

The House on Rochester Street



Art by PattRose

Story by Mab

This was, Blair acknowledged, nice. He was set up with his lap top in a warm, pleasant room. The television volume was set low and Jim occasionally muttered over the sports commentary that the line judge was blind, but since it wasn't a team he followed he wasn't getting vehement about it. The whole arrangement could even be said to be homely – and then the phone rang. Jim's fallen expression when whoever was calling started talking told Blair that domestic peace was on hold.

"Oh come on, Simon." If Blair didn't know any better he'd have said that Jim was whining. "That's bullshit."

Simon said something on his side of the line. "Politics *is* bullshit," Jim replied. Then he sighed. "I'll be there in about thirty." He slammed the phone back into the set with definite force. "Damn it. First quiet night home in far too long, and some city councillor is flexing his muscles."

"You've got a case," Blair said, shutting his files down, and getting ready to stand up from the table.

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. He genuinely did look tired, not just a like a man teed-off that his quiet night had disappeared courtesy of some local politician's bluster. "It's not much of a case, Chief. Some kid has died of an overdose in an abandoned house. It's tragic for the kid and his family, but it's not exactly a Major Crime."

"So why you?" Blair asked, indignant on Jim's behalf.

"Because," Jim said shortly. "Because the kid was the nephew of Councillor Grady, because Councillor Grady has the Commissioner's ear, because Simon has got budget negotiations coming up and now is not a good time to tell our beloved Commish to blow it out his ass. Major Crimes is to send someone to ensure appropriate oversight." 'Oversight' sounded more like it should be pronounced 'flaming bag of shit'. Jim strode over to the door and took his jacket off the coat hook, and then, as Blair moved to join him, said, "Hey, you don't have to come out with me. You can stay here. That way at least one of us would get something useful done."

"No, it's okay," Blair said, even though he'd been on a roll. "I needed a break." And it was early days with this new arrangement with Jim. Blair did not want to make it look like he was taking his bed (and utilities and the increasing familiarity with Jim's 'at home' voice) for granted.

Jim's left hand flicked back in a resigned gesture. "Okay. Let's go."

"Oh my god," Blair said, ridiculously awe struck. "It's the haunted house." The crumbling Victorian pile on Rochester Street was infamous in Cascade, hedged around by myth and rumour, none of it verifiable. A nineteenth-century widow had leapt from the high cupola when her grief became too much. A medium held a séance that went terribly wrong. A veteran, returned from the Korean War, blew his brains out in one of the bedrooms.

"In the flesh. Or clapboard anyway." Blair grabbed for the flashlight Jim kept in the glove box before Jim locked his car, and the pair of them paused a moment while Jim scanned the house and the street. "So did you ever come here?"

"Once. When I was sixteen. Me and a friend came here, drank some illicit beer, and left before it even got dark. The place felt... weird, but when you're a teenager pretending that you're drunk on one beer and you're trespassing with your buddy in the town haunted house, then anything feels weird, you know? You?"

"This place was still someone's home when I was young enough to be that kind of stupid." Jim stepped onto the overgrown path. "Come on, there are people waiting on us." They walked up the path, neglected shrubbery brushing against them, before the hairs lifted on the back of Blair's neck and he flinched, hunching downwards like a turtle into its shell as something passed almost silently just above his head.



“Whoa!”

Jim whirled, startled, and then grinned. “It’s an owl, Sandburg. Relax.”

“Easy for you to say. Where were the sentinel senses, huh?”

“Worrying about other things,” Jim said with a jerk of his head toward the house.

“Is he still there?” Blair asked. There was no ambulance amongst the vehicles parked on the street.

“Stupid little shit’s probably getting his morgue toe-tag right about now,” Jim said, with a weary mournfulness that belied the insult. Blair wondered how many dead bodies Jim must have seen between being a soldier and being a cop.

Inside, they tracked their way to a back room lit with a couple of powerful flashlights. A disgruntled patrol officer ‘guarded’ the scene, and Jim nodded at him.

“Briggs, isn’t it? Sorry to keep you waiting.”

