



artwork by akablonded

**T Verano's
WITH CLOSED EYES**

With Closed Eyes

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Story by T Verano

The first time Sandburg shows up in Jim's bed — in a manner of speaking — doesn't really count.

Jim's not interested. Not. Interested.

He just can't sleep. Been a hell of a week, what with Sarris's daughter terrorizing the city to wreak her psychotic vengeance and Jim's body betraying him with this whatever-the-fuck sentinel shit Sandburg keeps going on about. Hell of a week, and he's running on empty. He needs to get some sleep.

He just... can't. Too tense. At least nothing fucked-up is going on right now. The sheets feel comfortable against his skin, feel smooth and cool, like they should. The rest of the world around him seems normal. His body feels like he expects it to feel when he's this tired, this tense.

When he's lying in bed remembering kissing Carolyn in the rain the other night.

Jesus. Kissing has never felt quite like that before, with anyone.

His dick is starting to show some interest in this line of thought, and sure, why not? Good way to get rid of tension and get himself relaxed enough to finally fall asleep. He gives his still mostly soft cock a cautious stroke, and everything feels normal, feels comfortingly — tantalizingly — familiar. So yeah, why the fuck not. Get himself off and sack out afterwards, forget all this weirdness for a while.

Jim settles in, ready for a nice, slow buildup. Spending some time mentally replaying that kiss will serve just fine to get the ball rolling....

It does. A few minutes later he's more than half hard, biting down on his lip a little as he chases the memory of the way Carolyn tasted that night — there was so much more to taste than ever before, so much more to *feel* —

"Extra-sensitive touchy-feely."

Oh, for Christ's sake. This is not a moment he wants Sandburg's voice inside his head. Not that he ever wants — ever *will* want — Sandburg's voice inside his head. So the kid's been some help so far; he's also a pain in the ass, with a gift for rubbing Jim exactly the wrong....

The wrong, maddening way. What the fuck? He's supposed to be jacking himself off to a mental slideshow of memories of Carolyn, of the times they were good together. Maybe they weren't *great* together — except for that last kiss — but she's a beautiful woman and a strong one, and he remembers every strong, beautiful inch of her body. Yet instead of thinking about Carolyn, he's thinking, God help him, about Sandburg.

He's remembering grabbing Sandburg's shirt and shoving him up against his office wall. He's remembering the sturdy body he could feel underneath those hippy-dippy clothes, remembering the way Sandburg's hands felt as they... fuck, *kneaded* Jim's shoulders; not pushing Jim away, more like touching him because Sandburg couldn't help himself.

He's remembering those intensely blue, intensely intense eyes. Remembering that mouth.

That fucking mouth.

What the actual fuck. That Jim's dick would jump almost painfully to full attention the minute he started this particular Sandburg-starring walk down memory lane wasn't supposed to be on the agenda here. Jim grits his teeth for a moment before he gives in and sighs, changes mental gears. He just wants to get off and go to sleep. If his dick prefers that the movie reel feature Sandburg tonight instead of Carolyn, prefers that he imagine putting Sandburg's mouth to a hell of a lot better use than Sandburg generally puts it — does the kid even *know* how to shut up? not that he's actually a kid; Christ, no — there's no reason Jim can't oblige.

It's not like Sandburg will ever know about it. And he won't be around long, anyway. This... arrangement is only temporary.

Thank God.

Jim settles in again, hand wrapped loosely around his dick. One late-night fantasy blowjob coming right up.

The next couple of times Sandburg "shows up" don't count, either. After all, they're just carbon copies of the first time. Well, almost carbon copies, since the kickoff varies. It doesn't seem to matter where Jim starts, though, since he always ends up in the same place: fucking that mouth.

That *fucking* mouth.

Then everything changes. It has to change. Because Sandburg's asleep downstairs.

It's the first night since Sandburg moved in for his so-called "week" that Jim's found himself lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, a little too wound up to sleep and thinking about taking matters in hand like he normally would.

Except... Sandburg's asleep downstairs.

Jim sighs and forces himself to think about counting sheep instead of jerking off. Not that sheep-counting has ever really done it for him, but while Sandburg's squatting in his spare room Jim's not going to take any chances. His private life is *private*, and somehow Jim has a feeling that that's not a boundary Sandburg tends to respect.

The loft still smells faintly of smoke and monkey, even though the monkey's permanently locked up in some lab somewhere now and Sandburg's cleaned up all the stuff he managed

to salvage. It also smells like strange shampoo and soap, like candle wax and old leather-bound books, like intriguingly spicy musk... well, like Sandburg.

Blair. Like Blair.

Jim sighs again. Blair — *Sandburg* — might not have a lot of respect for boundaries, but Jim does. Certain boundaries, anyway. It's a no-brainer that Sandburg wants to stay, with the way he's settled into the spare room and the way he's making no visible effort at finding somewhere else to bunk. But if Sandburg stays, the quid pro quo is going to stand where it is: Jim's spare room for Sandburg helping Jim deal with these fucking senses. It's *not* going to be Sandburg providing Jim with an occasional, if only imaginary — and unaware, on Sandburg's part — blowjob in exchange for sleeping space. Jim's not going there, even in the privacy of his own mind.

