

# Tick Tock

Vid by Staratesg1971

Story by Arianna

*Inspired by the wonderful vid created by Beth (stargatesg1971)*

*for the Reverse Bang 2015*

*Seriously, this story pretty much told itself!*

Ear-splitting explosive weapons' fire ripped through the busy bank: short bursts tearing holes in walls and ceiling, deafening in the closed space, utterly disorienting. Shocked, terrified employees and customers, confused by the violence, not understanding, froze for a horrified heartbeat.

The gray-haired guard, gun still in its holster, was down by the door, bleeding his life onto the cold marble floor.

Silence erupted into chaos: women screaming, people diving to the floor, scrambling for cover behind marble islands, desks, chairs. Two young, female tellers, trembling with fear but focused on getting help, stomped on the alarm buttons beneath their counters.

Masked, armed men garbed in camo swarmed around the room, encircling everyone, waving automatic weapons, carrying canvas bags. One tall attacker yelled, "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" even as he fired another short, sharp burst into the ceiling, prompting more screams and panicked, sobbing pleas for mercy. He grabbed a well-dressed, fair-haired, fortyish woman, held her close, his gun pressed to her head. "Shut up!" he yelled again. "Shut up or I'll blow her head off!"

A second, sudden, shocked silence broken only by muffled weeping filled the high-ceilinged bank, silence so profound that many could hear the tick of the large round clock on the wall as the minute hand moved a notch.

Wide-eyed with fright, people gaped from the floor at the attackers, holding their breath, wondering with sick horror if they were all going to die.

Armed men moved quickly behind the counter, shoved tellers out of the way, dumped money into their bags. The tellers stood back, watching, helpless, hands in the air, pale, panting for breath, desperately trying to remain calm. The bank manager, a paunchy Caucasian with thinning brown hair, slowly stood from his desk, hands in the air. "Please, don't hurt anyone else," he begged.

Unexpectedly, the front doors swung open as two Brinks guards entered, one middle-aged and watchful, the other, young, dark-skinned and clean-shaven. They carried heavy bags,

walking with a brisk, confident stride that stumbled into stunned awareness of the danger. Bags hit the floor with heavy thuds and both guards reflexively reached for the revolvers on their hips. Weapons' fire laid them both out between one breath and another.

A siren wailed thinly in the distance.

The invaders grabbed the bags, raced out the door. The tall leader dragged the terrified woman he still held close with him as he backed out. Outside, they piled into the Brinks armored truck and roared off down the street. The manager hustled toward the fallen guards, yelling to his staff to call for ambulances. Two bystanders, a black male and a Latina woman, knelt to do what they could for the wounded men. Three men and a woman punched numbers into their cellphones. People wept in the relief of being safe. Everyone was still trembling from the adrenaline that had flooded their bodies, all talking at once.

Unnoticed now in the chatter of relief, the low moans of the wounded, the clock ticked off another minute: only the fourth minute since the first burst of gunfire.

"Ellison, Sandburg, my office!" Simon yelled.

Jim looked up from a report he was writing, wondering at the note of urgency in Banks' voice. Blair glanced at him, his expression indicating his own curiosity as they stood and swiftly crossed the bullpen. When they entered the office, he was on the phone. Simon held up a floppy disk, scowled at Sandburg and motioned toward his computer.

Blair swiftly circled the desk, taking the square piece of plastic and sticking it into the slot in the tower, even as Simon shifted his chair to make space for him, all while still talking on the phone.

"Yes, sir, I assure you I'm putting my people on it right now. Yes, I'll definitely keep you posted." He hung up and irritably stubbed out a cigar that was burning in the ashtray. "You get that thing to work yet?" he demanded as he rose to peer over Blair's shoulder.

"Captain, what's going on?" Jim asked, his voice tight with the urgency he was picking up from Banks.

"Robbery five minutes ago at the First National Bank at Jefferson and Hope Boulevard; got away with an armored truck, thirteen and a half million in cash, certificates and gems, and a woman hostage. One of the customers had one of those new-fangled digital cameras and managed to get part of the action. Uniforms at the scene had him make a copy at the bank and just rushed it over. You got it working yet, Sandburg?"

Blair lifted his hands, straightening with a quick, "Yeah, here it is." His eyes widened as he watched the short clip of an armed, masked man grabbing a woman and putting a gun to her head. "Oh, my God!" he gasped. But that was all that was on the clip.

"Not enough to ID the perp," Jim muttered. But he frowned. "Play it again," he directed Blair. After the short clip played out a second time, he shook his head. "Something about the woman," he said, eyes narrowing in thought. "She looks familiar – do we know who she is?"

Simon shook his head. "Not yet. Nobody in the bank recognized her. Just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's an APB out on the armored car."

"Shouldn't take long to spot something that distinctive," Blair said.

Joel appeared in the doorway. "Simon, just got a tip. The armored car has been found parked in a lot about a mile from the bank."

"Let's roll," Simon replied. As he strode past Joel, Jim and Blair on his heels, he called over his shoulder, "Nobody is to approach the vehicle until we get there."

Less than ten minutes later, Simon hit the brakes just outside the barrier of patrol cars fanned around the armored car. Jim was opening the passenger door before the vehicle had fully stopped. Simon threw the transmission into park and was out of the car, right behind Jim.

Blair hastened to slide out of the back, but he'd barely stood in front of the open door when Simon, moving around the hood, pointed a finger at him and snapped, "Stay here, Sandburg."

Blair gaped at him, wanting to argue that he should stick near Jim, who had pushed past the small crowd of uniforms and had already taken a knee next to a Dodge pickup parked about fifty feet from the armored car, his head tilted as he listened intently.

But Simon had already moved on, to crouch near Jim. "Anything?" he asked with a worried glance at the armored vehicle. "Is the hostage still inside?"

Jim shook his head. "I'm not hearing anything, Captain."

They stood, moving cautiously toward the sturdy vehicle, Jim still listening for sounds, opening his other senses to pick up any clues. Inhaling deeply, he immediately identified a scent that shouldn't be there just as he heard a voice whisper, "Gotcha!" Wheeling around, Jim urgently shoved Simon backward, shouting to the other cops, "Get back! Bomb –"

The blast erupted from the armored car, ripping apart steel plates; the shockwave caught them, tossing Jim and Simon like ragdolls into the air and then slamming them into the pavement. Cops not protected behind their patrol cars were blown backwards. Blair, well behind the line, having done nothing more than close the door of Simon's car and stand beside it, still felt the blast, the hot wind rushing past, banging him back against the vehicle.

"Jim!" he cried, shoving his way past the milling uniforms. "Jim," he demanded, bending to help Ellison, who seemed dazed, though he was already trying to stand, "are you alright?" He put his arm around Jim's waist, to steady him.

"What?" Jim demanded, leaning against Blair's sturdy strength. Shaking his head and rubbing one ear, he held his other hand out to Simon, to help him stand and added, "Can't hear anything."

“Figures,” Blair muttered but pointed to the ruined armored car, then tossed his arm into the air before cupping the hand over his ear. “It’s the bomb,” he said with clear enunciation along with each gesture. “It’s messed with your hearing. Probably temporary.”

Jim frowned, squinting at Blair’s lips as he talked; after a moment, he nodded, seeming to understand. He turned to Simon. “Are you alright?”

“What?” Simon bellowed. “Can’t hear a damned thing.”

Blair grinned in spite of himself. It’d been a near miss, but it looked as if they’d gotten off with stains on their coats and a temporary loss of hearing. If volume was anything to go by, Simon was evidently just fine, and Jim seemed generally unhurt, too. His relief was very nearly overwhelming.

“What are you smiling about?” Simon demanded, surly with impotent anger, but he turned away, not waiting for an answer. Gesturing to the uniforms, he called, “See if there’re any bodies in the wreckage.”

Jim was scanning the area, searching for the man to go with the voice he’d heard just before the blast. He caught a glimpse of camo as a big man slid into muddy SUV, plates too dirty to read any but the first few numbers. There were others in the vehicle, but he couldn’t tell if any were the hostage – though he got a flash of light hair as the SUV raced around the nearest corner – and he couldn’t hear a damned thing.

“There!” he called to a nearby sergeant. “A muddy SUV, gray, I think. First three numbers were five, one, eight. Just turned down Montgomery.”

The sergeant nodded and ran to put out the APB before pulling out, sirens blaring and lights flashing, to give chase.

Jim’s jaw flexed in frustration. “They’ll be long gone. Who the hell are these guys?”

“What?” Simon demanded even as he rubbed his ears. “They were waiting for us,” he growled. “This was an ambush.”

“What?” Jim asked, tilting his head as if that would help clear his hearing.

Simon just shook his head and pointed toward his car.

Simon headed to Forensics, to see if they could track the call that had led them to the armored car, and to put a priority on whatever they found in the rubble of the explosion. There’d been no obvious evidence that the hostage had been inside when it blew but, given the force of the explosion, Simon wasn’t sure the poor woman wouldn’t have been vaporized. Only Forensics would be able to tell for sure.

Blair followed Jim off the elevator.

“We gotta catch a break with the license,” Jim said over his shoulder as he led the way across the corridor and into the bullpen. “You get on the computer and I’ll check wants and warrants, and reports of stolen vehicles.”

Blair pulled up the Washington state DMV website and input Jim's badge number and password to run the make and model – so far as they could guess – and the first three digits on the plate. "This could take hours," Blair muttered as numbers started to roll up the screen. Leaving the machine to do its work, he turned to see how Jim was doing just as he hung up the phone. "Anything?"

Jim sniffed and shook his head. "Nothing," he reported.

"How's your hearing?" Blair asked.

"Uh, it's coming back," Jim replied, distracted as he rubbed the back of his neck. "We've got nothing on these guys," he grated. "Except," he added with a frown as he gazed sightlessly at Blair, "the hostage. I keep thinking she looked familiar."

"Yeah? Do you think you've seen her somewhere, like in a store? Or maybe remember her from one of your cases?"

Jim grimaced in thought, but finally shook his head. "I don't know. I can't ... damn it!"

"Hey, easy, man," Blair counseled. "You know the harder you try to remember something, the harder it is. Relax, let it go. It'll come to you."

When Jim glared at him, he threw up his hands in surrender. "Just trying to help," he said with a nervous grin.

Jim rolled his eyes, but then seemed to force himself to relax. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry, Chief. It's just this case. I feel like we're being led around by the nose, here. We get an anonymous tip that nearly gets us blown up; that can't be just a coincidence."

"I know, I get it," Blair replied, sobering, his brow bunching in worry. "Like Simon, you think it was a setup. But who? Why?"

"Exactly," Jim agreed, his tone grim. "Who and why?"

"Maybe we just need to slow down, give ourselves some time to think," Blair suggested. "It's been less than an hour since the heist, and all we've been doing is running around, reacting."

Jim gave him a tight nod of agreement, but sighed heavily. "The clock is ticking, Chief. Slowing down won't help us save that hostage – if she's even still alive."