The patrol guy nodded back. “I’ll live. Walking out of the haunted house and telling the tale, huh?”

He looked curiously at Blair.

“This is Sandburg. He’s riding with me for now.” Blair nodded and then jammed his hands in his pockets so that he wouldn’t do anything dorky like wave.

Briggs examined Blair a moment and then dismissed him. "Wish I could say that I'd found anything useful, but there's not much to see. The kid's paraphernalia is here, and his sleeping bag. That's about it. Doesn't look like he had much truck with food."

Paraphernalia was Briggs's euphemism for the syringe, the long shoelace, and the other detritus of heroin use.

"Did you find him?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. One of the neighbours called it in. This is a nice neighbourhood, even if this place is rotting in the middle of it. We get a lot of people keeping an eye out for strangers up to no good."

Jim carefully picked over the pathetic goods on the floor. Blair had become used to the little signs of Jim using his senses, enough that he soon knew that there was nothing unexpected to be found there. No mystery lay on the floor, and on impulse he turned away from a dead boy's belongings and wandered out into the other rooms. When he and his friend had trespassed here a decade or so ago, they'd left graffiti on the wall of what would have been a stately parlour once upon a time. It still had its massive Victorian mantle-piece, surprisingly in one, undefaced piece, decorated with dulled, dusty wood and glazed carnelian-coloured tiles.

Blair found his own graffiti, a quote from Claude Levi-Strauss written in black marker down close to the base board because teenaged, stupid Blair had been sitting on the dirty floor with his purloined bottle of beer. He crouched to read it, playing the flashlight beam over the writing. *The scientific mind does not so much provide the right answers as ask the right questions.* "You pretentious little shit," Blair chided his ten years-ago self, and then stood. Brian Clark's effort – his initials inside a heart stabbed through with a dagger – was in an opposite corner, by the window. Blair paused a moment, remembering Brian who had gone to one of the Ivy League universities – nothing so prosaic as home town Rainier for him – and was now probably a corporate warrior somewhere. They'd lost touch.

Blair heard voices in the back room – Jim and Briggs in shop-talk he guessed. He stepped into the hall and played the flashlight over the ceiling, dull with old paint and cobwebs. The wallpaper hung peeling and limp and there was a smell of damp, but otherwise the building was undefaced. The only graffiti was in the front room. Fixtures were unbroken. Blair and Brian had never gone further than that front room, and he wondered why. He could fix that now, and he started up the stairs. Dust rose under his feet. It blurred the pattern and colour, but even in the faint light of his flashlight Blair suspected that it was a direly unattractive orange loop pile. "Man, I'm not sorry the seventies are done," he said to himself and continued on to the upstairs floor.

The streetlights outside cast some light through the window at the end of the hall, but Blair kept a hold of Jim's flashlight, even with its small and narrow beam. He opened one door – a bedroom, with an empty bedstead threaded with a plain, wire-weave base. Blair used to bounce on one of those, in a house in Portland when he was about five. He grinned and stepped out into the hall again.



A weird feeling overtook him, something strange and disorienting. He wondered if he was going to faint, and looked down the hall which was suddenly extended, like an over-stretched slinky toy pulled out to breaking point. The window at the end looked miles away. At the window... if Blair reached that window he'd see the street lights with their everyday glow. He wanted to see the lights, so much, and he took a step forward, leaning almost as if he was slipping down an unexpected slope. A shadow covered the window, jerking and bobbing, and Blair realised it was the owl. Did they do that, hovering like that?

The disorientation passed. The hallway was still long, the way hallways in big Victorian houses always were, but it no longer seemed to stretch on into unnatural reaches. "You have listened to too much student bullshit," Blair told himself, surfeited on exploration. He half-expected an irascible call from Jim, but there was nothing, and Blair went back down the stairs to find Briggs packing the dead kid's belonging into plastic bags, with the flashlights his sentries.

"Where's Jim?" Blair asked, unsettled by that uncomfortable moment upstairs.

Briggs shrugged. "Investigating? Looking for you?" he suggested pointedly. "There's a cellar," he said with the suggestion of unkind sarcasm, as if he thought Blair might be too scared to check it out.