There's a brief rustle from the room below as Sandburg moves a little on the futon, but he's still breathing deeply and slowly, by all signs sound asleep. Jim lets himself listen to those peaceful breaths, feeling a little more peaceful himself after a few minutes. A few minutes after that, he realizes he's listening to Sandburg's heartbeat as well, and that it's steady and slow and oddly calming. Soothing.

Peaceful. Maybe he doesn't need to count those goddamned sheep, maybe he can just....

When he wakes up, he feels... wrong. Bad dream, he realizes after a moment. He must've been having an unpleasant dream just before he woke up. The sound of a yawn reaches him along with a creak from the futon mattress, and Jim finds himself relaxing, releasing tension he hadn't even realized his body had been holding.

The dream he was having is coming back to him now, and he was wrong; it wasn't unpleasant at all. Jim's subconscious mind apparently isn't as honorable as his conscious mind, though. Not that Jim feels like complaining too much about that as the dream replays in his memory: Blair on his knees, with his eyes half-closed and his eyelashes fluttering; with his mouth rounded, lips red and wet and gloriously tight around Jim's dick. Blair looking up at Jim hazily, with the blue of his eyes only a thin ring around his enlarged pupils. Blair's hands touching and stroking and fucking *petting*....

Blair leaving, with a cheerful, "See you around, man," and his backpack slung over his shoulder, leaving without looking back. And Jim poking his head into the spare room to find all of Blair's stuff gone, too; nothing left but Jim's furniture and a faint, fading trace of Blair's scent.

The shower turns on downstairs with a rush of water, and Jim gives his head a sharp shake and pushes himself up and out of bed, grabs his robe, and heads downstairs.

Just a dream, all of it. Just a dream.

Pleasant or not.

The next time Jim dreams about Blair, he's almost got the loft set to rights again after Lash's little abduction scene. Blair's been sleeping for crap — Jim hasn't been doing so hot himself — and Jim hopes it will help, having their home look more like their home again.

It at least helps *Jim* fall asleep. He has to be asleep and dreaming; that's the only possible explanation for suddenly finding himself standing in the middle of the living room, naked, with a nearly half-naked Blair in his arms. Blair's shirt is more off than on, and the feeling of his skin against Jim's bare chest is a revelation. So is the urgent intimacy of the hand he's holding on to Jim with.

Holding on for dear life — his heartbeat is going crazy and he's shaking, and it's not from arousal. "You did good," Jim says, over and over. "You did everything right." The hand on Jim's side tightens its grip. "You're safe," Jim says. "Lash is dead. You're safe. You did good."

Then Jim — still naked, but cold, now — is standing in the doorway of the spare room, and the room's empty. There's nothing there, nothing at all where Blair's stuff is supposed to be, where Jim's furniture is supposed to be. Nothing but dust motes drifting slowly through the early morning light.

Dust motes, and a Post-it note stuck to the door-frame. "Not my scene," the note says, "sorry. Catch you around sometime."

Jim reaches for the note, but a gust of cold wind pours in through the broken-out balcony windows (they weren't broken a moment ago, were they? No. He's dreaming, of course he's dreaming), and the wind plucks the Post-it off the door-frame, whirls it through the air and takes it outside, the black "sorry" sharply visible against the yellow paper as the note is blown away down the street.

He wakes up to pre-dawn darkness, the scent of hours-old coffee, and the scratch of Blair's pen against the paper of one of his notebooks.

It was just a dream.

After a few minutes he gets up and goes downstairs to make some fresh coffee. If that means he'll end up keeping Blair company for a couple of hours — even mostly silent company, if Blair's on one of his studying jags — well, then, it does. Jim can't say he'll mind too much.

Can't say he'll mind at all. Not that anybody's asking.

It's a while before he dreams about Blair again. When he does, everything is tinted gold, glittering and gauzy and hazy. Blair is a blur of gold as Jim cradles him to his chest, waiting for the ambulance. He's a glowing pillar of gold when he pulls away from Jim's arms and stands up. "Can't you see?" he asks Jim. His voice sounds choked up, like he's close to tears. "Can't you see it, man? I shouldn't be doing this, Jim. I can't do this."

Between one moment and the next, the glowing pillar collapses into a small pile of golden-gray ash that scatters in the cold wind snaking through the parking garage.

Jim wakes up with a start. He's tangled up in his sheets and sweating, breathing fast. The clock reads 2:18, and the white LED numbers have only the faintest golden glow around the edges.

Downstairs, Blair is breathing slowly and steadily, and his heart is beating slowly and steadily. Jim lies in bed watching the numbers on the clock change and listening to Blair sleep, until the rest of the night finally passes.

Most nights, Jim doesn't dream about Blair at all. Which is a relief.

Most days, he calls Blair "Sandburg," even inside his own head. He tries not to think about that too much, but it feels... safer.

As if anything about Blair really feels safe anymore. That's another thing Jim tries not to think about too much.

"The Macarena, Chief?" Jim's laughing, and Blair laughs too, the laughter echoing in the hallway as they walk together towards the door to the loft.

Just before they get there, Blair turns to Jim and waggles his eyebrows. "You know, Jim," he says, "traditionally speaking, this would be a really great time for some life-affirming sex. You up for it?"

