is possible.

"Moreover, a marriage means that two people have come together. It says to, and shows, the world that they love each other. There are four things that a marriage should have. They are skill, commitment, trust, and communication. That is the foundation of a successful partnership and this couple has those characteristics.

"Now it's time to exchange your vows. You are about to make promises to each other. These vows are beautiful words representing even more beautiful intentions. No other human ties are more tender. No other vows more important than those you are about to pledge. The miracle lies in the path you have chosen to take together, and the true magic of love is the ability to stay the course.

The chaplain addressed the wedding guests. "Blair and Jim have chosen to write their own vows which they will now recite to each other." He extended a hand to Ellison. "Jim, you're first."

The two men turned to face each other and joined hands.

"Blair, we've come a long way since the day we first met. We have been through so much together. You taught me so much about myself, about you, and about the world we live in. You opened my eyes and taught me to see in a way I've never seen before and that brought us even closer together. I owe you everything, including my very life. You have given me the courage to be who I am. I can never repay you for that. You are my best friend, the love of my life, my faithful companion always at my side, my guide and my protector. I promise to be respectful, faithful, supportive, and loyal and to give you my companionship and love throughout all the days of our lives. I vow to bring you happiness, and I will treasure you as my companion. I will celebrate the joys of life with you and be there through life's sorrows. I promise to support your dreams, and walk beside you offering courage and strength through all endeavors. From this day forward, I will be proud to be your husband, your protector, and your best friend." He beamed at his Guide, swallowing silently.

Blair gazed into his Sentinel's eyes. "Jim, my life completely changed the day we met. Yes, at first you were my Holy Grail ... just a research subject, but the more time I spent with you, you became so much more to me. You took me into your home when I had no place else to go. You've helped me to grow and mature. You became my one and only love. I promise to always give you my deepest love and devotion. I humbly open my heart to you as a sanctuary of warmth and peace, where you may come and find a refuge of love and strength. I will love you enough to risk being hurt, trust you when I don't understand, weep with you in heartache, and celebrate life with you in joy. I promise to always respect you, be faithful to you, protect you, guide you and support you throughout all of our days." His smile was broad; his eyes misty.

O'Neill continued and the two men turned to face him. "You have chosen to exchange rings as a sign of the promises you are making today.

"From the beginning of time, the ring has symbolized many kinds of human relationships. Kings wore them to express their imperial authority while friends exchanged them as expressions of their good will.

"Today however, the giving and receiving of rings symbolizes your love for one another, which like the circle, knows no end."

Stepping forward, Simon handed one ring to each man, and then returned to his place.

Nodding, the chaplain held his hands out, palms up, to the two detectives. "Please face each other, place thering on your beloved's finger, and take each other's hands so that you may see the gift that they are to you."

Jim slipped the ring onto Blair's finger and Sandburg followed suit. They both were grinning ear to ear.

"These are the hands of your best friend, strong and full of love for you, that are holding yours on your wedding day as you promise to love each other today, tomorrow and forever.

"These are the hands that will passionately love you and cherish you through the years, and with the slightest touch will comfort you like no other.

"These are the hands that will give you strength when you need it, support and encouragement to pursue your dreams, and comfort in difficult times. And lastly, these are the hands that even years from now will still be reaching for yours, still giving you the same unspoken tenderness with just one touch.

"May this day shine eternally in your lives. May you care for each other in all sadness. May you give cheer and strength to each other. May your life together be a source of inspiration to yourselves, your families, your friends, and to all whose lives you touch.

"You have expressed your love and commitment through the vows you have taken today and with the exchanging of rings. It now gives me great pleasure to pronounce you husbands for life. Please share your happiness with each other now and kiss your beloved."

Sentinel and Guide threw their arms around each other.

"I love you, Jim."

"I love you, too, Blair."

They kissed passionately. Everyone starting cheering.

When they finally pulled apart and faced the small crowd, Chaplain O'Neill said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the happy couple." Another cheer went up around the room. Clark began playing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Winking at her son, Sophie left for home in order to get all the food ready for the reception.

When Clark finished playing, everyone applauded and then rose to greet the happy couple. Jim and Blair were overwhelmed by all the good wishes.