Blair didn't have anything to say to that, just bowed his head and bit his lip, his shoulders slumping in discouragement. "God, that poor woman," he breathed. "She must be terrified. I know I would be. I sure hope she's okay."

"You an' me both, Chief," Jim grated as he turned to check the computer, only to see words and numbers still swiftly scrolling up the screen.

Just then, as Simon strode through the bullpen toward his office, Rafe looked up from his phone. "Hey! Dispatch says a patrol spotted an SUV that looks like the getaway vehicle on Bayshore near the docks. It's parked outside a derelict house on the edge of the warehouse district."

Simon snapped, "Tell them to observe but not approach. Call Joel, the bomb squad and SWAT. This time we're not going to rush in like fools. This time, we go prepared for anything."

Half an hour later, Simon drew to a stop at the observation post the patrol had set up at the corner, a half block away from the SUV and the dilapidated house. He and Joel were exiting the vehicle when Jim and Blair pulled up behind him and climbed out of the truck. Blair took in the boarded up windows, the scruffy yard of overgrown clumps of grass and windblown refuse. "Talk about your average haunted house," he observed with a shudder. The place gave him the creeps.

Ignoring him, Jim moved forward, past Simon's car, his head tilted as he strained to hear whatever might be happening inside the house. Behind them, the SWAT van pulled up, trailed by the bomb squad's heavily armored truck.

"It's like a parade," Blair muttered, feeling almost sick with tension. He pulled his hair free of the tie he'd been wearing all day and raked his fingers through the loose curls, hoping the feel of the wind in his hair would help him relax. While Simon and Joel went back to the SWAT van to swiftly pull on vests and caps and arm themselves with automatic rifles, Blair moved forward to stand close to Jim. "You getting anything?"

"Nah," Jim replied with a scowl as he rubbed his ears. "I'm still a bit deaf from the explosion earlier. I had my hearing wide open when it blew. Still do, or I wouldn't hear a word you're saying."

"You what?" Blair exclaimed. "You didn't tell me that! Man, maybe we need to retool your dial or get your ears checked out."

"No time for that right now, Sandburg," Jim retorted as he abruptly turned away to join Simon and Joel, also donning a vest and PD cap before checking out an automatic weapon.

Simon ordered the patrol officers to move in to within one hundred feet of the property, encircling the building to ensure that, if anyone was in there, they wouldn't escape this time. Then he waved the SWAT team to follow him and Jim as they moved forward, past the line of patrol officers, dropping into a crouching advance.

Blair stayed behind at the corner, feeling helpless and impotent. These were the moments he hated most, the moments when his friends moved into danger and he couldn't do a damned thing but watch. Everything had gotten so quiet that he could hear the rumble of traffic on the highway two blocks over. A semi hauling a trailer came down the wide street to turn in the opposite direction, along the cracked and uneven pavement toward the row of warehouses. Distracted by the grinding gears, Blair flicked a look over his shoulder to check it out.

He saw her. Or he was pretty sure it was her. The woman from the bank. The hostage. She was stumbling down the road, past the nearest grimy warehouse.

"Oh, man," he gasped. "Where are you going?" He turned, to call to Jim and Simon, but they were intent upon the assault on the house, too far to hear him unless he shouted and if he

did that, he might alert whoever was inside – assuming the numerous law enforcement vehicles and cops arrayed around the little house hadn't already blown any surprise assault. Whatever. Simon would rip him a new one if he compromised the mission.

But he couldn't just let her go. She'd turned down the access road to the docks, past the row of warehouses and he'd already lost sight of her. Muttering to himself, Blair set out after her in a loping run to catch up with her. "She's probably confused, terrified. Might even be hurt. Why else would she be running away from all the official vehicles that fairly scream, 'COPS!'"

He spotted her immediately when he turned the corner. She was limping quickly along the side of the lane in front of the second warehouse on the right. Just then, the semi turned into an alley on the far side of the first warehouse, blocking his view of the fleeing woman. "Damn it," he growled and sped up, swinging wide to see past the slow moving truck. "Where'd she go?"

Running flat out, he passed the end of the truck. A quick look down that alley showed nothing but the truck and rows of empty wooden crates abandoned outside the loading docks. Blair kept going, past the second warehouse. He caught a glimpse of her toward the end of the alley that ran between the filthy second and third warehouse buildings. Peeling paint and streaks of rust bled down the walls from the rooflines, windows high up were either boarded up or encrusted with dirt, their frames rusted shut. Tufts of hardy weeds pushed up through the loose gravel between the buildings. Bits of paper blew across the alleyway that was strewn with broken bottles and plastic water bottles.

"Hey, Lady!" he shouted. "Hey, wait!" She stumbled but kept going, maybe thinking he was one of her attackers trying to catch her. In moments, she'd disappeared around the far corner of the building. Blair was so intent on following, hurrying to catch up with her, that he didn't see the big man in camo step out of the shadows of the looming warehouse on the other side of the alley. He'd just slowed as he came to the corner, to look before he ran into whatever was on the other side, when he was blindsided, cold-cocked. He dropped like a stone.

Blair didn't hear the ripping, ear-splitting blast of the explosion behind him, a block away.

Or see the roaring flames and roiling black cloud that filled the sky.

Simon and Joel stood with their backs to the fiery remains of the derelict house, waiting for the fire department to put out the flames. Thick, suffocating smoke swirled thickly around them, and the blistering heat was stifling.

"Thank God we didn't just rush in like we nearly did with the rigged armored car," Simon said, low and tight, rigid from the adrenaline still flushing his system with the need to act when all he could do was watch and wait – and be grateful to be still breathing after having been very nearly blown up for the second time in as many hours.

He and Joel were focused on all the activity around them and across the street, on who was there, watching – and who might have been the perp who'd triggered the explosion. But no one raised any suspicions. The onlookers had come out of surrounding houses or from one

of the several nearby warehouses, curious as people are, fascinated by the fire, but they all looked clueless. Simon glanced at Jim, who was doing his own surveillance of the crowd, his head tilted, maybe to listen for guilty whispers or pounding anxious heartbeats; though how he could hear anything beyond the roar of the flames and the sensory chaos of the firefighting going on around them was hard to imagine.

“Why isn’t Sandburg...” he muttered, nearly blurting out the kid’s role in helping Jim stay grounded and focused. Frowning, he looked around, searching now, the frown growing with the realization that Sandburg wasn’t there. “Jim!” he called, striding toward his detective.

Jim pulled himself out of the depths of his concentration, feeling slightly disoriented by all the noise and smoke until he rebalanced his senses as he turned toward Banks. “What?” he asked, instantly alert at the expression of worry on Simon’s face.

“Where’s Sandburg?” Simon asked. “Have you seen him since the explosion?”

Jim blinked in surprise and then looked around with a growing anxiety. “No,” he said, “I haven’t seen him. What the –”

Simon laid a steadying hand on his shoulder even as he exchanged a worried look with Joel. “Look, let’s not rush to any conclusions, here. We need to check with the uniforms, see if they saw where he went. He must’ve had a good reason for leaving the scene.”

Jim swallowed hard, his jaw flexing as he strove for control. “You’re assuming he left of his own accord,” he growled.

“Hey, c’mon,” Joel coaxed, his tone studiously calm. “We all know Blair wouldn’t be dragged off without kicking up one hell of a fuss. He’s gotta be around here somewhere. Maybe he spotted someone approaching the scene and warned them to stay back while we were investigating the house. Maybe ... maybe he saw something and got curious.”

Jim glared at him. “Maybe,” he grated, but then he shook his head, evidently forcing himself to remain objective. “You’re right. Doesn’t help to jump to conclusions. It’s just ... it’s just I feel like we’re being set up here, that someone is out to get us. The robbery, now that was one thing. But the bombs triggered just as we get into range? Something’s going on here; something feels personal about all this.” Impatiently, he looked around, tilted his head to listen, chewing helplessly on his lip as he stared at the spot where he’d left Blair standing barely half an hour before.

“Anything?” Simon asked. Joel gave him a sharp look of enquiry but remained silent.

“Nothing,” Jim replied, his gaze still scanning the area. “He’s not here.” Meeting Simon’s dark eyes, Jim gestured toward their vehicles. “I’ll ask the uniforms if he said anything or if anyone saw when he left, which direction he went; see if I can pick up his trail.”

Hands on his hips, forcing down his rising worry about Sandburg and his growing conviction that the kid had been taken right from under their noses, Simon just nodded and watched Jim jog away from the destruction toward the cops maintaining order on the perimeter.

“You think they have him, don’t you?” Joel asked, concern heavy in his voice.

“Yes, yes, I do,” Simon admitted with clipped, impotent anger. “Whoever the hell ‘they’ are.”



He glared with disgust at the smoldering ruin that would have been their crypt if they hadn't been smart, hadn't sent in one of the bomb squad mobile units to get a look inside. The unit had triggered something almost immediately – maybe a tripwire, maybe a motion detector. The place had gone up in one hell of a blast. Banks shook his head. “We're not doing any good here. I'll have some of the uniforms help Jim with a search of the area, see if they can find anyone who saw Sandburg. We need to get back to the office; it's time to find out if any of our fanclub has been released from prison recently.”

“Prison or a psych ward,” Joel added. “This has the feel of, I don't know, a pyromaniac, maybe. Someone who sure likes fire and things that go boom.”

“Yeah,” Simon sighed as he pulled out a cigar. “Not like we haven't met a few of those over the years.”

Jim's fear and frustration over Blair's inexplicable disappearance, despite being practically surrounded by cops, grew markedly over the next twenty minutes as he prowled the area around the still smoldering embers of the explosion. He'd sent patrol cops in the four directions to seek out anyone who might have seen the observer, but if anyone had, they weren't talking. Unwilling to let it go at that, Jim stalked the sidewalks and then circled around the warehouses, eyes scouring the ground, nose scenting the air, seeking any sign of his friend.

Blair groaned and rubbed his jaw before opening his eyes, wondering what the hell had hit him; it felt like hammers were using the inside of his skull for an anvil. When he did look around, squinting against the pain, he frowned in confusion, wondering where the hell he was. Light leaked in through a hole torn from the wall beside the battered door. Concrete side walls were layered with graffiti, and rubbish covered most of the floor.

Rolling to push himself up on an elbow, Blair was glad to see – and smell – that the rubbish was mostly paper – old newspapers and magazines – and broken wooden pallets, rather than rotting organic garbage harboring only the gods knew what disease or, he shuddered, rodents. The place had the look and stink of body odor that characterized a rough shelter for someone homeless; not much but better than sleeping under a bridge. Or maybe it was just used a lot to lock up unwelcome visitors like him. Pulling himself back from his meandering thoughts, he told himself the history of the place didn't matter. The priority was to find a way out.

He stood, dizzy and still a bit disoriented; feeling hot in the small confined space, he pulled off his jacket. Keeping one hand on a wall for balance, he prowled around the small area, kicking the refuse, looking for something, anything, he could use. In the corner to the left of the door, Blair heard something metallic scrape the concrete floor. Squatting, he brushed away the pile of torn cardboard and crumpled newspaper, encouraged to find a rusted crowbar.