Jim shrugs and says, "Why not?" Maybe his stab at appearing only mildly interested is undermined a little by the fact that he's suddenly as naked as a jaybird and so hard it hurts, but Blair doesn't blink an eye.

What he does do is drop to his knees and start giving Jim a *very* life-affirming, a fucking *fantastic* blowjob.

Jim's got one hand threaded through Blair's hair and the other one palm-flat against the hallway wall and is trying to convince his knees to keep him upright, when he finds himself saying, "This one wasn't my fault, Chief. You weren't in that elevator because of me. You know that means you can't leave this time. Not this time."

The hot, wet — so fucking *sweet* — suction his dick is enjoying so much doesn't falter, but now both of Jim's hands are flat against the wall, and when he tries to put one of them back on top of the head bobbing so industriously at his groin, he can't; his hands won't move.

He can't touch.

He tells himself it doesn't matter as his hips jerk harder and harder, driving his dick deeper and deeper into that perfect, willing mouth; that perfect, willing throat.

Then he's standing in the living room, and there's a note on the table. "My committee's shitting bricks about me having sex with my subject, so I have to come up with a new topic. Looks like I don't need you anymore."

Jim doesn't need to look into Blair's room to know that the room will be empty. He looks anyway — or tries to, but the room is gone, too. There's nothing left but the cold, damp Cascade air and a straight drop two stories down to the alley.

When Jim wakes up, it's to messy sheets and to a gray cloud of thoughts that don't really lighten even when he hears Blair start making breakfast downstairs.

Incacha's dead.

The raging grief that possessed Jim earlier, that's possessed him for days now, has been pushed away for the moment by numb exhaustion. Exhaustion won't be enough to let him fall asleep, though. Not tonight. Jim's sure of that.

Still, he makes himself breathe slowly and deeply as he lies on his bed, doesn't let himself toss and turn. He can force his body to get some rest even if he can't force his mind to.

...It's cold up on the roof. The sky is the kind of dull, wet-looking gray that promises rain before the day is over. Jim stares out across the city but there's nothing to see, nothing he wants to see. He shivers. Incacha's not here. Blair's not here. The streets below him are deserted.

Then Blair's standing beside him, is standing in front of him, is hugging him. The warmth of Blair's body is the only warmth Jim's felt for days. "I'm here," Blair says, his voice low and fervent. "I'm here, Jim. I'm not going to leave you, I promise."

Everywhere Blair's not touching him, Jim is colder than ever.

"You *are* naked, Enqueri," Incacha points out from where he's sitting on his heels at one corner of the rooftop, just as a flock of birds flies overhead, parrot-noisy, their tropical-bright feathers a shock of green and orange and blue against the gray sky.

Jim's cold all over, suddenly. He looks away from the birds, and Blair's not hugging him any longer; Blair's walking away.

Walking away from Jim. "You know what?" Blair says, without turning to look back, "Incacha was wrong. That kind of responsibility — I'm really not up for that. Better luck next time, okay?"

Then he's gone and Incacha's gone and Jim's left standing alone again on the roof, shivering in the sunless air.

He's still shivering when he wakes up. Blair's on the phone downstairs, telling Simon that Jim's sleeping in and that they'll be in later. Sunlight's pouring in through the windows, and the only birds Jim can hear outside are pigeons and sparrows and gulls. The loft is warm and the quilt Jim's burrowed underneath is warm, but he still can't stop shivering.

He wakes up to the rush of bile up his throat and barely manages to swallow it down in time.

He's not Curtis. He isn't. But he can't shake the dream — the nightmare — of grabbing the prison's new creative writing teacher (motherfucking *creative writing*, like anybody inside could give a rat's ass about *creative writing*) and dragging him to the showers, of Teacher on his hands and knees on the rough concrete floor, of the catcalls from the inmates gathered in a ring around the action —

Of the action itself. Curtis likes to fuck, after all; who the hell doesn't? And inside, it's fuck or get fucked, and *get fucked* is only for the weak. Curtis isn't weak.

More bile floods Jim's throat, and he swallows convulsively.

He needs a shower. Badly. But before he does that, he needs to wake Blair up and tell him to get the hell out while he still can. Tell him to go find someone else to room with, to be backup for, to *help*; someone he can trust.

He doesn't, though. He showers, scrubs his skin till it's nearly raw, and when he walks out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips, he finds Blair in the kitchen making some kind of grassy-smelling tea. Blair looks worried. "You okay?" he asks, as he offers Jim a cup.

The tea smells like something only a lawn-mower could find appealing. Jim takes a sip, cautiously, and it tastes worse than it smells.

He doesn't say that to Blair, though. He doesn't tell Blair that if he was smart, he'd be in his room right now packing his bags in order to get the fuck out of Dodge, away from Jim. He doesn't tell Blair that being Curtis has turned him into a monster when he's asleep.

He doesn't; he doesn't need to. He won't *let* himself need to. He's not Curtis. He's Jim Ellison.

He's Jim Ellison. He. Is. Not. Curtis.

"Jim?" Blair asks, the worry even clearer to see now, and Jim still doesn't say anything. He just shrugs and swallows another sip of tea.