It was nearly half an hour later when everyone left the building. Team One, Winnie, Jim, Blair and Simon had changed out of their dress clothes in the locker rooms. Out in the parking lot, the two Americans stopped dead in their tracks. Their rented SUV was decked out in white and blue streamers, with "JUST MARRIED" written in white on the windows, and blue and white fishing line tied to the trailer hitch ending with tin cans lying on the ground. "All right, whose handiwork is this?" Jim laughed.

Spike and Lou stepped forward and took a bow.

"I should have known," Blair chuckled.

The group broke up and everyone got into their vehicles and headed for Ed and Sophie Lane's house.

Sophie and Clark had transformed the place. The front door was draped with blue and white bunting. The rear deck was similarly decorated and now had two tables laden with food, plates, glasses, napkins and utensils. There were silver chilling buckets with magnums of champagne and a couple of coolers with cans of soda and bottles of beer. The hammock had been removed from the yard and replaced with tables covered in blue and white tablecloths and folding chairs with blue and white bows.

Jim, Blair, Simon and the other guests arrived. Sophie, dressed again in casual clothing, greeted them at the door and showed them through the house to the backyard. Clark put his cello up in his room, changed his clothes and then joined everyone.

Ed and Wordy cracked the champagne and poured for everyone. Jules poured ginger ale into flutes and handed them out to Parker, Clark and the Wordsworth girls.

Ting! Ting! Ting! The sound of a fork striking a glass floated through the air. Growing silent, the guests looked up at the deck to see Greg Parker standing at the railing. "May I have your attention, please!"

Wordy and Shelley corralled their girls and sat them down. The sergeant then continued. "I wish to propose a toast to James Ellison and Blair Sandburg. I've only known them for a few days, but I have to tell you that they are two of the finest examples of police officers that I've ever known. Two men, here on personal business in a foreign country, risking their lives and their reputations to save innocent people—complete strangers—when they had absolutely no obligation to do so, well, that not only makes them fine officers, but makes them the finest of human beings—period. And I'm extremely proud to say that I know them and now count them among my friends."

Greg raised his glass. The guests all followed suit. "To Jim and Blair—may you always be as happy and in love as you are right now. May you always be as giving, compassionate, thoughtful, and kind. And may good things always be yours in return."

"Hear! Hear!" the small crowd shouted.

Simon then took Greg's place. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Simon Banks. I'm the captain of these two characters." He waved his hand toward Ellison and Sandburg. The guests laughed. "Seriously, I've known Jim and Blair for over a decade. They are the finest detectives I've ever had the privilege to command and to know. I am also proud to call them my best friends." He nodded at the men and smiled. "For years I watched these two dance around each other until they finally got a clue." Many of the guests chuckled. "Yeah, you never would have guessed these two geniuses were my best detectives." The group erupted in laughter. Simon grinned. "But once they did figure it out, there was no stopping them. So, we're all here today to celebrate their love and commitment to one another. And we're thrilled to have you, our new family, with whom to share this special day." Simon raised his glass, followed by everyone else. "To Jim and Blair—may your love and friendship be eternal."

"To Jim and Blair!" the guests cried.

Sandburg stepped forward and stood at the deck railing looking over the smiling faces of their new friends gathered below. "Jim and I just want to thank all of you for your gift of friendship and acceptance. You have no idea how very much it means to the both of us. We consider you all family. And we hope, one day, you'll come visit us in Cascade." Everyone applauded. "Now let's eat!"

People helped themselves to the food and took seats at the tables in the small yard. Daniel continued to inconspicuously snap photos here as he had at the wedding. Finally, Jim brought him a plate piled high with a variety of food and told him to sit down and eat.

-oOo-

An hour later, Sophie emerged from the house pushing a pastry cart containing the wedding cake. Everyone oohed and aahed at the sight as they approached the deck.

The cake was magnificent. It had three round tiers. The top and bottom sections were blue, perfectly matching the color of the bunting. The middle layer was white.