"Thanks," Blair said and walked past Briggs with a serene surface and ruffled depths. Civilians looked at Blair's not very cop-like appearance and assumed that he worked

Narcotics. Any time that Blair met some of Jim's brothers in blue, they all gave off a vibe that suggested their assumption that he was using them.

There was what looked like it might have been laundry room once, and at the end of that a shadowed door. Blair's flashlight showed the steps, and he hesitated at the top, and called out Jim's name. There was no answer, and Blair was irritated by the little flair of anxiety in his chest. He wasn't worried that Jim might have hurt himself, or be in a zone; he was creeped out by the house and the dark stairs, and he stomped down, noisily defying the dark and his own nerves. "Jim?" he called again, and then the thin beam of the flashlight played over Jim standing stock-still, his hand resting against the brick wall of the cellar foundations.

"Hey, Jim," Blair said, but there was no answer. "So what's so fascinating down here?" It was muttered to himself as much as to Jim before Blair laid a hand on Jim's arm.

Jim jumped as if Blair had yelled in his face. "Christ, Sandburg, don't do that!"

"Don't do what?" Blair protested. "Excuse me for not letting you stand here all night zoned on whatever you were zoning on."

"I wasn't zoned."

"You were giving an excellent impression of it." When Jim looked as if he might argue the toss, Blair said hastily, "Briggs is putting everything into bags upstairs. I guess this means that the police investigation part of the night is over."

"At this point there's nothing to investigate. We'll follow up, but even if the kid bought some poisoned smack, it's still not Major Crime's beat."

Blair didn't know if he was pissed off at the dismissal of his effort to come out to support Jim, or at the blasé approach to someone's death. "So that's that? It's not Major Crime's problem?"

Jim frowned. "That's not what I said. But there's nothing here except a dead kid's stuff." It was regretful, not dismissive, Blair realised. "Dealers don't print business cards, and Tommy Yuan's boys in Narcotics are the ones with the in-depth knowledge of who's dealing in Cascade. There'll be an autopsy, and we'll go from there."

Blair shrugged. "Okay." He looked around the cellar. "So if there's nothing here, why come down and feel up the wall?"

It was Jim's turn to shrug. "I thought I'd check if there were any other signs of trespass. This place has been under patrol from the PD and the local neighbourhood watch for years." He grinned, suddenly teasing. "You picked your window of opportunity just right, Sandburg. A couple of years later and you would have been moved on before you ever got the cap off your beer bottle."

"Ah, okay. Yeah, I did wonder. This place is kind of untouched for how long it's been empty. Makes it creepier, somehow."

Jim gestured in an 'After you,' gesture up the cellar steps. "Just adds to the mystique. The house looks after itself," he said. His voice dropped unexpectedly deep. He was jerking

Blair's chain, Blair knew that and it still put a stupid shiver through him. He couldn't wait to get out of here.

"Hey," Blair said. "You didn't bring a flashlight down with you."

"I guess I didn't."

"Okay," Blair said, climbing the steps. "So, was that sight, using whatever light was around? Or were you using other senses to keep you aware of your surroundings?"

There was an odd pause from behind him, as if Jim had to think about the answer. As if he didn't know. "Auto-pilot, Sandburg. That's the best you're getting."

"Oh, like that's scientific, Jim. I can really measure that."

"You're a resourceful guy, Chief. It's just another challenge."

Blair scowled all the way to the door. "Challenge, my ass."

"I cooked," Blair said, as Jim came in the door.

"So you did. Is it edible?"

"It's a chicken casserole and baked potato," Blair said, carefully not mentioning that the meat was more of a garnish than an anchor to the meal. "Your share is in the fridge, if you want to heat it up." Jim nodded and hung up his jacket. It seemed to Blair that the broad shoulders were a little bowed tonight. "Did the paperwork need hog-tying as well as wrasslin' tonight?"

"I was hanging out with a guy. An informant, I guess. He might have a lead on one of the local dealers. I should introduce him to one of Yuan's people, but..."