"What good does it do for a man to have ears that will hear a thousand miles if he cannot listen to the whispers of his own heart? You should begin by listening to the hearts of others."

Gabriel was right, Jim thinks, as he lowers himself slowly onto Blair's waiting cock.

Gabriel was right, Jim thinks, as Blair moans and arches up underneath him.

Gabriel was right, Jim thinks, and throws his head back and tries not to whimper as Blair's hand closes around his achingly hard dick and begins to work it.

"Jim, do that again," Blair says from across the bedroom. Jim looks away from Blair on his bed and looks at Blair in the corner of the room. Blair shrugs. "I didn't have the right angle for the video." The camcorder's resting on his shoulder and the recording light's still on, an unblinking red circle bright against the black camera case. Blair nods towards himself still

lying on Jim's bed, still buried deep inside Jim. "Also, I'm going to need to take five in a minute so I can get some notes down. This is groundbreaking stuff, Jim; Burton never said shit about sentinels and sex. We've got a lot of territory to cover here for my research."

Jim wakes up to the sound of his heart hammering loudly inside his chest, like it's trying to break out of his ribcage.

Hearts. He runs his hands through his hair, rubs his face. Gabriel wasn't right. Gabriel was wrong.

Jim doesn't need a dream to tell him that. He already knows the truth: if he listens to the whispers of his own heart, he's fucked.

If he listens to Blair's heart, he's fucked.

He's fucked, period.

The sound of Blair breathing in the bedroom below him isn't as much of a comfort as it usually is.

It's a nightmare. Jim's awake, and it's still a nightmare. It's been a nightmare since the moment Alex showed up in Cascade.

She won't be showing up in Cascade again.

Jim sighs, shifting on the mattress to lie on his side and stare out of the hotel-room window at the night sky. It's quiet, even for three a.m. If he lets himself listen, he can hear the occasional murmur of Spanish from a few locals who appear to be having as much trouble sleeping as he is. He can hear Simon snoring in his room next door, and from further down the hall he can hear Connor tossing and turning, sheets rustling, as she mutters, "Bloody hell," and thumps something, presumably her pillow.

He can hear Blair breathing in his room on the next floor up, at the far side of the building. That seems too far away tonight. It feels wrong.

Everything feels wrong.

Jim closes his eyes. Blair's breathing sounds slow and steady, but just slightly off. Maybe recent drowning does that to a person's lungs. Somewhere off in the distance, a jaguar roars, and Jim flinches. Real? Not real? Does it matter? He really wants to be done with this mystical shit.

A wolf fills Jim's mental vision for a moment, a wolf trotting away but turning at the last minute to run back towards a jaguar. Towards Jim.

All right, so the mystical shit isn't entirely useless. But it sure as hell fucked him over when he needed to be on an even keel to deal with Alex, turning him into some kind of remote-controlled, morally compromised idiot. Turning him into a patsy, first, then turning him into a rutting animal.

That's not who he's supposed to be.

Alex isn't who she's supposed to be, either. Jim's pretty sure of that.

Jim rolls over to lie on his back, and the box springs complain with a noisy creak. The hotel bed isn't nearly as quiet as his own bed, or as comfortable.

His thoughts aren't very comfortable, either.

That's fine; maybe they'll keep him awake. He'd just as soon not dream tonight — or any night in the foreseeable future — since it's a safe bet that he'll just dream about Alex on the beach, Alex at the temple, Alex... *lost*. He'll just dream (again) about Alex killing Blair.

Or dream (again) about Blair, cold and naked on the jungle floor, Jim's arrow in his heart. Blair cold and wet on the grass beside the fountain with water filling his lungs. Dream about Blair... dead.

Dream about Blair alive and watching him at the temple with Alex, watching him at the beach with Alex.

Or dream about Blair putting his research first, putting Jim last. Or about kicking Blair out. About the emptied-out loft....

...About having nothing left.

He doesn't need those dreams.

He doesn't need any dreams at all. Dreams just show him things he doesn't want to see.

*

Jim sits on the side of his bed, elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands.

Blair's words to Simon replay inside Jim's head. *"He'll get over it. Maybe not today, but soon."*

Right. Thanks, Chief. Thanks a hell of a lot there.

Maybe Blair hadn't meant for Jim to overhear him, maybe he had. It doesn't matter. He's right, anyway. At least, he's mostly right. Jim can't let afford to let any more old flames waltz into his life out of the blue, stick around for a day or two and fuck with his head, his *trust*, then die right in front of him.

Not that he has any more old flames waiting in the wings. Veronica was the last one.

Blair's downstairs in the living room, typing on his laptop and muttering to himself occasionally. It's just background noise, meaningless, and Jim lets it wash over him. After a while he lies down, pulls the sheet up, and stares at the ceiling. *"He'll get over it."*

He will. He doesn't have much choice. That's the way life works.

...The chapel is crowded with people murmuring quietly to each other and milling around. They're all wearing black. Jim looks down at his own black suit as he stands in the doorway, smoothes the lapels and pulls the cuffs down. He's straightening his tie when Simon claps a

heavy hand on his shoulder. "Time to go in," Simon says, and Jim closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment before he nods.