“Now that's more like it,” he murmured as he hefted it. Wouldn't be much use against guns, but a length of solid iron was better than nothing.

There were no windows, but the back wall had been hacked at, creating a small aperture. Curious, he moved across the small space and peered into the darkness beyond, dimly making out the interior of a warehouse. Squinting, he saw rubber boots and ... shit! Was that a stack of dynamite and C4 next to a can of kerosene? There were shelves loaded with all kinds of stuff, and empty wooden pallets.

Someone crossed his line of sight, a man, startling him. Blair could only see part of his back; he realized he'd never be able to identify the guy. Backing away quietly, not wanting to draw unnecessary attention to himself, he turned back to the door. He wasn't surprised to find it locked. But he heard voices and bent down to peer out through the narrow ragged opening that had been hacked into the wall next to the door.

Blair nearly yelled with relief when he saw it was Jim, but then he realized his friend was talking to three armed, very big and burly men. Listening closely, he heard one introduce himself and the others as warehouse watchmen. "You looking for something? Maybe we can help," the stranger offered.

Given what was in the warehouse behind him, Blair didn't harbor any illusions that the watchmen might be good guys. Worse, if they suspected Jim knew anything, he wouldn't have a chance of drawing his weapon before they'd be on him.

"Hey, Jim, it's me, behind you," Blair whispered, just barely audible, to ensure the bad guys wouldn't hear him. "Be careful; there're explosives in the warehouse, man."

Watching closely, Blair couldn't see any indication that Jim had heard him.

Jim pulled out his badge. "I'm with Cascade PD. I'm looking for a guy with long hair, leather jacket. Any of you see him? Would've been in the last half hour or so."

There was a chorus of negative replies. Then the apparent spokesperson said, "Cop, huh? Anything to do with that explosion on the next block? Is this guy you're looking for the bomber?"

Explosion? Blair wondered with a jolt of surprise. What explosion?

"No, no, nothing like that," Jim assured them.

"Jim!" Blair tried again, slightly louder, but he didn't dare call out. Frowning, he wondered what was wrong that Jim wasn't hearing him. Then he remembered Jim's ears had been wide open when the armored car blew and he'd had trouble hearing after. He'd said his hearing was still wide open the last time Blair had seen him. If he'd been close to yet another explosion, it was a wonder he could hear anything at all.

"Well, thanks for your time," Jim said. "Here's my card. If you see him, his name is Blair Sandburg. Give me a call."

"Damn it," Blair gusted with helpless despair as he watched Jim walk away. The watchmen trailed behind him, not so subtly escorting Jim away from the property and, well, him.

"At least they're not coming in here to beat me up some more," Blair muttered, trying to find a vestige of a silver lining. Some days, it really wasn't all that easy to look on the bright side. He listened for footsteps, or any sounds that would indicate the men were returning, but

there was nothing. No doubt, they'd be yukking it up that the big dumb cop didn't know the guy he was looking for was right behind him. Hilarious.

Blair looked at the crowbar in his hand and then at the hole punched into the back wall. If he tried to widen the hole in the crumbling masonry by the door, the watchmen patrolling outside might well hear him or happen by long before he enlarged it enough to escape. On the other hand, there was no telling how many people might be in the dark warehouse. The very fact that it was dark, though, might indicate that, for now at least, it wasn't in active use. For all he knew, the guy he'd seen might be the only guy back there, just picking up supplies and leaving again.

Either way, he figured he might well be jumping from hot water directly into the fire. But he couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

Once again, Blair approached the back wall and peered through the hole. Not seeing anyone, he prodded at the wall and discovered it was drywall, much lighter in construction than the outside wall of masonry. "Well, I guess this is the way out," he mused as he pulled some pieces loose with his hand.

Listening, not hearing any reaction from the other side, he wedged in the crowbar, leaned his weight on it and pulled.

The loud tearing sound could have awakened the dead.

Certain he'd be discovered, Blair stopped, gripping the crowbar tightly, and held his breath. But silence prevailed. He blew a long slow breath of relief.

And then he resumed work to create an opening large enough for him to squeeze through.

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As he walked away from the warehouse, back toward the main street, Jim had an indefinable sense that he was missing something. There'd been an itchy feeling of proximity at one point beside one of the warehouses, the second one on the right, not all that far from the building that had been blown to kingdom come. But the sudden arrival of several 'watchmen' had distracted him, even as their very presence confirmed that there was likely something not quite kosher about the building – there were too many men, too well armed, too eager to tell him that he was wasting his time, too anxious to hasten him on his way.

Whether the 'something' possibly illegal in the warehouse had anything to do with Sandburg's disappearance or was simply ordinary contraband was anyone's guess. Still, Jim didn't believe in coincidences. Especially not with this case where everything was so damned nebulous despite the major heist, the kidnapping, and two massive explosions. There were no clues, no leads to who was behind it or why.

Lingering on the street corner, sightlessly looking back at the still smoldering ruin of the blasted house, Jim tried to grasp what it was that had given him the feeling that he was close to Sandburg. Couldn't've been his hearing; two explosions little more than an hour apart had left his ears ringing so badly it took all he had to hear anything at all. Might have been scent, but his sense of smell was overwhelmed, again by the explosions and fires, the smoke still

thick in the air. The stench of the dumpsters in the alleys and the heavy reek of perspiration from the so-called watchmen hadn't helped.

Whatever it was, he just couldn't grasp it. Maybe if Sandburg was there, he could come up with some weird way of isolating his memories, but Sandburg's very absence was part of his difficulty concentrating. Jim's sense of urgency clawed at him, making it even harder to focus, to concentrate. Two hostages had now been taken – because he was sure Blair's disappearance was related to whatever the hell was going on. But there'd been no ransom request, no approach of any kind to negotiate the woman's release. Jim didn't want to think about how that could mean that she was already dead.

"Damn it!" he cursed as he rubbed the back of his neck to ease the tension in his muscles. "We don't even know her name."

How the hell had they taken his partner without Blair kicking up some kind of fuss, shouting, yelling to the nearby uniforms for help? Scowling as he looked around and tried to visualize various scenarios, Jim finally decided that, somehow, they'd lured Blair away from the immediate protection of the uniforms. He had to have left of his own accord, at least until he was out of sight of any help, and then they'd ... what? Swallowing heavily, Jim told himself Blair was still alive. If they were going to kill him, why not just a drive-by shooting? Or ... well, if he was dead, there'd be a body. What would be the point of killing him and hiding the body?

Sighing heavily, Jim shook his head. The longer it took to find the kid....

Refusing to go there, he turned away from the warehouses and jogged back to his truck. Maybe the automated DMV search had come up with results that might give them a lead. The exploding building had torched the SUV, and the scorching heat had melted the plates to the point where there was no telling what the license number had been. Exasperated, Jim berated himself for not making note of the complete number before all hell had broken loose.

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Scowling with worry and frustration, Simon and Joel stalked into Major Crime only to be brought up short in surprise; Sheila Irwin from Internal Affairs was pacing impatiently in Simon's office. Brown and Rafe just shrugged when Simon glanced askance at them.

Rhonda said quietly, "She's been here, waiting for you to come back, for the past fifteen minutes."

"Now what?" Simon muttered as he pointed Joel toward the machine that was still spewing DMV information and then strode into his office. He pasted on a strained smile of collegiality, as he closed the door. Still garbed in his overcoat, he leaned against his desk as he said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Lt. Irwin; it's been a busy day. Was there something I can help you with?"

Crossing her arms, Sheila studied him for a long moment.

Heaving a sigh, wishing he could light up a cigar, Simon gestured impatiently for her to get on with it. "If you don't mind, I don't have all day. We've got two people kidnapped, a major heist, two explosions –"

“Two people?” Sheila cut in, her arms dropping in surprise.

Simon nodded, grimacing. “We think they grabbed Sandburg.”

“Blair’s been taken...?” Sheila frowned and shook her head. “This makes no sense.”

“Perhaps if you could enlighten me as to what’s on your mind, I could maybe help make it all make sense?” Simon probed, his impatient tone thinly edged with sarcasm.

“Sorry,” she replied, meeting his gaze. “Half an hour ago, Internal Affairs got an anonymous tip that you and Ellison were behind the robbery and bombings.”

“What!” Simon exclaimed, straightening in outrage. “Did you trace the call?”

“There wasn’t time. However, we did learn that large deposits were made to both of your accounts – a quarter of a million each.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Simon gusted, confused by the information. “We’ve had the sense that someone is orchestrating events, playing with us, leading us into ambushes but ... if they’re trying to kill us, why would they bother putting half a million dollars into our accounts?”

Sheila narrowed her eyes as she studied him. “Sounds like a lot of money, but it’s a pittance compared to the millions they scored in the armored car heist. I think it’s some kind of setup, to discredit the both of you.”

“But who? Why?” Simon demanded. “And why would they take Sandburg?”

“Maybe they’re trying for leverage. Do Ellison or Major Crime have any cases coming to court soon, or where your or his testimony would be critical?” she asked.

Hands fisted on his hips, Simon considered the question. Reluctantly, he shook his head. “Would help narrow things down if it was something that simple. Sure, we have cases before the courts, but nothing that would link to something this big, this elaborate.”

They were interrupted when Joel rapped sharply on the door before opening it to lean into the office. “Sorry, Simon, but we may have a possible match of the partial plate from the DMV.”

Waving him in, Simon asked, “What’ve you got?”

But Sheila intervened, physically moving between the two men. “Captain Banks, I’m sorry, but what I believe doesn’t change what I must do in terms of regulations. I have to relieve you of command of this operation pending our investigation.”

Simon gaped at her. “You can’t be serious. People’s lives depend on what we manage to discover and do in response in a matter of minutes or hours.”

Joel frowned in concern. “Simon, Sheila, what’s going on?”

Pulling off his glasses, Simon rubbed his eyes. “Can’t you see that disrupting our efforts is exactly what that anonymous caller wants?”

“Be that as it may, the regulations are clear. Your bank accounts have been frozen and you are to abstain from activity related to this case.”

With barely-restrained fury, Simon looked past her to Joel. “You heard her. You have the lead on this case until further notice.” Meeting Sheila’s stormy gaze, he sneered, “Satisfied? Let’s just hope your interference in this investigation won’t cost the lives of Sandburg and the innocent woman taken today.”

Sheila flinched. “This is one of those days when I hate my job,” she grated. Looking from Simon to Joel, who looked completely baffled by the proceedings, she sighed. “Alright, well, my duty here is done and I’ll get on with the investigation; I’ll be back tomorrow to interview you and Ellison about the money in your accounts. In the meantime, I assume I can trust you gentleman to act appropriately given the current situation.”

Understanding flashed in Joel’s eyes, but he gave her a grave nod, moving out of the doorway to allow her to leave.

Mutely, they watched her cross the office and into the hallway beyond.

“Simon, what –?”