Blair looked up from his work. "But?"

Jim smiled apologetically. "He's homeless, on the street. He's a veteran. We're connecting. I buy him the occasional hot meal."

That was Jim Ellison – apparently a soft touch for a sob story. Don't knock it, Blair told himself. He'd be either still couch surfing or paying too much for some new rat hole if the big, tough cop didn't have a marshmallow centre. "Cool," Blair said. "Would this guy mind a note-taker tagging along sometimes?"

Jim lifted a sardonic eyebrow. "He's not a sentinel, Sandburg, and he gets antsy with people he doesn't know. We'll get along fine without you note-taking." There was a small, uncomfortable silence, which Jim broke by heading to the refrigerator and taking out his meal. "Smells okay," he said, with teasing surprise.

"My repertoire isn't broad, but it is reliable," Blair said with a touch of offended dignity that had little to do with aspersions on his cooking and everything to do with the reminder that Jim wasn't always comfortable with 'note-taking'.

Jim nodded and reheated his meal, and sat at the table with it. He examined Blair a moment. "Like I said, Chief, Leon, that's his name, he gets antsy. You have to work on the trust thing with these people, you know?"

Blair nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I get it, man. You've got the shared military past thing going with him, and I'm not going to fit in with that vibe."

Jim smiled at that; an inclusive, reassuring expression. "No, I don't think that you'll fit in with that vibe, but you won't need to for your study anyway."

"That's a relief," Blair grumbled. "If you want me out of your buzz-cut hair, I need the chance to actually get some study done."

"No rush." Jim took another mouthful of his meal. "You have your good points."

Blair wandered the old house on Rochester Street, his beer bottle in his hand, impatient to finally reach the end of the hallway. He kept walking but the hallway only grew longer, like a Hitchcockian camera effect. "Jim?" he called. The hallway stretched off into dark infinity, and Blair's hand squeezed harder and harder around his bottle of beer, until it wasn't there anymore and it was just his hands clenched into useless fists. "Jim?" he called again, his steps faster and stumbling because the hall was tilting, and he stared down a long, dark fall with something grey and shimmering at the bottom of it; he screamed as he fell... and woke up in his bed, sweating, with his chest hurting from the way his heart pounded.

"Oh, man, that was a good one - not." He got out of bed and tried to shake the adrenaline out, jerking his arms in spastic, galvanised motions. It worked, barely, and suddenly cold, he wrapped his arms around himself, before he grabbed his old flannel bathrobe and headed out to the kitchen. The living area was lit by one low lamp, because Jim was up, dressed in an old t-shirt and sweatpants. "Oh, hey," Blair said. "What is this, insomniacs anonymous?"

"Something like that," Jim said. He sat with his back to Blair, and didn't look round, and that bothered Blair.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Jim did turn then. "Yeah, I'm fine, Sandburg. Just, like you said, insomniac." Blair stared. Jim didn't look like a man who couldn't sleep. He looked ill, grey-shadowed under his eyes, and so very tired.

"I had this shitty nightmare, so I'm making myself some tea. You want some?"

"Just how bad will it taste?"

"Better than the coffee in the PD break-room, and I've seen you drink that, so don't tell me you're fussy."

"Make your tea. I survived Ranger training, I guess I can survive whatever leaves you pour your hot water over."

Blair shook his head and grinned despite the surge of worry about Jim. He boiled the kettle, poured the water into the little pottery teapot that his mother had given him, and carried two steaming cups to the sofa where Jim was sprawled. "Here," Blair said, "one for you and one for me."

Jim took it and sipped. "I've had worse," he said, with gentle mockery. "Thanks, Chief." That wasn't mocking at all, and Blair sat in an armchair and sipped his own drink. Maybe Jim took in a little nourishment along with the nurture. By the end of his tea he no longer had that drawn, grey look that had bothered Blair.

"So I had a nightmare. What's your excuse?"

Jim shrugged. "Who knows? Sometimes you just don't sleep. At least this time I have someone to keep me company."

Blair relaxed into the comfort of the chair. "Company good," he grunted, gratified and embarrassed and covering it with a stupid caveman joke.