The crowd parts to let him through as he walks towards the far side of the room where the caskets are laid out. Lila's casket is decked out in orchids; they're beautiful, but not as beautiful as she is, lying there. He stares down at her face until Simon nudges him in the ribs with an elbow. "A shame," Simon says. He jerks his head towards the second casket. "But you need to move on, Jim. You've got a job to do. You can't be hanging around here all day."

Jim nods again and steps over to the second casket. This one's got a big heart-shaped arrangement propped up on the lower end, made out of folded hundred-dollar bills. Hundred-dollar bills are scattered inside the casket, too, surrounding the body and lying on top of it, and Veronica's waxy-pale face is set in a smile.

"Time to move on, Jim," Simon chides, gesturing at the third casket. Jim turns to look at it. There aren't any flowers on this one, no hearts, no anything. The lid's still closed. He's about to walk over to it when a hand wraps itself around his wrist.

Carolyn's hand.

She's standing in front of him, and she looks angry. "You didn't love me enough for me to betray you," she accuses, and Jim closes his eyes and lets his head drop; he has nothing to say to that.

"Don't make me turn this into an order, Jim." Jim looks up. Simon's pointing at the third casket and glaring at him.

The casket's further away than it looks, and it takes Jim a long time to reach it. When he finally does, the murmur of voices behind him vanishes. He doesn't need to glance over his shoulder to know that everyone's gone, even Carolyn. Even Simon. He's all alone here.

All alone, with a job to do.

The lid's heavy, hard to lift. Jim has to strain against the weight of it, and he can't get a look inside the casket itself until he's managed to shove the lid halfway open.

Then he looks inside.

...He can't feel his hands. The lid slips out of them and falls closed again with a bang that echoes against the walls of the empty chapel, that —

That jolts Jim awake.

For a moment he can't hear anything over the pounding of his heart, and he twists until he can look through the railing down into the living room.

Blair's still there at the table, working away on his laptop beside a stack of books. Burton's book is lying on top of the stack.

Of course Blair's there. It was just a dream. None of it means anything. Blair lying dead in that goddamned casket with that goddamned book clutched in his hands doesn't mean anything.

It was just another goddamned dream.

It's a fucking horror show. Everywhere they go in the house, they find more blood, another body: two adults and five kids, one of those just a baby.

Some of the crime scene techs look like they're barely hanging on by their fingernails. Jim can't blame them; he feels the same way. He'd feel the same way even if this wasn't the third house they've gotten a call to during the past week, the third house filled with bodies, with "Kill and tell" scrawled on one of the walls in blood.

"Tell who? Tell *what*?" Jim says, and it comes out as a snarl.

Beside him, Blair shrugs. "We figure that out, we might be able to stop him." He sounds matter-of-fact.

He *looks* matter-of-fact, maybe a little annoyed, as he crouches next to the blood-covered body sprawled on the floor beside the couch and studies it. "Either that or we hope he moves on soon, so he can be somebody else's headache." He stands up and rolls his shoulders in a stretch, and Jim can hear the joints pop. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

He isn't; he's only been a cop for a year now. But when he turns away from the couch towards the living-room doorway, his crew cut is shot with silver and his hairline is higher than Jim's. He's wrinkled all over, wrinkled and sagging, and his eyes aren't blue anymore; they're a washed-out, dead-looking gray.

The corners of his mouth pull down sourly. "Don't just stand there, Jim. I'm doing *my* fucking job, like you wanted. Why aren't you doing yours?"

"Cold son of a bitch," one of the techs mutters after Blair pulls out a notebook and walks out of the living room.

Another of the techs stares at the doorway Blair left through. He scratches his jaw, looking puzzled. "Hey," he says to the room at large, "didn't he used to be somebody else?"

Then Jim's climbing out of Sweetheart and crossing the sidewalk, passing Collette's window, the dry-cleaning bag that he's carrying with his black suit in it rustling in the cold breeze. The door to the lobby of their apartment building sticks, and he has to brace both hands against it and push with everything he has until it finally moves just enough to let him squeeze through the opening.

He doesn't smell the blood until then, even though the stairs leading up from the lobby are slippery with it and the third-floor hallway is awash in it.

There are words scrawled on the outside of the loft door, written in bright red blood. "Kill and tell," the bloody letters say. "Kill and tell."

The door swings open in front of Jim. "Who is he now?" the dripping red letters say on the wall inside.

The garment bag Jim's carrying slides out of his grip and falls to the floor with a wet plop. Jim looks down at the blood pouring out from the bottom of the bag, then he looks back up. The letters on the door to Blair's room say, "Hint: He's not a cop anymore —"

"— he's a corpse," the letters on the mirror above Blair's dresser say. "Who are *you* now?"

No, Jim says, but the word gets stuck in his throat. Out of the corner of his eye he sees something move, and he whirls.

The relief makes him dizzy. "Jesus, you scared me, Chief," he says to Blair, but Blair doesn't answer; he just stands there, leaning back against the wall, smiling at Jim. He's... beautiful. He's fucking beautiful, the neo-hippie witchdoctor punk, in that patchwork vest and those earrings, his hair a wild, dark cloud framing his face and shoulders. Jim wants to run his fingers through that hair. He wants to kiss that wide, smiling mouth. He wants to fall into those blue, blue eyes and never come out again.