“Never mind that!” Simon snapped. “What’ve you got?”

“The DMV spit out more than a hundred vehicles that match the description of the SUV and the partial plate, but one of them is registered to a name that rang a few bells: Sarris.”

Simon pulled up short. “Veronica Sarris? But she’s still in prison,” he replied, disbelievingly.

Joel shook his head. “Nadia Sarris. Veronica’s mother. And here’s her photo.” Joel held out a photocopy of the licence photograph. “Recognize her?”

“That’s the woman who was kidnapped this morning.”

“Allegedly kidnapped,” Joel clarified, his tone grim. “Her involvement means you’re probably right that this has been a setup to get Major Crime involved from the very beginning.”

“Dammit,” Simon growled as he pushed past Joel into the bullpen. “Brown, put out an APB on Nadia Sarris.” Turning to the nearest desk and phone, Joel right behind him, he punched in Ellison’s cell number. “Jim, we may have a connection. Looks like the SUV you spotted this morning belongs to Nadia Sarris.” Referring to the document, he added, “Her address is listed at five-twenty-one Merryweather Street, Apartment six-oh-eight.”

*“Nadia?”* he heard Jim echo, and the detective sounded stunned by the information. *“No wonder the woman looked familiar; I should have recognized her right away. I don’t believe it, Simon. They must have commandeered it after they took her.”*

“Maybe,” Simon allowed, but shook his head. “Think about the logistics. It was barely an hour between her being dragged out of the bank to the armored car exploding and her SUV fleeing the scene.” Straightening to glance back at Joel, Simon added, “And you should also know that an anonymous caller claims you and I are behind the bank robbery. IA has since found a quarter of a million dollars in each of our bank accounts, which makes this whole

thing very personal. Officially, you and I are now off the case pending investigation and Joel is taking point.”

Silence. Then, *“Capt...n, you ... brea ...ing up. I’m in ... garage down ...wonky. I’ll go check out ... address an... back to you.”*

The sudden sound of the dial tone in his ear made Simon smile with wry amusement before he wiped all expression from his face as he hung up. Turning to Joel, he said dryly, “Jim couldn’t hear me. He’s in the garage downstairs; phone reception’s very bad down there.”

Joel rolled his eyes but couldn’t quite hide his appreciative smile. “Uh, huh,” he acknowledged. “Of course it is. Well, we’ll just have to clarify matters the next time we see him.”

Jim felt ... he wasn’t sure what he felt. Everything had been happening too fast. And yeah, it had felt personal after the armored car blew but – Nadia? Veronica’s descent into criminal madness after her father’s death had cut him deep. Though her anger had been extreme, and indefensible in costing civilian lives, he could understand it. She’d been only been fifteen when her father had died in the jungles of Peru. Even though he knew they’d been set up by Oliver, he’d never quite stopped feeling responsible for failing to bring his squad back home; it was something he could never make right.

But Nadia? Responsible for the shooting of the bank and armored car guards? For the theft of millions? And the attempts to blow him and others to Kingdom Come? And now, apparently for framing him and Simon – not to mention apparently kidnapping Sandburg.

Ears still ringing from the explosions, feeling shell-shocked and bewildered, Jim shook his head. “I can’t believe it,” he muttered to himself.

But he couldn’t deny that in a twisted way, Nadia had grounds to blame him for the destruction of her family – her husband dead, her only child in prison.

Then again, it might explain how Veronica had managed to grow up so angry, so certain he’d been responsible for her father’s death. So determined to get even, no matter what it cost her or anyone else. If Simon was right, the poor kid had been brought up to hate and to seek a vicious vengeance.

It would explain the military precision of the crimes, as well. Nadia would have the connections to find disgruntled ex-military and mercenaries who’d know where to get the explosives and how to tactically plan the heist and all the actions since. Thinking about the watchmen at the warehouse, Jim nodded to himself. They fit the profile.

If Simon was right, Nadia was mostly likely a worse nutcase than her daughter, more vicious and unrelenting in her desire for revenge.

And she had Blair.

That thought was enough to break him from his reverie and chill his blood. Whirling back to his truck, he climbed in, cranked on the engine and slammed it into gear. He left rubber behind as he tore up the ramp to the street.

Blair winced at the ripping sound of each piece of drywall he tore away to enlarge the hole in the back wall. Thankfully, it took less than five minutes to create a space large enough for him to squeeze through. Sweating now, his hair lank, he impatiently pulled it back out of his eyes and secured it with a leather tie. Then, after grabbing his jacket and picking up the crowbar, he slid through the enlarged gap in the wall into the dark warehouse beyond.

Blair paused for a minute to get his bearings and to figure out which way to go to get to the nearest door. While he peered through the dim light that filtered through the filthy windows high up on the wall, he also listened for any sound that would indicate the man he'd seen earlier was on his way back. Conscious that his heart was hammering, Blair took a slow deep breath and then another before shifting a few boxes to more or less cover the big hole he'd created in the wall.

He was creeping past the dynamite and C4 when he paused and looked at the materials. Chewing his lip, he considered the explosives; they basically scared the shit out of him. But after he'd first worked with Joel, the bomb expert had explained the basics of bomb making and diffusing to him. As he understood it, the key was the blasting cap or at least some kind of detonator – a box of which he could clearly see on the middle shelf.

Blair didn't think of himself as any kind of hero, but compromising the capacity of the perps to create more bombs just seemed to make sense.

Once again, he listened with all he was to be sure no one was nearby. Then he rolled the crowbar into his jacket and carefully laid the resulting leather package over the top of the box. Easing it off the shelf, he carried it with as little jostling as possible down the passageway between all the shelves, crates and boxes. Two rows down, he spotted a big enough space on a lower shelf to stash the box, at least until he could bring Jim back and show him where it was.

He'd just slid the box into place when he heard scuffling footsteps. Keeping low, trying to breathe absolutely silently, he circled around the end of the row of shelving away from the approaching footsteps.

"The boss said you should stick with Ellison. If you get a chance, well, you know what to do."

Blair froze, chilled to his soul. The close calls hadn't been coincidental at all – they were targeting Jim. But why? Who were these guys?

Slowly, he unwrapped the crowbar and quietly dropped his jacket on the floor. Then he edged around the shelving, taking care to move silently. Slowly, one careful step at a time, he moved up behind the perp who was built like a linebacker. He was just putting his cellphone into his pocket as he continued his ambling patrol around the warehouse; he gave the impression of being bored to death. When he stopped to pull a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and was fishing for a lighter, Blair moved in close enough to crack the back of his head with the crowbar. The guy dropped like a rock.

Blair winced at the thud. Holding his breath, he waited, crouched, crowbar ready to strike again, in case the guy wasn't out for the count. But when the big man didn't move, Blair



edged closer, checked to be sure the crook was still breathing, and then appropriated the cellphone from the guy's jacket pocket.

Straightening, Blair once again took his bearings, listening to see if anyone else was anywhere nearby. Hearing nothing, keeping to the shadows, he continued toward what he hoped was the front of the warehouse and the nearest exit. He tried calling Jim and then Simon, but all he got were busy signals. Blair had covered more than three-quarters of the distance through the warehouse when he heard the murmur of more voices. Edging closer, he realized several men were in a room he figured must be an office, to the side of the only exit door he'd seen so far.

And the only way out was to walk right past them.

Mentally spewing epithets toward all the gods and goddesses he could immediately think of for very evidently making this escape as difficult as possible, he crept closer, to try to hear what they were saying.

Minutes later, Jim was cruising down Merryweather, looking for the apartment building Nadia Sarris apparently called home. It didn't take him long to spot the worn building that badly needed paint, its garden long dead for lack of water, with the yard in front more dust than grass. Jim parked at the curb across the street. For a moment, he studied the area. The neighborhood was seedy but quiet – more down on its luck than falling into hard-core poverty, like a lot of other parts of the city where ordinary people struggled to make a living.

Although he doubted that she was anywhere nearby, Jim still had to check out the apartment. Hopefully, the superintendent would be amenable to letting him in without a warrant, because he had a feeling they were running out of time. With an ever-growing sense of urgency, deeply worried about what had happened to Sandburg, Jim climbed out of the truck and started jogging across the wide street.

A dark sedan pulled away from the opposite curb halfway down the block. He was nearly across the street when a squeal of wheels was his only warning of its abrupt acceleration. Startled, he turned his head to check out the threat, a reflexive move that cost him precious seconds. Realizing the danger, he lunged out of the way, but not fast enough. The sedan caught him, dealing him a powerful, if glancing, blow from the front corner fender that had him rolling up and over the hood, before dumping him to the street as the car sped away.

He hit the ground hard, rolling twice before he landed up against the wheel of a parked car. Breathless, he lay still for a moment, taking stock of where it hurt. With a groan, he forced himself up, first onto an elbow, and then he pushed himself to his feet to lean against the car.

"Dammit," he breathed. He was lucky to be standing, but furious at having fallen for another setup. She'd counted on them tracking her down. She'd had someone planted here, to watch for him, to do their best to take him out.

*'Or was it 'their best'?*' he wondered as he drew his cellphone from his jacket pocket. They could have more easily gunned him down. With a grimace that was a mixture of pain and anger, he hit the speed dial. "Captain?" he asked when the call was answered. "It was another trap. She's still one step ahead of us."

*“Are you alright?”* Banks demanded.

“Yeah, I think so,” Jim replied as he stiffly flexed his other arm and shifted his stance to test his aching hip. “Got clipped by a car, but nothin’s broken. Simon, I don’t think it’s an accident that I’m still standing. They could have killed me if they’d wanted to. It’s a setup; I just don’t know for what.”

He listened as Simon brought Joel up to speed, and was relieved to know his hearing was getting back to normal. Thinking about his senses reminded him that Blair was missing and time was passing too quickly, getting away from them. Anxiety twisted in his gut and he broke into Simon’s discussion with Joel. “Captain, listen – we have to stop playing catch-up here. I think there’s something going on that warehouse down by the docks. There was something hinky, I just couldn’t figure out what. But I’m sure I’ll find some answers there to whatever the hell is going on.”

*“Warehouse?”* Simon echoed. *“What warehouse?”*

Jim rubbed his eyes, then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sorry, sir. So much has been happening so fast. When I went looking for Sandburg, I met up with some exceptionally vigilant watchmen who were only too eager to send me on my way. I want to go back there and find out why.”

*“A warehouse on the docks? Could be drugs, or guns; doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the heist and the bombs.”*

“Maybe not, but that’s the same general area where Sandburg disappeared, and we don’t have anywhere else to start.” When Simon didn’t immediately reply, impatient, his sense of urgency buzzing through his system, Jim started limping hastily back across the street to his truck. “I’ll let you know if I find anything,” he said and abruptly terminated the call.

“Sonuva –!” Simon swore as he slammed down the phone, furious to be cut off without knowing exactly where Jim was headed. There were a lot of warehouses down by the docks.