Jim fixed him with a tolerant expression over the rim of his cup, and Blair relaxed a little more. The last of the unsettled feeling of the dream dropped away. They sat in amicable silence, before Jim stood and said, "It's still a couple of hours before I have to get up. I'm going to try for some more sleep."

"Yeah, me too," Blair said. "G'night, Jim." He went back to his bed, and lay down and tried to sleep, but found that he couldn't. With a sigh, he sat up and grabbed some notes, and started reading and annotating. He became engrossed in his work until he realised that it was morning rather than the small hours, and there was the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen.

He got out of bed, and found Jim there. Jim grinned. "Sleep well?" he asked.

"I ended up doing some work," Blair said sheepishly.

"Enjoy that capacity to pull all-nighters," Jim said. "It starts wearing out once you get older." He pushed a cup of coffee across the table to Blair. "Although if you need an afternoon nap you're free to take one as far as I'm concerned. I'm following up on some options for Leon. I'm pretty hopeful that I can get him into some sort of shelter."

Something uneasy ran over Blair, reminiscent of the last night's unsettled feeling when he'd awakened. "You're getting pretty tied up with this guy," he said, making sure he kept it light, conversational.

"That a problem? Going to take away diss time?" It was snappish.

"No, no, it's cool. But people with those sorts of needs – they can be hard work."

"I'm not exactly scared of hard work, Sandburg."

"Of course not," Blair said soothingly. "But a homeless veteran – he's going to have a lot of issues."

“Which is why,” Jim said with heavy patience, “I want to get him into the shelter. It’s a start. I know I’m not a shrink, which is what he needs, but it’s a start. Why do you give a shit anyway?”

“Just taking an interest. A non-sentinel interest,” he said with emphasis. “Come on, we’re roomies. We kind of seem to be developing into friends. I’m taking an interest, that’s all.”

Jim stood, and threw the dregs of his coffee down the sink. “Yeah, okay, I get it. Sorry for biting your head off.”

“No problem,” Blair said, but Jim was already headed for the bathroom. In the silent room, Blair tried to figure out why he felt so uncomfortable whenever Jim mentioned Leon. So Jim was helping out someone vulnerable. It was admirable of him. It tied very neatly into some of Blair’s pet theories about sentinels. But it also reminded Blair of areas where insight into what made Jim tick was harder to achieve. Blair was never going to get what it meant to have been a soldier. Not like Leon. And Blair admitted to himself that he did like Jim. He liked him a lot and he wanted this developing friendship, despite all the pitfalls presented when Jim was his subject as well.

Maybe he should plan to meditate this afternoon. Get his head screwed on straight, and not feel like a kid locked out of the secret treehouse.

“This may not be tactful, but you look like shit.”

Jim rubbed his fingers between his brows, as if to wipe out the frown. “I’m tired.”

“So get some sleep,” Blair suggested, carefully placing his cup down between the piles of books and papers. This was a fraught suggestion – he’d heard Jim moving around the loft in the middle of the night at least a couple of nights this week.

“Maybe I will,” Jim said, and took himself upstairs with precision, like he was checking out that the steps hadn’t changed height on him. Blair dived into his work again – essays, never his favourite. He eventually put the last marked paper aside in triumph and yawned. It was getting late, even for him, and Blair was thinking about bed when he heard Jim’s steps on the floor above. Then Jim came quickly down the stairs and headed for the door without even looking at Blair.

“Jim!” Jim didn’t answer, only grabbed his jacket from the hook by the door. Blair stood, and called Jim’s name again, but Jim didn’t look back or even shut the door properly. “Hey, Jim, what the hell is it?” Blair yelled down the hall.

“Got a call from Leon,” Jim shot back, already halfway down the first flight of stairs, and Blair paused. Call? What call? Or had he been so lost in his work that he’d missed the sound of a phone or a pager? He stood undecided in the hallway, the back of his hand pressed to his mouth in thought, and then went back inside the loft and shut the door behind him, leaning against it and looking out over Jim’s orderly home. Did Blair have the right to be concerned over Jim’s middle of the night bolt, or was he getting just the littlest bit overinvested in knowing everything Jim Ellison did?