He wants to —

The red cotton patch on the left side of Blair's vest, just in front of his heart, is growing bigger.

It's glistening wetly. Glistening with bright red blood.

Jim can't move. He can't get to Blair. He says, "Sandburg," desperately, and it isn't enough; Blair's eyes change from hopeful to resigned.

No. "Blair," Jim says — begs — "*Blair*."

Blair's eyes change again. He smiles at Jim, sweet and sad. "Too late," he says, as the red patch grows and darkens. "You figured it out too late, Jim." He lets out a wet-sounding breath in a long, fading sigh and his eyes close.

They don't open again. His blue, blue eyes don't open again.

"No." The word scrapes its way painfully up Jim's throat like a rusty razorblade, tears its way out of his mouth. "No. *No*."

"No."

The sound of his own voice jerks Jim into awareness.

Awareness, at least, that he's lying in bed with the sheets twisted around him like sweat-sodden pretzels. That it's the middle of the night. That the loft doesn't smell like blood.

That the harsh sound of his ragged breathing isn't being countered by the sound of Blair's steady breathing, that the thundering beat of his heart isn't being countered (calmed, *comforted*) by the familiar sound of Blair's heartbeat.

Jim sits up with careful deliberation. It doesn't mean anything that he can't hear Blair. He knows that. His fucking senses pull shit like this sometimes, shut down in weird ways when he least expects it; that's all it is.

That's all it is.

He needs to get up and go downstairs. Not to check on Blair — Blair's fine. But Jim's mouth is dry and he could use a drink of water. And he sure as hell needs a shower and to get some less sweated-on sheets for the bed before he tries to go back to sleep.

Tries to go back to sleep? That's a laugh.

He sighs at himself — it was just a fucking dream — and heads downstairs, ignoring the ache the steps stir up in his still-healing leg. He hits the kitchen first to get a bottle of water and drinks half of it in front of the refrigerator, then decides to get some fresh air before he takes his shower.

If making his way from the kitchen to the balcony and his date with breathing in the night air happens to take him right in front of the door to Blair's room, and he finds himself pausing there... well, so what? He *is* there; he might as well try listening again.

Try, and fail: nothing. No heartbeat, no breathing, no creak of mattress or rustling of sheets.

Fucking senses.

Fucking dream that he can't entirely shake.

The hell with it. Jim clears his throat, knocks lightly on the door, says, "Sandburg," quietly.

Still nothing. He knocks again, louder. Then he opens the door.

Opens the door and lets out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Forget the senses; the reason he's not hearing Blair is because Blair isn't here right now. It isn't because Blair is... gone.

Why Blair isn't here in the middle of the night Jim doesn't know. Maybe he ran out of pens or Snapple and is making a run to the 7-Eleven, or had an irresistible craving for a slice of cherry pie at the all-night diner over on Drayson. It isn't any of Jim's business why Blair isn't here. Jim is well aware of that. As long as Blair didn't get carted away against his will — and there's no sign of that — it's absolutely none of Jim's business why Blair isn't here.

The dull ache in Jim's leg is beginning to feel a little less dull, a little more noticeable. It's nothing more than an occasional inconvenience now — Zoeller's bullet didn't do that much damage — but still, it's probably a good idea for him to go get that shower and go back to bed. Read for a while, maybe. Get some rest, even if he isn't really interested in going back to sleep.

He's sure as shit not going to waste any more time wondering where Blair is. Or wondering why Blair isn't here, like he should be, and sound asleep, like he should be —

("I'm doing my fucking job, Jim, like you wanted.")

— wondering if it has anything to do with this afternoon, with Simon offering him a job as Jim's official and permanent partner.

He's sitting on the couch in the dark when Blair unlocks the door and comes in forty minutes later. He waits until Blair's hung up his jacket before he says, "Where have you been?"

Blair jumps, and Jim gets a certain amount of satisfaction out of that, even if he hadn't meant to sound quite so accusing.

The raised eyebrow and the out-flung hands and the breezy — or sarcastic — response Jim's expecting don't come. Instead Blair stands there like a statue. His voice, when he says, "I, uh... I couldn't sleep. Went for a walk. Sorry if I woke you up," isn't sarcastic or breezy at all. It's the same hesitant voice he used in the hospital hallway when he said, "It's just a book," and "Where did I get off following you around for three years, pretending I was a cop?" The same goddamned voice he used when he said, "This is a detective's badge. What's going on? I don't deserve this."

Blair isn't supposed to sound like that. Jim rubs the side of his neck and grimaces. "You didn't wake me up."

"Okay," Blair says. "Okay, good." He's still standing there like he's frozen in place, but now his forehead creases in concern. "Why are you up, then — is something wrong? Your leg bothering you?"

"Leg's fine," Jim says, and it's close enough to the truth. What's bothering him has nothing to do with his little souvenir from Zoeller.

Blair says, "Good, that's good," still in that same goddamned tentative voice, and he starts to head for his room.

"Who is he now?" the dripping red letters had said. *"Hint: he's not a cop —"*

"We need to talk." Jim's words come out too rushed, too sharp.

Jesus, he needs to get his head on straight.