Turning to Joel, he jerked a thumb toward the exit. “C’mon,” he said, not bothering to hide either his irritation or his sarcasm. “We need to meet Ellison down by the docks. He thinks there’s something hinky going on at one of the warehouses.”

“Captain! Line two,” Brown yelled from across the bullpen. Holding out his phone, he added, “It’s Hairboy!”

“Oh, thank God for small mercies,” Simon muttered as he turned back to the phone and punched the line indicator. “Sandburg!” he bellowed, “Where the hell are you?”

*“Uh, hey, Simon,”* Blair whispered hoarsely. *“I’m in a warehouse down by the docks.”*

Blair pressed himself against the thin wall of the storeroom he’d slipped into when he’d heard more footsteps coming up from somewhere behind him. His first impression was that it was probably a supply closet of sorts, but he quickly dismissed thoughts about the room;

there were far more urgent matters to address. "Simon, listen, I heard one of the guys say they were going after Jim. I can't reach him. You have to warn him!"

*"Easy, Sandburg, Jim's alright. I just talked to him and he's on his way to a warehouse – I presume the one you're in."*

"Don't let him come alone!" Blair rasped, nearly forgetting to keep his voice down. "There are at least five or six guys here, all of them armed. They, uh, they look like ex-military with buzz cuts, tats and a lot of muscle. Oh, and they've got a lot of C-four and dynamite."

*"Which warehouse are you in? Are you safe?"* Simon demanded.

"I don't know. Jim knows. He was here earlier but he didn't hear me. He met up with some of the guards. They told him they were watchmen."

*"Are you safe?"* Simon demanded again.

"Uh, maybe, for a while. I don't see any way out except past them."

*"Okay, stay where you are. I'll alert Jim and get backup there ASAP."*

"Thanks, man," Blair sighed, suddenly tired to the bone. He closed the phone and slid down the side of the wall, trying to make himself as small and inconspicuous as possible.

The smell of sweat and a slight dimming of the light, along with the clump of boots on the concrete floor let him know the guys he'd heard approaching were now passing the supply room on their way to the office. He bent his head, hunched into himself and held his breath.

And nearly jumped a foot when the cellphone in his hand burst into a raucous ringtone.

"Well, lookie here at what I found," he heard, and lifted his head – to look down the long barrel of a submachine gun.

"Ellison!" Jim snapped in answer to his cellphone's ring, his eyes on the road, his foot firmly pressed down on the accelerator and his siren blaring. He had a powerful gut feeling that he was running out of time if he hoped to find Sandburg before it was too late.

*"Jim, Sandburg just called,"* Simon told him.

Jim hit the brakes and angled toward the curb. "Where is he? Is he alright?" he demanded.

*"He's at the warehouse you're heading toward. He said you could tell us which one it is. Jim, there are at least half a dozen armed men who Blair describes as ex-military types. You will not do him any good if you rush in there alone. You hear me?"*

Jim grunted in frustration as he rubbed the back of his neck. Dammit, he'd been right there! He'd screwed up and now Blair might well pay the ultimate price. Nausea roiled, but he forced it back. There was no time for emotion now. No time for anything but focused, deliberate action. "How long before backup gets there?" he grated, making no promises. "Is Sandburg safe?"

*"I don't know. He was for the moment, but he acknowledged that the perps are between him and the only way out. Joel and I are on our way. Which warehouse is it?"*

"A block from where we were earlier. Take Avenue K toward the docks; second building on the right." Jim paused, picturing the area in his mind. "Wait, scratch that. They'd see us coming. Loop around to come up the back lane from the direction of the docks. I'll meet you behind the next building, the third building in from Bayshore, on the right," he glanced at his watch, "five minutes."

*"I've got uniforms responding, too. Wait for us,"* Simon ordered.

Jim didn't answer. Snapping the phone closed and dropping it on the seat beside him, he checked traffic and steered back onto the road, siren still blaring.

Garbed again in tactical gear, both he and Simon scrambled out of the sedan as soon as Joel pulled in beside Ellison's Ford. As they'd agreed on the way there, Joel jogged back to the uniforms who'd followed them in – all with sirens silent in the hope of sneaking up on the perps – to bring them up to speed. Simon spotted Jim up ahead, at the edge of the building, peering around the side to check out the warehouse where Sandburg had been held. Hopefully, the kid was still safe somewhere inside.

"Jim!" he called, but softly, knowing Ellison would hear him. Sure enough, Jim flattened against the building and looked back at him, urgently waving him forward.

"They're waiting for us," Jim told him, his tone grim. His expression was flat, contained, but his pallor gave Simon pause.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

Jim looked away, as if picturing what he'd just seen on the other side of the building. "Sandburg's wrapped in explosives. Nadia is with him, holding a pistol to his head."

"Sonuva –" Simon groaned.

But Jim cut him off. "Half a dozen of them are closer to the street end of the building, as if distancing themselves from the explosives or ... or...." He paused, holding up a hand as he tilted his head to listen. "They don't know we're here yet," he murmured, his eyes narrowed with the depth of his concentration. "They're waiting for something."

"What –?"

But again Jim silenced him, holding up a hand as he turned his head toward the conversations Simon could neither see nor hear. "Blair's talking."

Despite the situation, Simon quirked a quick grin, as if to say 'what else is new?' but he also knew that Sandburg was probably trying to convey information in the hope Jim was somewhere nearby to hear him.

After a few moments, Jim turned back to him and waved Simon back toward Joel and the uniforms. When they came together, Jim told them, "There are six armed mercenaries at the

front of the target building. They're waiting for a transport to come through from the dock; it's carrying some kind of payload that they plan to intercept and it sounds as if it will be coming through in a matter of minutes."

Simon turned to the uniforms. "You position yourselves on this side of the building up toward the main road, but stay out of sight until you hear from me." A uniformed sergeant, Wilkins, looked from Simon to Jim, curiosity written on his face, no doubt wondering how they knew what the perps were waiting for. But discipline won out and he simply nodded in understanding before leading the seven other uniformed officers away at a jog.

Jim turned to Joel. "They have Sandburg wired up with explosives, but he was babbling to Nadia about hiding the detonators so he may not be in immediate danger of being blown to smithereens." Looking from Joel to Simon, he went on, "The way he's talking, it sounds like he thinks Nadia isn't a threat – I know, I know she may be playing games with him, like she was with us. But, in case he's right, I don't want to take her out unless it becomes clear there's no other choice. They've been one step ahead of us the whole day – and we might not have all the facts yet."

"Jim – can we take that chance with Blair's life?" Joel asked, his expression clouded with worry.

Jim rubbed his mouth and shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "But Blair's no fool, and he seems to be trying to make it clear that she's no threat." He frowned in thought as he reviewed what he'd heard and what he'd seen in his quick glimpses around the corner of the building. "You know," he reflected, "most of the guys at the end of the building were focused on watching for the truck. But there was one...." He looked up first at Joel and then at Simon. "There was one who had his automatic rifle pointed back at Sandburg and Nadia."

"That automatic rifle could maybe set off the explosives, even without blasting caps or a detonator," Joel told them. "Or just kill him regardless of the bomb."

Jim looked away, blinking hard as if to dispel the unwelcome image. Joel gripped his shoulder briefly in mute support.

"So maybe this is one more twist, one more 'gotcha', if they can make us take her out?" Simon pondered aloud, both to work it out and keep them focused on the business at hand. "Then he takes out Sandburg while we're focused on her. Meanwhile, the rest of them take us out."

"Maybe," Jim said, his gut twisting with sick uncertainty. He took a deep breath. "I hear the rumble of a semi coming from the docks. We're out of time. I can only take one shot, so I'll focus on the guy with the automatic weapon. Simon, you watch Nadia. Joel, I'm counting on you to get to Blair and free him from the explosives once we're sure the other threats are neutralized."

Faces solemn, with no illusions about the implications of the decisions they were making and the risks if they were wrong, both captains nodded. Jim led off, loping along the back of building three, Banks and Taggart right behind him. Simon toggled on his communication device and ordered, "Wilkins, wait until the perps attack the truck and then engage."

"Ten-four."

Jim held up a hand as he stood flat against the wall and then dropped to one knee to peer around the edge of the building. They could all hear the heavy rumble and grinding gears of the fully-loaded tractor-trailer coming closer, and closer. Jim held up three fingers, counting down: three, two, one.

He whirled around the edge of the building even as the perps started firing at the truck and the uniforms shouted, "POLICE! DROP YOUR WEAPONS!" The suspects turned their weapons' fire on the uniforms, who briskly returned the barrage with deadly force.

Jim saw the lone gunman spot him and then swiftly lift his weapon to firing position. Beside him, Simon came around the edge of the building, taking aim at Nadia Sarris.

"DROP YOUR WEAPONS!" Simon bellowed.

Blair yelled, "Don't shoot!" even as Jim took down the lone gunman, aiming above the Kevlar to hit him between the eyes. The dead man's weapon fired a long burst that arced upward before the weapon fell from his lifeless grip and he toppled to the ground.

Simon kept his weapon trained on Sarris as he paced toward Sandburg, trusting Jim and Joel to cover him, both men now firing at the other armed perps at the far end of the building. In what felt like minutes but was barely seconds, it was over; all but two gunmen were down, while the last two were ditching their weapons, hands in the air, yelling, "Don't shoot. Stop!"

Uniforms swarmed around them, kicking away weapons, cuffing the two still standing, checking those on the ground, cuffing those who were still breathing. One patrolman was already on the radio calling for ambulances and the coroner.

Nadia was sobbing with terror. "Please don't kill me," she pleaded, though she kept the pistol tight against Blair's head. "Please."

"Put your weapon down!" Simon bellowed.

Blair cut in, talking fast but otherwise staying absolutely still. "Simon, she's terrified. We were told if we move, it could trigger the bomb, like there's some kind of pressure switch between us. They made her hold the gun to my head. They told her she'd have to kill me to live, but she didn't. Please, Simon, if she just drops it, it could go off."

Joel hurried forward to examine the makeshift bomb – wired sticks of dynamite that were wrapped tightly around Sandburg's chest – to determine the degree of danger.

Jim, putting his gun back in its holster, was right behind him. "Hang in there, Chief," he encouraged as he took the pistol from Nadia's loose grip; he could tell from the weight that it was loaded. "It's going to be fine."

"I sure hope so, man," Blair gusted, his wide eyes dark with fear. "But, uh, you might want to keep your distance until we're absolutely sure about that, if you know what I mean. You, too, Simon."

"Joel?" Jim prodded. "What do you think?"

Joel was carefully circling Sandburg and Sarris, leaning close to study the wiring and to look for triggers. “Blair,” he said, low and steady as he drew wire cutters from the pouch of tools on his belt. “I can’t see if there’s a pressure switch between you, but I have to tell you, son, that that’s a pretty unusual setup; the way you’re wired isn’t complex so ... odds are pretty good they were lying to the two of you. I’m going to have Mrs. Sarris take a single step back so that I can see the detonator.”

“Joel, uh, don’t you think you should wait for the bomb squad, man? I mean, you’re not wearing protective gear. If this blows....”