On the top were two fondant figures dressed in tuxes, with blue vests—one with a tie and one with a bow tie. The colors were an exact match to the real tuxes. The figure with the bow tie had Jim's short-cropped hair, and the other had Blair's ponytail. Next to each figure stood their respective animal spirit guide—the black panther and the grey wolf. The detail was striking. On both, the fur had been delicately air-brushed on.

Around the middle layer were various fondant replicas of police items—a gun, handcuffs, a gold shield—and a diploma and books representing Blair's academics.

The bottom layer had silver wedding bells, white doves and flowers all woven together with a delicate small-leafed jungle vine.

Daniel was snapping away, photographing the cake from all sides. He waved at Jim and Blair to come stand next to their figurines while he took some more shots.

Sophie handed Jim a knife who then turned to address the crowd. "This is the most beautiful wedding cake we've ever seen. We really don't want to ruin it."

"But we want some cake!" cried Lilly, Wordy's little girl. Everyone laughed and nodded.

"Well then, I guess we're just going to have to cut it, aren't we?" Blair laughed.

"I guess so," Jim replied.

With big grins on their faces, the two men grasped the knife together and deftly sliced into the bottom layer. They removed two pieces, put them on plates and each grabbed a fork. Daniel took pictures as they fed each other, the group cheering.

Sophie finished cutting and serving the dessert while people helped themselves to tea and coffee. She then joined Jim and Blair. "There's a tradition I'm going to help you with."

"What's that?" Blair put his fork down.

"You freeze the top layer of your wedding cake and eat it on your first anniversary to bring good fortune to your marriage."

"Cool! Never heard of that. Have you, Jim?"

"No. That's a new one on me. Carolyn never did that."

Sophie smiled. "Well, I'm going to freeze it for you, then send it packed in dry ice overnight after you get home. It'll be all wrapped, so you just have to put it in your freezer. Then you just take it out and put it in the refrigerator 24 hours before you intend to eat it."

"Okay, thanks," the two men replied.

The reception wound down about nine o'clock. Jim and Blair stayed up until the early morning, thoroughly enjoying their first night as a married couple.

-oOo-

The next day, Jim and Blair drove over to Greg Parker's place for dinner. Simon packed his bag, and they drove to Pierson International together in Parker's car to see Banks off on his eight o'clock flight.

They all walked to the security checkpoint. Simon shook Greg's hand. "I can't thank you enough for all you've done. You must come visit us in Cascade, and let us show you around. You'll love it."

"I promise I will. I have vacation coming up in August. It'll be nice to get away, see a new place and spend time with friends."

"Now, as for you two.... I expect to see you bright and early on Monday, July 7th. Until then, you're under orders to relax and have a good time."

"Yes, Sir!" The two detectives saluted.

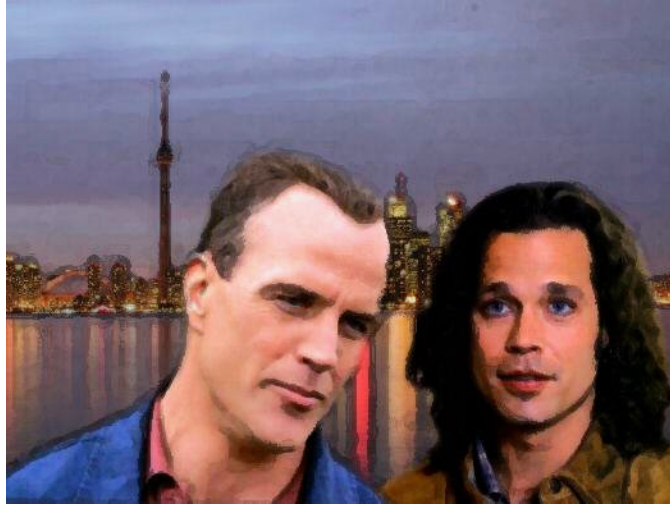
"Smart asses," Simon muttered. Greg laughed.

The captain hugged his men and clapped them on the back. He shook hands with Parker and then started to walk toward the waiting CATSA* agents when he suddenly turned back around.

"Oh, and Sandburg?"

"Yeah, Simon?"

"Stay out of banks will ya, please?"



THE END

*Canadian Air Transport Security Authority