



# Fool's Gold

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## Prologue

The book was older than it looked, by several centuries. However, the leather was as supple as when it was first bound. Time had made neither pictures nor the writing fade; they were as sharp and crisp as the day they were made.

The large tome was opened wide. A hand turned the pages slowly and reverently but with purpose. Stories were skimmed over as the reader searched for a particular story. After several minutes the reader stopped, having found what they were looking for.

The person frowned over the story, obviously not liking what was being read. One slender finger tapped the pages, contemplating what to do, before the figure leaned back.

“Hmmmmm. What to do? What to do?” the figure mused. “Something needs to be done with this story or it’s all going to end in a mess.”

The reader closed their eyes as they mulled over the situation. The expression on their face changed as ideas were contemplated and discarded until a solution comes to mind. Their head tilted to one side as they mused out loud, “That just might work. It will take a little...creative planning.” The mouth curved up into a smirk. “And a little manipulation,” was added.

“... So tell me again Sandburg, what in the hell are we doing out in the ass end of nowhere,” Jim said. He took his attention away from the road for a moment to glance over at his Guide.

Said guide, Blair Sandburg, wiped a hand over the right side of his forehead in frustration. After a moment or two he glanced back at his Sentinel, Jim Ellison, and shook his head. “Geez, Jim, I’ve already told you this a dozen times or more...”

“It hasn’t been a dozen times Sandburg,” Ellison said.

Blair squeezed his eyes shut and ground out, “I was using it as a metaphor, Ellison.”

The use of his last name caused the Cascade detective to give his younger friend a quick glance. It wasn’t often that Blair used people’s last names as was the custom among a lot of men Jim knew. For Blair to be using Jim’s last name meant that he was really ticked off.

“As I was saying,” Blair said through gritted teeth, “I have been corresponding with Mr. Gold for a few years now and he contacted me the other day to let me know that he’s found a rare dagger from the Middle Ages and he wants my help in translating the writing.”

“How have you been corresponding with Gold? I’ve never seen you send a letter from the loft since you’ve lived there.”

Blair rolled his eyes and looked over at Jim. “It’s called emailing. You know, the inter-net,” the anthropologist said exaggerating the last two words.

“Don’t be a smartass Sandburg.”

“Then don’t be such a jerk, Jim,” Blair said, glaring back at him. “I am so sick and tired of having to explain every fact that I know to you and everybody else.” The anthropologist held up a hand, stopping Ellison from speaking. “I know, I know I’m not a cop. I’ve heard that enough from you and Simon to last me a lifetime.”

“Well, you’re not a cop Sandburg.”

“No shit, Ellison. I never claimed to be one or pretended that I was one. I’m a scientist who is helping a friend and Sentinel. You all are so quick to ask for my help doing research but then you need to have the evidence corroborated before you believe anything I say.”

“Yeah,” Jim said as if Blair had stated the obvious. “As cops we need verification of all facts.”

“Then why ask me for the information in the first place? And why is it that you do the exact same thing to me even when we’re not at the station?”

The detective glanced over at Blair and frowned, not giving him an answer. The younger man threw up his hands in frustration and turned to look out the window at the rapidly passing scenery. They ended the conversation, neither one satisfied.

An hour later the two men were still sitting in silence. Jim had been thinking about the earlier conversation and he realized there was some truth to what Blair had said. He honestly had no idea why he constantly questioned the younger man, but it was true that he did more than was necessary. The Sentinel wasn't sure how to reopen the conversation, because let's face it, as an Ellison it'd been hardwired into his brain that apologizing was something he didn't do.

Jim opened his mouth to say something, he wasn't exactly sure what, when a sudden chill ran all over his body making him shiver and the truck swerved into the far lane. Luckily for them there was nobody in the other lane, in fact, they hadn't seen anyone on this road for miles.

"Whoa!" Blair reached out a hand and grabbed hold of the 'oh shit' handle. "What the hell?" he asked as he looked over at his companion.

"I don't know," Jim admitted. "I felt a chill all of a sudden. Did you crank up the AC or something?" Ellison asked, giving the observer a suspicious look; his previous thoughts of apology fleeing out the window.