“You let me worry about that,” Joel replied with a small smile.

Blair met his steady gaze and then blew a long slow breath. “Yeah, okay, well, you’re the expert.” Behind him, Nadia was still weeping in abject terror. “Hey, uh, did you say Sarris?” Blair asked, confusion chasing fear from his face as he looked from Joel to Jim.

Slowly, Jim nodded as he regarded her intently. His hearing was still a bit wonky but he could smell fear – but then, she would be afraid whether she was a victim or a perpetrator. “Nadia is Veronica’s mother.”

Blair gaped at him. “You’re kidding me,” he breathed, trying hard to not move, to not stiffen in surprise or pull away from her. “What the hell is going on?”

Nadia sniffed. “I’m sorry,” she cried, swallowing hard, struggling for some measure of control. “Veronica hates me, hates all of you – she couldn’t believe I didn’t want you dead, Jim, that I didn’t blame you for what happened. That, that man who was behind all this? The one you shot? He was her boyfriend. Richard Morrison, but she called him Rocko; they were in the service together and both of them went AWOL. He always gave me the creeps.”

Joel was about to ask her to take the single step back when she sniffed again, dragged in a ragged breath and continued, “Once Rocko finished up here, he was going to tell her he’d fulfilled her fondest wishes: to discredit all of us and ensure we all ended up dead. Then he planned to break her out of prison. All the money, from the bank and armored car? And the diamonds and whatever is in that truck? He was going to use it to bribe anyone necessary and then escape with her to somewhere they couldn’t ever be found.”

“Okay, Mrs. Sarris,” Joel said, breaking into the nearly hysterical flow of words, his voice warm and soothing. “I want you to take one small step back, just enough so that I can see the wires between you and Blair, okay?”

“I... I don’t want to die,” she wept, her whole body trembling. “They told me if I moved, the bomb would explode.”

“Hey, hey,” Blair intervened. “Joel here is the best. He’ll make sure we’re both alright, you’ll see. Just, just do what he says, okay? One small step back.” But even as he spoke, he looked straight at Jim, tried to smile and then lifted his gaze to the sky.

“It’s going to be okay, Chief,” Jim soothed, moving closer.

“Jim,” Simon cautioned.

“Don’t,” Blair gusted. “Please...”

But Jim stepped up, right in front of him. Reaching forward, he cupped Blair's pale, cold cheek. "You're gonna be fine. You're both going to be just fine."

Joel threw him a look that made no promises as Nadia took one small step back.

Nothing happened.

Everyone let out a long, slow breath. Joel drew a small flashlight from his pack and leaned in as much as he could, shining the light on the wires connecting the bomb to Blair's body. He studied the dynamite, and then smiled. With a swift motion, he moved Nadia back another step, steadied her and handed her off to Simon.

"Jim's right," Joel assured them all. "There's no blasting cap, no trigger mechanisms, no detonator of any kind." He gripped Blair's shoulder. "You did real good when you hid that box on them, Blair. You might just have saved your own life, and Mrs. Sarris', too."

Blair looked at him as if he was afraid to believe it was all over. "Really? Oh, my God, get this thing off me!"

Once Joel slid the harness of dynamite away from his body, Blair started giggling, then laughing until he started hiccupping. "I – I'm sorry," he stammered. "I can't help it. I was, was so ... I didn't think –"

Jim drew him into a tight hug, wrapping him in the warmth of immeasurable relief. When he felt how badly Blair was trembling, Jim rubbed his back. "It's okay, Sandburg. You're fine. It's over."

One of the uniforms appeared with two blankets. Simon wrapped one around Nadia Sarris and led her toward the ambulances that were just pulling up, sirens screaming, emergency lights flashing. Jim took the other and pulled it securely around Sandburg's shoulders and then drew him along in Simon's wake. "C'mon, Chief. You're in shock. You need to sit down, get checked out."

Blair reached out to Joel. "Thanks, man – I ... just, thanks, you know?"

"I know," Joel replied with a wide smile of understanding. "I'm just real glad you're okay."

Blair nodded shakily, the hysterical laughter giving way to sudden exhaustion. Jim got him settled on the edge of an ambulance and watched the EMT check him out.

"I'm okay," Blair asserted. "Just really wiped out. It's been a very long day."

Jim smiled at him and ruffled his curls. Blair didn't even try to duck away, but leaned into Jim's touch. "I was really scared," he admitted, his voice low and just a little shaky.

"Yeah, I know," Jim replied, shifting to sit down beside him and wrap an arm around his shoulders. "I was scared, too. I'm sorry, Sandburg. I ... I was here earlier...."

Blair looked up at him. "Yeah, I know. I was in the storage room right behind you when you were talking to the three stooges. You didn't hear me – your ears were ringing, right? From the explosions?"



Ashamed to know he'd been that close and had walked away, Jim's gaze dropped as he nodded in confirmation. "And, uh, the smoke and –"

With a quick glance at the EMT taking his blood pressure, Blair cut in, "Yeah, yeah, I understand, man. It's not your fault. You got back here right on time, Jim." With another sidelong look at the technician, he asked, "But you're okay, now, too, right?"

A half smile quirking his lips, Jim nodded. "Yeah, Chief, I'm fine." Looking around, he let the tension ease from his body then, tightening his grip around Blair's shoulders, he added, "We're all just fine."

Blair looked at the EMT. "You know, I really am okay. I'm just really, really tired. I want to go home and get cleaned up."

The technician finished his examination with a frown at the bruise on Blair's jaw. "What's this?"

"Oh, someone clobbered me earlier; hurts, but nothing's broken."

"Did you lose consciousness?"

When Blair hesitated, Jim cut in. "I'll watch him. If there's any sign of concussion, I'll bring him to the hospital."

Blair flashed him a look of profound gratitude as the EMT replied, "Then, sure, yes, I don't see why you can't go on home."

Simon came to stand in front of them. "You know, Sandburg, you're going to have to write up a report. I want to know in detail why you disappeared without a sound."

"Ah, geez, Simon," Blair retorted. "You want all that right now? You guys were busy checking out that house. I saw her – Mrs. Sarris – stumbling down the street and recognized her from that short clip we saw of the robbery. Anyway, I just went after her to, you know, tell her she was safe. I couldn't figure out why she was running away from the all the cops, though. She just seemed terrified."

"I think she'll probably reveal she was forced into luring you away," Jim replied, hoping he was right, that Nadia had never been part of the plot to take them all down.

Looking across the lane, Jim studied Nadia for a long moment, watching her weep as the EMT took her vitals. She could be telling the truth, but some of her story didn't add up, didn't make sense. If she was supposed to shoot Blair to save herself, then why would she think if they were physically separated that the bomb would blow? She'd been terrorized and probably wasn't thinking straight but ... she might also be spinning a story to save herself. Until they heard what the remaining perps had to say about who was involved, there was no way to know for sure, one way or another.

But right now? At this moment, she wasn't his top priority; Sandburg was. The kid was still shivering, and Jim had no doubt he was suffering from the shock of thinking he was about to die. Sandburg hadn't lost his head, and Jim was proud of him, of how Blair had handled himself. But he needed to get home. Needed to know he was safe.

“Captain, how ‘bout I take Sandburg home?” Jim suggested, but there was a vein of steel underlying his words that implied he wasn’t asking. Simon flashed him a look that said he’d heard it, loud and clear. Not wanting to turn something so simple into a clash of authority, Jim softened his tone as he added, “I can get the info from him and debrief you later.”

Simon nodded, as if reluctantly. “Yes, alright, fine.” But he jabbed a finger into Blair’s chest. “Just don’t you ever run off like that on your own again, capisce?”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve learned that lesson,” Blair assured him with a shaky laugh.

Simon took a step back. He glanced across the street at Nadia Sarris, who was being treated for shock by another EMT. Returning his gaze to Jim, he said, “I’ll give you a call later, once we’ve taken all the statements.”

Jim nodded, signaling that he knew what Simon was saying. He couldn’t read Nadia, and it bothered him. He just couldn’t tell if she was only what she presented – a terrified innocent overcome with both grief and shock – or if the emotions were a cover for her relief at having escaped apprehension. He’d never known her well and, other than touching base briefly when he got back from Peru to express his sorrow and abject regret to have not been able to save her husband, he’d not seen her in years. He wanted to believe in her innocence, but he’d spent the past hour convincing himself of why she could well be guilty.

Jim felt unsettled with not knowing if the threat was over or not. He was too close and there was too much history for him to be objective. Though he wanted to interrogate her personally, he knew it was best left with Simon and Joel. Turning to Blair, Jim gave him a hand up onto his feet. “C’mon, Sandburg, let’s get you home.”

It was late when the phone rang, nearly midnight; the only light streamed in through the windows from the streetlights outside. Jim answered on the first ring, listened for a while and then said, “Thanks for letting me know.” After he hung up, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and quietly moved through the darkness to step out onto the balcony. Welcoming the cool, clean air, he inhaled deeply, as if he was starved for breath.

But he grimaced when he heard the soft click of Sandburg’s bedroom door and the pad of his bare feet through the loft. When Blair stepped out beside him, Jim said, “Sorry. I’d hoped the call wouldn’t wake you.”

“No problem, man,” Blair replied, looking up him. “What did Simon have to say?”

Jim quirked a brow. “The two mercs confirmed her story that Richard Morrison, AKA Rocko was in charge. The visitor log at the prison confirmed that Morrison was there often; the warden told Simon that he was believed to be Veronica’s lover so, yeah, it seems the two of them apparently planned it all. They’d been tailing Nadia and one of them stole her SUV while she was inside the bank. According to the mercs, the armored car was an unexpected bonus; the big haul was supposed to be that load of rare metals and gems from the docks.” He frowned and rubbed his chin, not happy with the ‘lucky coincidence’, but let it go. “We still don’t know how Morrison knew about that transport and the lack of the usual security; we’ll look into that tomorrow. Probably had an inside accomplice. By the way, the guards wounded in the bank robbery will all be okay. Looks like the other perps will all survive, too.”

Blair flashed a smile. “That’s great! So nobody got killed in their little crime spree.” The smile faded quickly, though, to be replaced by a shrug of resigned acceptance. “Well, nobody but Rocko. Hate to say it, but I don’t think he’s much loss to the world, y’know? Pretty diabolical guy.”

Shifting his gaze to look out over the bay, Jim nodded. After taking a sip of beer, he reported, “Simon told me that Sheila Irwin assured him that the block on our bank accounts will be lifted by the end of the day tomorrow.”

Leaning close to bump his shoulder against Jim’s arm, Blair asked with a cheeky grin, “Do you need a loan between now and then? I’m not exactly flush, but I could probably spring for lunch. I mean, given you saved my life and all today.”

Jim laughed, warmed by Blair’s cheerfulness, and regarded him with a fond smile. “Thanks, but I think I can manage without a loan. Lunch, though, I could go for that – my choice, because I’m the hero, right?” he teased as he lightly punched Blair’s shoulder.