Blair pauses. After a moment he chuckles. It's a hollow sound. "Isn't that *my* line, Jim?"

"Apparently not tonight." Jim feels a muscle in his jaw twitch. He doesn't want to have this conversation, but it doesn't feel like he has any choice anymore, not when he keeps hearing Blair's voice in his head, jaded and sour, saying, *"I'm doing my fucking job, like you wanted."*

Not when he keeps seeing all that blood, Blair's blood. Keeps seeing Blair's blue, blue eyes close and not open again.

It's hard to push the words out, but Jim makes himself say, "You want the badge or not?"

Blair tenses. "You're asking me that now?"

Jim just waits, and eventually Blair sighs and runs his hands through his hair. "You know what?" he says. "It's late, and I'm not really up for this tonight. Can't we talk about it in the morning?"

"Who is he now?" the bloody letters had said. Jim clenches his jaw. "Do you want it or not?"

Blair closes his eyes briefly and lets out a gusty breath. "Right. So we're talking about it now. Okay." His hands are moving, saying, "*I don't know what to say to you,*" to Jim at the same time his mouth's saying, "I want to work with you, yeah."

Jim frowns. Neither answer is actually an answer; Blair's deflecting. "That's not what I asked."

"What do you want here, Jim? Isn't that enough?" Now Blair's hands are saying, "*You don't really want to know the truth.*"

No, Jim doesn't want to know the truth. He's pretty sure about that. He's also pretty sure that he *needs* to know it, whether he wants to or not.

"You're too smart to believe that," he says.

"Not smart enough to avoid this conversation," Blair mutters. "Look, I didn't just trail around after you for the past couple of years because of the diss, but you already know that. I really liked working with you. I liked helping, okay? And yeah, it was a rush sometimes. Making it official... I don't know. It's a lot. I'm not sure it's who I am. I'm trying to figure it out."

"Hint: he's not a cop —"

Fucking dream. Jim can't afford to ignore it, though. The stakes are too high. "You have to be sure, Chief," he says. "If you take the badge, you have to be in it all the way. Anything less can get somebody killed." He takes a deep breath and finishes what he needs to say. "Can get *you* killed. It can also eat you up inside, and just because I want you there, working with me... that's not why you should do it, if you decide to do it."

Blair doesn't say anything for a minute. Then he crosses over to the end table beside the couch and turns on the lamp. "Where's this coming from, Jim?"

My fucking subconscious, Jim thinks. What he says is, "Common sense."

Blair narrows his eyes (blue in the light from the lamp, not dead-looking gray; so very *blue*). "Why now?" he says. "You were... everybody was so gung ho this afternoon in the bullpen. It didn't feel real, you know? I kind of felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I don't know what kind of strings you and Simon pulled, but they had to be big ones. I mean, hiring the guy who —"

"*Don't,*" Jim says, and he doesn't care at all that his voice comes out harsh. "Don't. You finish that sentence, you're going to piss me off."

"— the guy who betrayed his best friend and tried to defraud his academic institution and the public," Blair continues, stubbornly, "that's —"

"You didn't love me enough for me to betray you," Carolyn says, her hand wrapped around Jim's wrist.

"*Too late,*" Blair says. "*You figured it out too late.*" His smile is sweet and sad, as the red cotton patch on the left side of his vest, just in front of his heart, keeps growing bigger, glistening wetly with bright red blood.

"Jim," Blair says. "Jim!" His breath is warm against Jim's face — *close* against Jim's face — and his shoulders are sturdy underneath Jim's hands.

And his back is shoved up against the living room wall, pinned there by the grip Jim's got on him.

"Will you fucking stop that?" Jim hears himself saying. Hears himself say, "I am so fucking *tired* of you leaving. I'm so fucking tired of having to be so fucking *careful*, of always having to —"

He stops listening. He isn't saying those words; he can't be. He doesn't have Blair shoved up hard against the living room wall and he isn't saying those words to Blair, because he's sitting on the couch talking about whether Blair really wants the badge or not. He has to be sitting on the couch. He was sitting on the couch a moment ago and he doesn't remember getting up.

He doesn't remember grabbing Blair.

He doesn't remember —

Jesus, Blair's eyes are so fucking blue.

So fucking *alive*.

If he can just keep Blair here underneath his hands, safe. If he can just keep Blair here, where he's supposed to be....

He barely registers Blair's hands clutching his shoulders, can't really seem to follow all the words Blair's saying. "— leaving?" he hears, vaguely, and "What the hell are you —"

Blair's so close, and Jim's wanted this for so long, and he can't have it.

He *has* to have it. At least once, he has to have it.

...It's nothing like kissing Carolyn or Lila or Veronica or anybody Jim's ever kissed before. Kissing Blair feels like barely leashed fury — no, like ungrounded electricity, like the end of everything caught in an infinite loop of high-voltage destruction.

Like Jim's last fucking hope.

Blair's hands are wrapped around the back of Jim's head, and he's trying to pull Jim in closer, and that's wrong. Jim knows it's wrong. Blair should be pushing Jim away, should be pushing everything Jim has to offer away, but he's pulling Jim closer.

Jim can't think about that now.