An animal's sound made him start. There was an owl, a big one, sitting on the edge of the balcony parapet. It stared in the loft window with unwavering avian disdain, as if it knew that it might be wasting its time but would make the effort anyway. Blair's skin crept, and the tension that filled his gut was fear, not humiliation. He remembered the silent presence which crossed his path outside the house on Rochester Street, and the bobbing shadow against the window that distracted him in that long, dark hallway.

"Oh, this isn't creepy at all," Blair said, and walked a few steps closer to the window. The owl shifted on its clawed feet, and Blair considered how in myth and legend owls shared the distinction of being harbingers of death and ill-fortune, and also totems of wisdom and truth. He figured that was understandable. Wisdom and truth often came at a price, and Blair just hoped that his truth wasn't that he was a needy, jealous little shit with a stupidly over-active imagination. He stared back at the owl, although he could never match the bird's unblinking intensity. The dark, enormous eyes turned to a reminiscent, mottled grey, and Blair took note of the cold that sliced through him and decided that making a fool of himself wasn't the worst risk he faced.

"Okay, okay. Messages from the great beyond it is." He grabbed his jacket and his keys and ran down the stairs and outside into the ordinary city night, which was lit with electricity and sounded gently with the whistle of the wind off the bay cutting corners around buildings. Just an ordinary night, but Blair wrenched his steering wheel hard towards the old residential section and Cascade's very own haunted house.

There was no lightning or rain when Blair pulled up outside the old house on Rochester Street, just the chilly wind that had travelled all the way off the sound, and a dark, cloudy sky hiding the moon and stars. Jim's car was parked there too, and Blair swallowed back some of the choicer exotic curses he knew as he scrambled out of his own car. Of course Jim was here. Blair had never doubted it from the moment he fled out the door of the loft.

And speaking of doors – he saw a shadow of movement at the big front doors at the top of the porch steps. He ran up the path, his feet thumping on the wooden steps leading up to the porch. He wasn't even that far behind Jim, he thought and grabbed at the door handle. The door stayed fast shut and the shock of the failed yank ran down from Blair's shoulder all the way to his hand as it slipped away.

"What the-"

He tried again. The door rattled, and he banged on the glass. "Hey, come on, Jim? Jim, do you hear me?"

There was no answer, not a sound; not so much as the barking of a dog. "Oh, come on!" Blair growled. He tried the big windows at the front of the porch – they remained stiffly shut. He hadn't brought a flashlight in his hurry, and he very much wished for one as he pounded down the porch steps and ran around the side of the building in the dark. Overgrown bushes impeded his way, snapping back from his extended hands to whip him in the face. There was no easy access anywhere, and finally, hoping that Jim would back him up when he found him, Blair put his foot through the glass of a small cellar window, scraping the shards from the bottom of the frame before he fumbled for the window catch. "Come on, come on," he muttered, and finally yanked the window frame up and out enough to climb through.

If it had been dark outside, it was Stygian inside. “Jim,” Blair called again, unpleasant thoughts beginning to crowd his head. Jim had mentioned that Leon knew something about drug dealers. What if this house was a meet of some sort? What if Leon had always planned to betray Jim, to get a cop? What if Blair was only going to make everything worse by simply being here – a hostage, a distraction? He listened, hard, and wished for sentinel hearing. His own ordinary hearing gave him nothing, and carefully, his hands outstretched in front of him, he stepped forward and promptly barked his shins on something – an old cupboard or table. “God damn it,” he said between his teeth, and then found a door, and cautiously felt his way through it.

It grew no less dark, and Blair cursed himself for being the biggest idiot on the planet, but the same urgency that had made him break the window pushed him on, even blind as he was. And then blindness ceased – not with the electric glare of a light bulb, but with something dull and silver shimmering in a room beyond, like the reflected shadows of water rippling on a wall. Blair followed it and rounded the door to find himself in a room he recognised – the cellar room where Jim had zoned the night the drug addict boy had died. Jim stood, one hand against the wall, still and wide-eyed, but with something in the angle of his body suggesting that he was trying to pull... away? Instead of bricks, Blair saw only shiny, mottled grey, a disturbed and dirty pool of liquid mercury slapped up against the wall. And Jim’s hand on in. In it.