Blair let go of the emergency handle and looked over at Jim. "Yeah right. Like I can move a muscle without you seeing it and like I would be the one to make it colder in the first place." The Guide looked back at the Sentinel, worried. "You felt a chill? Are you feeling okay?" Blair raised his hand intending to touch Jim's forehead to check for a fever—he never got the chance.

Ellison brushed Blair's hand away before it could ever come in contact with his skin. "I'm fine," he barked out, feeling irritated for some reason. "It is just a weird feeling and no, before you can suggest it we don't need to do any damn tests."

"Excuse the hell out of me for caring." Blair brushed his brown curls out of his face and instead turned to face forward once again.

The detective gripped the wheel and glared at the road. Once again he felt he had slighted Blair but he wasn't sure how. On the right side of the road Jim noticed a sign that read Storybrooke.

'Well, what a weird name for a town,' he thought to himself. Jim didn't say it out loud for fear of starting another argument. What was ironic was Blair was thinking the exact same thing.

“This place is weird,” Jim muttered under his breath.

“Weird? How is it weird?” Blair asked looking around in puzzlement.

The Sentinel glanced over at Blair, surprised that he’d heard him. The two men were sitting at the only stoplight in town, at least as far as they could see, and it had allowed the detective to let his senses roam for a few moments.

“I don’t know, everything just seems...off.” Ellison frowned, frustrated that he couldn’t describe what he was sensing better.

“Off,” Blair said, thinking out loud. “So... what, do you hear something, see something, smell something. What?”

“No, nothing that I can point out with one sense or the other. Just a feeling of wrongness.” Ellison glanced around at the people walking on the sidewalks, looking in shops, generally going about their everyday routines and winced at the wrongness of it. “They’re all just... different.”

Jim rolled down the window of his truck a few inches just to let in some fresh air. A pretty young woman with long black hair with red streaks running through it paused in front of a window. She had a very short skirt and a formfitting T-shirt...and she smelled like a dog. A wet dog.

‘No, not really a dog, like a wolf,’ Jim thought to himself, frowning.

The detective glanced over at his companion expecting to see him eyeing the young woman, only to notice that Blair was looking over at him, a resigned look on his face. Jim glanced back at the canine smelling woman and realized that under normal circumstances either he or Blair would be giving her the once over; Blair because she looked pretty and intelligent (how one could look intelligent he didn’t know) and Jim because she had red in her hair. For a moment, the Sentinel wondered why he had such a predilection for redheads.

“Hi, Killian,” a young woman’s voice called out cheerfully. Jim glanced up and sure enough it was the young woman with the black and red hair talking. She had a bright smile on her ruby coated lips and was waving a hand energetically.

The detective followed her gaze and saw a handsome man with dark hair on his head and face and bright blue eyes. The man looked up at the young woman’s greeting and waved back.

“Hi, Ruby,” Killian answered back.

The Sentinel extended his sense of smell and realized the young man smelled salty and briny, like the ocean. Also, the hand that was waving at Ruby had something metallic in it. Jim tensed, preparing himself to jump out of the truck if what he’d seen turned out to be a gun or some other

weapon. The young woman didn't seem to be worried as she crossed the street to meet him. Ellison dialed up his sense of sight and relaxed slightly when he saw that it wasn't a gun but rather a hook.

'A hook?' he thought in astonishment. 'Who the hell wears that for prosthetics anymore?'

Right then, while Jim was musing about redheads, hooks and animal smells on young women, a tall man with thinning curly hair and glasses walked in front of their truck, an umbrella in one hand and his dog's leash in the other. The man glanced over at the two men in the truck and nodded his head giving his bright smile before continuing on. Again, Jim smelled something odd on the person. It was a more...earthy smell.



'Earthy?' The detective wondered.

"Yeah, they're all wackos," Blair said with a touch of sarcasm.

Jim looked from the retreating figure over to Blair, surprised at the comment. He was so used to Blair believing anything he said that the skepticism was startling.

'I guess I know how Blair feels now,' the Sentinel thought to himself. He didn't say anything out loud deciding to keep the revelation to himself, for now.

The light changed to green and Jim drove down the main street. "What is this Gold's address again?" he asked, looking for address numbers on the businesses.