When he can't ignore the need for more oxygen he backs off, but only an inch or two, dragging in hurried breaths that Blair matches and diving back into Blair's mouth as soon as he can.

It's not as frantic this time, not as angry. That's Blair's fault; Blair, who tastes even better than Jim had imagined, who's somehow turning Jim's desperate fury into sweet, slow exploration.

Every time they break apart — barely break apart — to breathe for the briefest of moments then start kissing again, the kiss gets sweeter.

Jim really can't think about that now.

It has to end, eventually. Blair chases after Jim's mouth with his own when Jim finally manages to pull further away than that inch or two of breathing space, and Jim makes himself step a little further back.

He looks at what he's done. Blair's leaning back against the wall, sagging a little, like his knees don't want to hold him up — neither do Jim's — and his hair's a mess from Jim's hands running through it. His eyes are dazed. And his mouth....

Jim can't look at his mouth, not without wanting — wanting too much — to taste it again.

Jim closes his eyes. For a long, stretched-out moment, the only sound he hears is their breathing, gradually slowing. He listens a little deeper; their heartbeats are gradually slowing, too.

He hears Blair swallow, and he opens his eyes. "So," Blair says, and his voice is low and hoarse, and cautious in a way that makes something twist inside Jim's ribcage, "not that I'm complaining, but what was that, Jim? Something messing with your senses? Some chemical you —"

Of course Blair would think that. Jim laughs. It's not much of a laugh, but it stops Blair cold. "That had nothing to do with my senses, Chief."

"Okay," Blair says slowly. "What was it about, then? I mean, you haven't ever..." He trails off because Jim's laughing again.

It's still not much of a laugh. What was it about? *Christ, Blair*, Jim thinks, *how much clearer do I have to be?* "Neither have you," he says.

"But that's because..." This time Blair stops himself. "Okay. Wow," he says after a long pause. "So, uh... what now?"

Jim finds himself frowning. "You don't become a cop, not unless your heart's really in it."

"Seriously?" Now it's Blair who's huffing out a not very amused-sounding laugh. "You can't tell me *that's* what this was about."

"No," Jim says. He takes another step back, further away from Blair. "Yes.... I don't know. Maybe a little. Too much can go wrong."

"'Too much can go wrong' — are you talking about me becoming a cop, or are you talking about us, about...?" Blair waves his hand between the two of them in a gesture that's clearly referring to what just happened.

You always ask the easy questions, Chief, Jim thinks. It's gone too far — *he's* gone too far — to keep avoiding the issue, though, so he grits his teeth and makes himself say, "Both."

Blair shakes his head. There's a spark in his eyes Jim hasn't seen for too long. "No," he says, "I'm not buying it, Jim. The cop thing — okay, maybe. We can talk about that later. But

if you're going to stand there and say 'too much can go wrong' and back off from what just happened, that's not enough. You'll have to come up with a hell of a lot better reason than that if you want to back off now."

Jim's suddenly too tired for this. "You'll leave," he hears himself say, even though he hadn't intended to say anything at all. "You always leave."

He sure as hell hadn't intended to say *that*. Goddamned dreams.

"You said that before," Blair mutters. He narrows his eyes. "When, Jim? When have I ever left? Even if sometimes you haven't made it easy to stay, you know?" He deflates a little. "Okay, sometimes I didn't help much with that, I get that. But I didn't leave, okay? Jesus, Jim, I came back from... from what Alex did, for you. Even if you were more interested in talking about back rent than in me still being around."

Blair's just fucking with him now. Jim shakes his head. "You knew that wasn't true."

Blair sighs. "Yeah, I knew. I know. I just... I didn't know you wanted *this*." His shoulders are tense. "I want it too, Jim, in case you didn't notice just now. I've wanted it for a really long time. I know it might not be easy, but you really want to give up before we even try?"

"*Who are you now?*" the blood-red letters had said.

Jim doesn't know who he is, not anymore. He needs to know.

There's only one way to find out. "No," Jim says. "No, I don't want to give up, Chief."

Most of the tension drops out of Blair's shoulders. His smile is a little awkward. "So, uh, that means we can kiss some more?"

"Guess it does." Enough talking. Jim needs to get closer to that awkward smile and *do* things to it. He crowds back in on Blair and cups the side of Blair's face in his hand. Blair's eyes are so alive, so full of hope, and so very, very blue. Jim can't help grinding a little against Blair's pelvis as he presses in closer, and Blair sucks in a suddenly ragged breath. "Might even mean we can do more than that," Jim says, just before he lays claim to Blair's mouth again.

Blair's perfect, willing mouth.

Blair's perfect, willing mouth that Jim might never stop kissing....

They must make it over to the couch at some point, even though Jim doesn't remember them doing it. But when Jim reluctantly pulls himself out of an especially long, especially drugging kiss so he can suck in some necessary oxygen, there they are, mostly horizontal and entirely tangled up together.

It feels so fucking *right*. Jim drops his head to rest his forehead against Blair's. Says, "Blair," just because he can, now.

This isn't a dream. He closes his eyes, his forehead still pressed against Blair's. "Blair," he says again, because he can. Because the smile Blair just gave him was so fucking sweet and so fucking beautiful, and he isn't dreaming.

He isn't dreaming anymore.