“Jim?” It was actually a question, and quiet, as if the grey wall was a dangerous animal that shouldn’t be startled. “Jim,” Blair said, more loudly this time. Jim’s face crashed into animation as if he was a radio turned up from silent to blasting noise.

“Sandburg! Give me a hand here!”

Without thinking, Blair grabbed at Jim’s arm to haul him away. Cold shocked through him, the heart-stopping freeze of jumping into ice, and he fell back, not willingly. He simply could not keep his hold.

“Come on!” Jim insisted. “Help us!”

“Us? Who the hell is us?” Blair yelled, and then realised as soon as he’d opened his mouth.

“He’s stuck! Come on!”

Blair’s fists clenched in sheer, unexpected rage. He was quite certain now that ‘Leon’ was just a trap, a mirage; bait to bring Jim in. And even if he wasn’t, Blair knew Jim and not Leon, and he knew who his first priority was. It was maybe only split seconds that Blair waited, trying to figure it all out with the sharp-edged clarity of crisis.

“Jim. Give me your hand, man.” Blair grabbed for it, but missed. He was reminded of playing with magnets in science class – put the same poles together and they forever shoved each other away. “Jim. You have to give me your hand. Give me your hand!”

It came out an urgent bark, as Jim muttered, “He’s slipping…” and swung as if to put his free hand against the wall. But Jim’s movement was awkward and slow, and Blair knew - he just *knew* - that at some level Jim understood that what he was describing was unreal, a trick.

“Jim, what are you seeing? Come on, you’re the guy with the deep-down sensory ability. What are you really seeing here? What are you touching?”

Jim paused. Instead of the blankness or the urgency, there was a dawning, confused horror on his face.

“Sandburg?”

“Come on, Jim. Just trust me and take my fucking hand, will you? Come on!”

There was a pause that stretched the ages of a skidding car, of ice cracking underfoot, and then Jim lunged for Blair’s hand. There was that same stupefying shock of cold. Blair wanted to cry out but he had no strength for anything except keeping his grip locked on Jim’s hand.

“Jim, let go of Leon. Let go of him, he’s not real, let him go!”

Distressed fury crossed Jim’s face – anger at Blair’s demand, and the last disbelief that he could have been fooled so deeply. Blair crushed his qualms that he was wrong and that there really was someone on the other side who needed their help. If there was, they’d worry about it after Jim was out. His other hand was buried well past the wrist in the greyness, and Blair hauled back with everything in him.

“Why would I lie, Jim? Please. Let go of him. Let go.”

Jim turned his face away from Blair, looking into that grey, greedy space. Blair couldn’t see Jim’s expression, but he knew the moment that Jim made the choice; the mingled tension and surrender. Blair pulled with renewed desperation, and they tumbled to the floor in a bruising tangle. There was sound – Blair didn’t know how to describe it, something very loud,

an earth sound, and the winged thrum of disturbed air. There was a corpse-light flash, and then darkness, and a silence broken by two men panting for breath on a concrete floor.

“Holy shit!” Blair kept repeating it, his stupid mantra, until Jim’s voice rose into the darkness.

“Sandburg, just shut up, okay. Take a few deep breaths and calm down.”

“I am calm,” Blair said. “I am perfectly calm. Oh god, I’m a mess.” He struggled for control and blew out a slow breath. “I am calm,” he told himself. “What about you?” He wriggled, embarrassed by the way that he and Jim were caught up together, until he realised that Jim’s hands were clenched into his clothes just as much as Blair held fast to him. “Oh, man, that was a *trip*.”

“I’m okay,” Jim said. He sounded flatly exhausted in contrast to Blair’s wired come-down from his adrenaline rush.