Blair reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a piece of folded paper. Unfolding it he read out loud, “Let’s see. Huh, that’s strange he doesn’t give an address. It just says Main Street.” The anthropologist’s brow furrowed as he puzzled over the lack of an address.

“No address. Sandburg, if you’ve led us here on a wild goose chase...”

Blair interrupted before Jim could finish that threat. “Lighten up, Jim. It’s a small town with one main street. It’s not like there’s going to be a plethora of businesses with the name Gold.”

“No, just one,” the Sentinel said as he pulled up in front of a building on which the sign read Mr. Gold Pawnbroker & Antiquities Dealer. “A pawn shop? Really?”

Blair leaned forward in his seat looking at the big sign hanging over the building. “And antiquities,” he countered.

“Same thing. I’ll say it again, kid. If this is a big run around...”



Yet again, the younger man kept Jim from saying what he wanted to by the simple expedient of unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out of the truck. Swearing under his breath, Ellison did the same and followed him into the building.

The tinkling of the bell over the front door sent Jim's already irritated nerves into overdrive. The Sentinel gritted his teeth and, for Blair's sake, tried to have a positive attitude. Glancing around the room Jim decided it wouldn't be easy to keep his spirits up especially since they had been acting wonky since he and Blair had stepped, well drove actually, into town.

Ellison's cop instincts took over and he took a closer look at the shop's inventory. Nothing too tacky, not like you'd normally see in a pawn shop. In fact, upon closer look the objects for sale seemed to be more upscale, like you would see from an estate sale rather than from people desperate for money and selling things. That unicorn mobile that was hanging in the corner of the shop was very well crafted and looked like it would've belonged in a very rich child's bedroom.

Of course, there were one or two things that were downright creepy. The two dolls that were leaning against a shelf especially set Jim's nerves twitching. They were made out of wood and dressed in the clothes from a couple of hundred years ago or thereabouts but the frightening thing was that the dolls looked like they were screaming. Their mouths had been carved open into a desperate scream.

'I sure as hell wouldn't buy them for any child of mine,' the detective thought to himself. 'Maybe that's why they're here gathering dust,' Ellison thought cynically.

"Well, you must be Blair Sandburg," a voice in an accent Jim couldn't place said. It was quickly followed by a middle-aged man about Blair's height with light brown hair and an interesting smile. He seemed friendly enough but as with all of the other people Jim had seen in town the shop owner set the detective's nerves to screaming.

Blair stuck out a hand to be shaken and the other man, Jim presumed him to be Mr. Gold, gave Blair a warm handshake. Ellison nodded when the antique dealer greeted him. However, the Sentinel stayed well back from the counter; there was no way in hell he was going to voluntarily touch anybody in this town.

Jim wiped a hand across the back of his neck trying to get rid of the sensation of ants crawling all over his skin. He sent out his senses of hearing and smell around the shop and as far out into the street as he dared, but again he couldn't find anything that he could actually point to that would explain his sense of wrongness.

A dog, probably the one he had seen with the man walking earlier, had left a deposit not too far down the street. That was the only sort of litter that Jim could smell. The Sentinel could smell newly mown grass and dirt but that was about it.

'Maybe that's the problem' Jim thought to himself. 'There is nothing to smell.' In most towns, no matter how small, you would smell discarded food wrappers, trash cans overflowing with

refuse, that kind of thing. However, in Storybrooke there weren't any of those smells. It was so clean here that it was like nobody was living here at all.

"...and here it is,"

While Jim had been letting his senses roam Blair and Mr. Gold had been continuing their conversation. It irritated the ex-Ranger to realize that he had let his guard down, even for a few moments. He walked purposefully over to the counter to stand beside Blair. Ellison kept a neutral look on his face trying not to let on that he had no idea what the two men were talking about.

"Oh my, what wonderful craftsmanship," Blair gushed enthusiastically as was his wont when anything anthropological or archaeological came up. "May I hold it?"

"Of course," the older man said, handing over the knife with a smile on his face.

Blair took the antique reverently, turning it this way and that as he examined it. "Is it an athame?"

"No, although it does resemble one," the shop owner said in his unique accent. The older man glanced up and saw Jim standing there. He gestured the Sentinel closer with one hand as he said, "You can come closer, dearie, I promise it won't bite."