Blair barked a laugh and nodded. “Well, my hero, anyway. But if you ever tell anyone, I’ll deny it.”

He studied Jim for a moment, until Jim shifted uncomfortably, and looked away. Jim didn’t know how Blair did it, but sometimes he felt naked, as if all his thoughts and emotions were an open book to Sandburg.

“It’s not your fault, you know, Jim,” Blair said quietly as he placed a warm hand on Jim’s back. “You’re not responsible for Veronica or Rocko’s violent choices. That’s not on you.”

Jim chewed his lip as he bent his head, nodding reluctantly. “I know that ... but....”

“It’s wasn’t your fault that you couldn’t bring her dad home, either,” Blair affirmed with rock-solid steadiness. “I know you think it is, as if you should be able to work miracles, but you’re just a man, Jim. Not a god.”

Jim grimaced; Blair was right, but it didn’t make him feel any better. “I feel bad for Nadia. She didn’t deserve any of this – the loss of her husband, her only kid in jail.”

“Yeah, me, too. Maybe we could see how she’s doing in a few days; maybe have her over for dinner,” Blair suggested.

“Yeah, maybe,” Jim agreed, not sure whether it would be a good idea or not, though it wouldn’t hurt to check on her – make sure she was recovering okay from the ordeal of the day’s events, let alone all the other grief her life held. Thinking about it, he wondered if she’d ever had any counseling, to help deal with the losses in her life. Maybe dinner would be a good idea and, if she was haunted by ... well, everything, he could possibly suggest she talk to someone to find her own peace with it all. He nodded more firmly. “Yeah,” he said, “yeah, it’s a good idea, Blair.”

But then he recalled that Nadia wasn’t the only one who’d been subjected to a fair amount of terror that day. He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “It was all so long ago and you had nothing to do with it – but it nearly got you killed today.”

Blair looked up at the stars and then out over the dark water of the bay a block away. “Yes and no,” he allowed with a slow nod. “Yes, in that what happened today was all part of Veronica’s crazy need for vengeance, part of her inconsolable fury with the Universe. No, because I was involved because I choose to work with you, and I chose to follow Nadia. You didn’t put me in danger, Jim – you got me out of it.”

Jim thought about that, his shoulders loosening as he let go of some of raw despair of those days in the jungle, a sorrow that never seemed to heal. At last, he nodded as he looped an arm around Blair’s shoulders. “Thanks, Chief,” he murmured.

But then, when a gust of cold damp wind blew in from the bay, he felt the shudder of shivers ripple through Blair’s body. “Geez, Sandburg, you’re freezing!” Laughing as he steered his friend inside, he added, “You might be a genius, but sometimes you don’t have the sense to come in from the cold.”

“Oh, so you agree I’m a genius,” Blair teased, though he eagerly complied with the idea of returning to the warmth of the loft.

Jim couldn’t help the smile that lit his face. Reaching to ruffle Blair’s hair, laughing as Sandburg ducked away, he replied, “Takes one to know one, Chief.”

“Yeah, in your dreams, Ellison,” Blair snorted with amusement as he turned away. “Night.”

Jim’s smile lingered as he watched Blair saunter back to his own room, amazed as he often was by Sandburg’s resilience. “Good night, Chief.”

He closed the balcony doors. After a last look over the city, Jim went to the kitchen to rinse out the beer bottle and then he, too, called it a night.

When Jim entered the bullpen the next day, Simon waved him into the office where Joel was sipping a steaming cup of coffee. Quirking a brow at their rumpled clothing and unshaven faces, Jim asked, “You two been here all night?”

Simon gave a short nod as he filled a mug of coffee for Jim and handed it across the desk.

Joel replied, “I’ve been going over the statements and following up with the Warden. When they questioned Veronica Sarris about her involvement in her mother’s kidnapping she clammed up. When they told her about Richard Morrison being killed in the takedown, she started screaming that she was going to kill you, that you’re a dead man – well, you get the picture. So far as I know, she hasn’t stopped.”

Jim grimaced, but refrained from commenting. What was there to say?

“And I’ve been liaising with the FBI and Interpol about the lax security on the treasure shipment and the, so far, still missing money from the bank and the armored car,” Simon said. “Stanford Security own both the armored car and the transport down on the docks, so the link is in there, somewhere. The Feeb’s are going through their personnel roster to see if there are any connections with Morrison, or maybe even Sarris. There’s still a lot that we don’t know.”

“Like how they knew where and when to hit the bank and the transport truck? And the ‘coincidence’ of Nadia being in that bank just before the armored car delivery was made?” Jim offered. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that, too.”

“If we could have taken Morrison alive, maybe we could’ve gotten some answers from him, but he didn’t give you any choice but to take him down. As it is, the rest of the goon squad don’t seem to know much about anything. What’s your take on Nadia Sarris, Jim? You think she’s telling the truth?” Simon asked.

Jim shrugged. “I couldn’t get a read on her yesterday,” he said with a glance at Joel. “Her meltdown when it was clear the bad guys weren’t going to win seemed real, but whether that was fury at her plan going awry or because she was hysterical with relief at surviving is hard to say.”

Joel consulted some notes in his hand. “She moved here from the southeast after her daughter was sentenced to prison; lives in a one-bedroom apartment –”

“I saw the outside of it yesterday,” Jim interjected. “Rundown neighborhood.”

Joel nodded. “She lives on the insurance she got when her husband died and her widow’s pension from the Army. Enough to make ends meet, but not a lot left over.”

“How well did you know her?” Simon asked.

Setting the mug down on the conference table, Jim rubbed his jaw. “Not that well,” he replied. “Her husband was the sergeant on my squad; good man, but a lot older than me. I liked him; considered him my best friend on the base. But...” he sighed. “They lived off-base, and I didn’t socialize with the family. Not a lot in common.”

Simon and Joel nodded. “We can’t hold her on what we have.”

“She’s still here?” Jim asked, surprised.

Simon gestured toward the hallway beyond the bullpen. “She’s in the break room. We told her she could go as soon as her statement was typed up and she signed it. Last time we checked, she’d laid down on the couch in there and fallen asleep.”

“Well, she’d had a rough day,” Jim remarked, then felt a twinge of guilt at his cavalier attitude. What had happened to ‘innocent until proven guilty’? The woman had lost a husband, her only child was in prison, and they had nothing on her. “Look,” he offered, “let’s see what she does when she’s released. Where she goes, who she speaks to.”

Simon quirked a brow but shrugged. “Not much else we can do at this point. So far as we know, she’s the victim she claims to be.”

“Speaking of victims,” Joel interjected, “how’s Blair today?”

“He was up and gone by the time I woke up. Left a note that he had an early morning meeting at Rainier and that he’d be here as soon as he was done there,” Jim replied. “He’ll write up his statement then.”

“Speak of the devil,” Simon muttered, with a tilt of his head toward the bullpen.

Turning, Jim saw Sandburg entering from the hallway, coffee mug in hand and Nadia Sarris in tow. When he opened the office door, Blair gave him a wide grin and called out, "Hey, Jim, guess who's coming to dinner?"

Behind him, Simon gave a reflexive groan. "You sure that's a good idea?" he asked, low and wary.

Jim gave a wave of acknowledgment toward Blair and gestured toward his desk. Turning back toward Simon, he replied, "No I'm not, but she might be what seems – an innocent victim – and I owe her the benefit of the doubt." With that, he left the office and headed across the bullpen toward his partner and Nadia Sarris.

"Nadia," he greeted. "I was surprised to learn you were still here. Are you alright?"

She frowned and rubbed her temple. "Bit of a headache," she replied. "And I'm just about dying to crawl into my bed and just pretend none of yesterday ever happened. Can I please go home soon?"

"Yeah, yeah, just waiting for the typed statement. Should be here any minute now," Jim assured her, then waved her toward the chair in front of his desk. "Why don't you have a seat while Blair chases it down?"

"What?" Blair asked, looking up over the edge of his mug. "Oh, yeah, right, I'll get right on that," he agreed, setting the mug down and hustling out of the bullpen and into the stairwell to go to the secretarial pool on the floor below.

Jim perched on the corner of his desk. "You sure you want to come to dinner tonight? We can always postpone."

"No, that's alright," she replied with a wan smile. "It's been ... we've never...." She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I know I should have been in touch when I moved to Cascade but it had been so long since ... well, since Peru, and I was embarrassed and ashamed about Veronica. I wanted to be closer to her, but I don't approve of what she did. I just thought you wouldn't want to see me; wouldn't want any reminders."

Pale and obviously tired, her uncombed hair and smudged makeup giving her an air of vulnerability, she sounded lost and more than a little hopeless. Jim couldn't detect any sign that she was lying or trying to mislead him. "No, I'm sorry," he replied. "I should have ... I don't know, stayed in touch. Checked to see how you were doing after Veronica's trial."

"Oh, no," she assured him. "Don't apologize. None of what happened, to Brad or to Veronica, was your fault. It's just...." She tossed a hand in the air and shook her head. "It's just overwhelming, you know?"

He nodded, then looked up to see Sandburg returning, waving the typed statement. "Here you go. Once you sign this, you can go home and get some rest," Jim said, reaching for a pen.

Nadia took the document from Blair, read it over and reached for the pen. Once it was signed, she stood and ineffectually brushed at her crumpled clothes as if she could erase the

wrinkles. "I need a shower," she muttered, weary and aggrieved, but she gave Blair a smile when she looked at him. "Don't worry, I'll be in better shape for dinner. Can I bring anything?"

"No, nothing," Blair assured her. "See you around six-thirty?"

She nodded, and reached out to stroke his arm gently as if in silent apology for the rough time he'd had the day before. "You're a very kind young man." With a glance at Jim as she turned toward the elevator, she said, "I'll see you then."

"Poor woman," Blair breathed softly as he watched her disappear into the hallway.

"Yeah," Jim agreed as he read over her statement, but he didn't see anything that he hadn't already heard her say the day before. Setting it aside, he pointed Blair toward the computer on the desk next to his. "Now let's get your statement done, okay?"

They decided on an easy dinner of pasta with Jim's special homemade sauce, Blair's salad, and garlic bread. Blair stopped off at the bakery on the corner to pick up something for dessert, while Jim carried the rest of the groceries for their meal upstairs.

He found Nadia waiting outside their door, looking tense, her gaze downcast. "Hey, sorry, didn't mean to keep you waiting," he said as she backed up enough to let him unlock the door and shove it open. He glanced at the clock on the wall as he led the way in, sure that she was a half-hour early, at least.

Still silent, she followed him through the doorway; when he turned from putting the grocery bags on the counter, he saw her standing rigidly just inside the entry, a gun in her hand ... pointed at him.

"Ah," he sighed, lifting his hands as he looked past the weapon and into her eyes. "I guess you weren't quite the victim you were pretending to be."

"I thought I could do this," she rasped. "Thought I could pretend that everything was fine, that I don't hate you with every fiber of my being. But you killed my husband! And my little girl is rotting in prison because of you!"