“Truly? Truly okay? Not that I can tell because I can’t see a thing.” He let go of Jim’s jacket and tried to move, and heard the small grunt from Jim as he poked him with his elbow. “Oh, sorry, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I figure I owe you. What’s a couple of bruises after that?”

“Can we get out of here? Can’t see a damn thing.” Blair’s breathing was almost steady again, but his heart still beat hard. There was a sense of quietus in this dark room, but Blair didn’t see any need to hang around. It was time to go while the going was good. He felt movement in the dark – Jim rising to his feet and hauling Blair up with him.

“Come on, Chief. It’s this way.” Blair was led unerringly up the stairs, and out into the front hall to the door, which Jim unlatched and opened. They stepped out into the comparative light of the street and Jim shut the door behind them. Everything was peaceful.

“So how come you could get in the door? I had to break a window.”

“How the hell would I know, Sandburg?” Jim looked at his watch. “It’s three o’clock in the morning and I don’t even remember driving here.”

“Are you okay to drive back?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I’m okay.”

Jim would say that, wouldn’t he? But Blair nodded himself in answer, and said, “So we’ll head back to your place then?”

“Yeah.” The two of them descended the porch steps.

“So much for the neighbourhood watch,” Jim said, looking back at the house.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Blair said, thinking of the soft whirring of wings. “I’ll tell you my side of the story when we get home.” That made him pause a moment, but Jim said nothing, gave Blair no looks, and Blair let the moment pass over him. They walked to their cars, and Blair waited for Jim to pull out, following behind him, watchful still. But they made it back without incident, parked their cars, climbed the stairs to the loft and walked into peaceful normalcy.

"I'm making coffee," was the first thing Blair said. "I don't care if it is the wee hours."

Jim gestured agreement and sank onto his couch, staring out the windows at the lights across the water. He said nothing, but it was a present silence all the same.

"Here," Blair said when the coffee was ready. He handed Jim his cup and then sat next to him on the couch, pushing himself into the corner of the seat. It felt good to have something at his back, and he resisted, just, the urge to kick off his shoes and curl his knees up to his chest like a scared kid. "That was something different."

Jim raised one eyebrow, sardonic as well as exhausted. "You think?"

They both sipped their coffee, synchronised almost.

"You said you didn't remember driving. Do you remember anything about Leon?" Blair knew that would be an awkward question. He asked it anyway; driven by concern and a less than ethical curiosity. His mind buzzed with ideas and questions – he'd have to make an excuse to visit Lisa in Pullman. She was studying molecular plant sciences at WSU but she had a closeted but enthusiastic interest in the paranormal. Yes, he definitely needed to catch up with Lisa.

Irritated disgust crossed Jim's face at the thought of Leon. "I do and I don't. I know that I was meeting with him, talking with him, but it's sort of... foggy now. Which makes sense, as far as anything about this makes sense." He stared morosely into his cup with a hang-dog expression that moved Blair to say the first thing that came into his head.

"It doesn't make you a schmuck just because you fell for a lie, Jim. It just means that whatever that... *thing* was knew what would get you. That you're a good man who'd want to help someone you thought was in trouble. You're good at that. Hell, look at me and Larry."

"Chief, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm glad that I don't have to look at Larry anymore."

Blair laughed shakily, clutching his cup firmly. It wouldn't do to spill coffee over Jim's upholstery. "Fair enough." They talked a little longer. Blair mentioned Lisa and Jim told him to knock himself out with the investigation but to leave his name out of it. They went to bed, even though there wasn't that much left of the night.

Blair dropped into a heavy sleep almost immediately, as if there were weights attached to him. I'm dreaming, he thought, I'm not there. But he still looked down the long hallway to the grey shimmer at the end of it and struggled for breath and freedom, caught in empty falling space and his sheets at the same time. And then something soft drifted over his face and he woke, starting upright in his bed with the lamplight from the living area filtering through the little window. His hands found it on the covers in front of him – a feather, barred white and soft brown, about eight inches long. He picked it up and twirled it between thumb and fingers, thoughtful, before he placed it in a little pot that Naomi had given him. Then he went back to bed and lay there, rested and unafraid until it was time to get up.