Jim shook his head, weighing his chances of taking her down even as he debated whether to argue with her or not – to buy time if for no other reason. If he delayed things long enough, then Sandburg might arrive in time to call in the cavalry ... or maybe just in time to be caught in the middle, which wouldn't be good.

He didn't want to hurt her, any more than he'd wanted to hurt Veronica, but he might not have much choice. The mad glint in her eyes made it pretty clear she wouldn't listen to reason.

Still, he had to try.

"Nadia," Jim replied, striving to keep his tone low, calm and reasonable, even conversational. "I didn't kill your husband. He was the best friend I had on the base; he was my right hand man on the squad. Oliver killed him, all of them. I was just lucky."

“Lucky!” she screamed, tears now glazing her eyes. “You know, he talked about you all the time, praised you to the skies. He’d never trusted an officer before, not like he trusted and relied upon you. He followed you into HELL! And you let him die there.”

“I tried my best to save him,” Jim told her, his throat tight with the memories, with his grief and guilt for not having been able to save any of them. “You have to believe me.”

“I wouldn’t believe anything from you,” she sneered as she waved her gun. “What? You think I’m a fool. You’d say anything to save yourself. You’d *do* anything to save yourself. That’s just the kind of monster you are!”

Jim heard the door to the stairwell scrape open; he’d run out of time. This had to end. Now.

“Nadia, you don’t want to do this,” he cajoled – but it was too late.

“What the hell?” Blair exclaimed as he bounded through the door, a box of pastries in his hand. “What’s going on here?” he demanded as he gaped at the gun in Nadia’s hand.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Nadia snapped, barely giving Blair a glance. “Leave here now.”

“Get out of here, Sandburg,” Jim ordered.

“Are you nuts?” Blair argued, looking from her to Jim and back again. “This makes no sense.”

“Blair, please, just go,” Jim directed, but the look Blair gave him froze the breath in his chest.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen,” Blair retorted. Moving further into the apartment, he dropped the pastries on the dining room table, forcing Nadia to widen her stance, the unsteady weapon now swinging between them as she tried to keep them both covered. Turning to face her, he shrugged off his leather jacket. “Nadia, I know you don’t want to hurt anybody here. You could have killed me yesterday, but you didn’t. You’re not a murderer.”

“He killed my husband, destroyed my child,” she wailed, tears now streaking her face. “He’s a monster!”

“No, no, he’s not,” Blair argued, moving closer to her but to her far side, drawing her attention away from Jim. “Jim didn’t blow up that chopper. He was as much a victim of that attack as any of his men. He did all he could to save them.”

“You don’t know that!” she argued, sobbing. “You weren’t there.”

“Sandburg, stop!” Jim shouted, wanting to draw her attention back to himself, away from Blair. God, if she shot Blair –!

Blair waved him off as he took another step closer to her. “No, I wasn’t there. But I know Jim. I know him really, really well. He’s a good man, Nadia. He lives to protect people – he does his best to protect this city.”

“What do you know?” she sneered, one hand ineffectually scrubbing away the tears streaking her face. “He’s evil. A monster. He deserves to die.”



Blair shook his head. "If you shoot him, you'll be the monster. You'll be the evil one. Did you plan everything that happened just to get to Jim? You know how crazy that is, right? You're lucky that the bank guards didn't die. That nobody but ... but Rocko got killed in this whole mess. Is that what you wanted? Innocent people getting killed because you're filled with this insane hatred that isn't even justified?"

He'd angled closer and closer as he spoke and then, without warning, Blair flung his jacket at her and rushed forward to grab her gun hand.

Nadia screamed, shocked and surprised by his unexpected assault, as she lifted her gun toward Blair.

Jim shouted, "No!" and leapt forward, intending to shove Sandburg out of the way, just as Blair grabbed her wrist, wrestling for control of the weapon. The gun exploded, deafening – and everyone froze, shocked by the violence, the immediacy of deadly force.

Then, panting from exertion, Blair shoved her backward, into the door, even as he wrenched the gun from her limp fingers. "Give me that before you hurt someone," he growled.

"Sandburg, are you nuts?" Jim yelled, pushing Blair away from her. "She could have killed you!"

"Yeah? You think? Well, she was definitely going to kill you, man! I wasn't about to just stand there and watch her do it!" Blair yelled back as he watched Jim turn her around and cuff her wrists. Her weapon gripped tightly in his fist, he raked his hair back off his face with his other hand.

Footsteps thundered out of the stairwell as uniformed cops rushed to the door, weapons drawn. Jim flashed his badge to slow them down before they shot Blair by mistake. "Ellison, Major Crime," he snapped. "Put up your weapons. It's all over. Sandburg, give them her gun." Pushing Nadia toward them, he added, "Read her her rights and take her downtown. Book her with..." He sighed and shook his head, wondering where to start. "With bank robbery, conspiracy to commit murder, assault, and I'll figure out the rest later."

"Yes, sir," the younger cop replied with brisk efficiency and, taking her arm, led her from the apartment.

The older uniform looked from Jim to Blair and back again. "You sure everything's alright here?" he demanded as he relieved Blair of her gun.

Jim nodded. "Yes, thanks, your timing's impeccable."

The cop nodded. "We were only a block away when we got the call: 'Officer needs assistance'."

Jim quirked a brow at Sandburg who shrugged and nodded. "You don't think I'd waltz in here without calling for backup first, do you?" he asked with a weak grin. "I came up the far staircase and heard you guys talking – well, her screaming at you. I just opened the closer stairwell door to let you know I was coming in. I was just trying to stall her."

Speechless, Jim waved the cop out and closed the door. He didn't know whether he wanted to hug the kid or strangle him. Turning, he asked with deceptive softness, "You deliberately walked in here, knowing the danger?" he clarified.

"Well, duh!" Blair retorted. "What did you expect me to do? Stand out there twiddling my thumbs while she shot you?" He shook his head. "I heard you. Trying to reason with her. And you know what? I could tell, man – you didn't sound surprised. Because you expected her to draw down on you, didn't you? What is wrong with you? Why didn't you tell me you suspected she was in on it all along? Huh? Why did you go along with this dinner idea? She could have killed you!"

"What's wrong with me?" Jim thundered back as he came up close to loom over Blair. He poked a rigid finger into Blair's chest. "You deliberately walked into a dangerous situation. Are you out of your mind? How many times do you have to be told? You're not a cop, Sandburg! God damn it; she could have killed you!"

Blair slapped Jim's hand away. Seething, he shouted back, "I know I'm not a cop, dammit!"

"Then why would you risk –"

"Because I'm your friend, dumb ass! Because you're worth it! She was going to kill you, Jim. She was..." His voice cracked and he looked away, shaking his head. "I couldn't stand out there and just listen to her shoot you, man."

Jim grabbed his arms, intending to give him a good shaking, but felt Blair trembling under his hands; he belatedly realized all the bravado was covering thinly-contained terror. "Ah, Chief," he sighed, all the fight gone as he drew Blair into a hug. "You scared the hell out of me," he murmured, as Blair's arms came around him, hugging him back, hands fisting in his shirt, holding on tight.

"I really thought she was going to shoot you," Blair replied, his voice shaking. "I was more scared today than I was yesterday, when she held the gun to my head. I didn't know she was one of the bad guys then."

Jim nodded in understanding. "I wasn't sure she was until she pulled the gun on me." Easing out of the hug, he stepped away. "I wouldn't've gone along with the dinner idea if I'd known she was going to pull something like this."

"But you suspected she might," Blair accused, but without heat. "I'm sorry. I should never have just assumed she was on the side of the angels."

Jim shook his head. "Don't apologize, Sandburg. You see the best in people, and that's not a bad thing. If she was a stone cold killer, she wouldn't've hesitated to shoot you, too. She's, well, she's just...."

"Crazy," Blair supplied. "Just like her daughter, or maybe Veronica's crazy because of her." He wandered into the kitchen and pulled two beers out of the fridge. "It's just sad, man. The horrible stories people tell themselves, fueling their anger, unable to just accept life isn't what they wish it was or that bad stuff happens." He gave Jim a long, steady look as he crossed the floor to hand him a beer. "Stop blaming yourself. I can see it in your eyes ... but this wasn't your fault. Her insanity isn't your fault. Shit happens, that's it, that's all."

Jim nodded as he twisted off the bottle cap and then took a long swallow. “Okay, Chief, how about this: I’ll stop blaming myself if you’ll promise never to do anything so stupid again. Okay? Do we have a deal?”

Blair gave him a slow smile, then as slowly shook his head. “Hey, man, haven’t you heard? I’m a genius. I don’t do stupid stuff.”

Jim snorted, but before he could say anything else, Blair looked at the floor. “I’m surprised you haven’t noticed it yet.”

“What?” Jim asked with a frown, confused by the change in topic, not sure what Sandburg was referring to.

“The floor, man,” Blair replied, his tone droll. “She shot your floor, Jim. She shot your floor.”

“Sonuva –” Jim snapped when he finally noticed the deep gouge in the gleaming hardwood. He’d put hours into sanding and staining that floor.

But Blair’s rollicking laugh was all he needed to let it go. Blair slapped him lightly on the back as he said, “Don’t worry. I’ll help you fix it this weekend.”

“Yeah, well, you better, seeing as how you’re the one who provoked her into killing the floor.”

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” Blair challenged, but his grin only widened, his eyes sparkling with such good humor Jim couldn’t help but laugh in return.

Blair held out his bottle, “Peace, man,” he offered. “I’m just glad you’re alive.”

Jim clinked his bottle against Blair’s. “Thanks, Sandburg,” he said, meaning it.

“Anytime, Jim. For you? Anytime.”

“Now, see, that’s the problem,” Jim began, linking an arm around Blair’s shoulders to steer him toward the living room. But he was interrupted by the peal of the phone. Rolling his eyes, feeling put upon and beleaguered, he spun around and went to the kitchen to answer. “Ellison!” he barked, then relaxed. “Ah, yeah, Simon, hi. What? She worked at Sandford Security? Well, guess that explains the insider information.” He listened and nodded, a grin lighting his face. “Oh, yeah, well, about dinner. Don’t worry, she won’t be joining us. We’ve got lots, though. Pasta, if you want to come by.” He nodded again. “See you in a bit.”

“You didn’t tell him?” Blair quipped.

“Nah,” Jim said with a grin, as he tipped the bottle toward his lips. “I figure it will make a good story over dinner. I’ll let you tell him what a hero you are. Well, my hero, anyway,” he added, cheerfully – and with no little sarcasm – echoing Blair’s words from the evening before.

Blair shook his head, his smile vanishing as he stared at Jim like a deer in the headlights. “Maybe she was right. You’re just evil, man. You know Simon’ll yell at me even louder than you just did.”

“Nah, you think?” Jim teased as he turned back to the kitchen. “I’ll start the sauce and you make the salad.”

“Evil,” Blair repeated, with a slow shake of his head. “See if I ever save your life again.”

Busy unpacking the grocery bags, Jim just smiled.

**Finis**