Ellison scowled at the shop owner, his nerves already irritated beyond belief. "I can see just fine, thank you very much. And, by the way, my name is Detective Ellison, not dearie."

The anthropologist was busy studying the knife, too busy to pay that much attention to the byplay between Jim and Mr. Gold. Turning the knife this way and that he had just discovered that there was writing on the blade and was about to investigate it when his halfway tuned in brain decided to slap him upside the head and tell them to pay attention.

Blair glanced up from the knife in surprise. Jim's bad mood had been obvious for hours, if not longer, but he usually didn't take it out on civilians. And his being irritated at nicknames was rather ironic considering the number of pet names he had for Blair.

The Guide gave his friend a deliberate stare hoping against hope that the Sentinel would take the hint and lay off. Sandburg considered Mr. Gold as an online friend he didn't want to lose because Jim was in a pissy mood. Ellison didn't even notice.



Mentally Blair rolled his eyes. Really he didn't understand why he even tried sometimes; it's not like Jim listened to him that much. Sandburg prepared himself to try and make peace, both with his Sentinel and with his online friend.

"Is it really?" Gold asked, a patient look on his face, like Jim's ire didn't even faze him. "What kind of detective are you? A private d-detective?"

Ellison narrowed his eyes almost certain, but nothing he could prove, that the shop owner had been about to say private dick. "I'm a detective with the Major Crimes division of the Cascade Police Department," he said through his teeth.

"Ah, yes. Where Blair is from." The older man turned away from Jim, effectively dismissing the detective and spoke to Blair. "That's in Washington state, isn't it?"

Blair smiled at the shop owner. "Yes, it is."

Jim was even more irritated for some reason. It bothered him to be considered an add on to Sandburg and not the other way round. The Sentinel frowned as he realized how petty that made him sound. Deciding to ignore the strange feelings he was having Ellison looked over Blair's shoulder and down at the knife he was still holding. Any thoughts of tempering his attitude flew out the window when he saw what was written there.

"Rumpelstiltskin," he said in disbelief, his voice rising as he felt a wave of red-hot rage hit him at the obvious ruse that had been played on them. "What the hell kind of trick is this anyway?"

Blair was looking at the writing on the knife and frowning. "Rumpelstiltskin?" Blair's voice, however, was more questioning than accusatory. "What..." Whatever Blair had been about to say was interrupted by the Sentinel's voice.

"I ought to have this place shut down and searched just on general principles," Jim growled out his threat.

"And just who do you think you are, dearie?" Gold drawled out, obviously not worried by the threat.

"I am James Joseph Ellison, a detective with the Cascade Police Department. And I..."

"Have absolutely no authority in this town," the shop owner reminded Ellison, a smirk on his face.

That statement shut Jim up, because he knew Gold was right; he was helpless in this town. His blue eyes flashing, Jim placed his fists on his hips and stared at the older man. It irritated him to no end that his glare didn't seem to impress the owner at all.

“Well, I'll just go find somebody with the authority to do something.” With that pronouncement Ellison turned and walked out the door, slamming it behind him and making the little bell tinkle like crazy. Oh yes, and just incidentally, leaving his Guide behind.

Blair stared at the door, his ears still ringing from the violent tinkling of the bell caused by Jim's slamming of the door, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. The Guide knew that Jim had been on edge all day; truthfully he'd been out of sorts for more than a week.

‘Hmm, about the same time I got the invitation from Gold,’ Blair thought to himself.

After deciding that staring at the door wasn't going to make the Sentinel magically reappear Sandburg turned back to his host. He thought about apologizing for Jim's behavior but then realized he didn't have anything to apologize for and, glancing down at the knife he was still holding, Blair wasn't certain that some of Jim's anger wasn't warranted.

“So, Rumpelstiltskin?”

Once on the sidewalk, Jim paused. It occurred to him that he had just left Blair alone with someone obviously untrustworthy and he had no idea where the police station was. After the scene he had just made he couldn't very well go back inside the shop and ask for directions to the local constabulary. Knowing that he hadn't seen a police station on the drive into town the Sentinel started walking in the opposite direction.

“Hi, mister.” A young boy about 11 or 12 was sitting on a bench in front of one of the shop's windows.

Jim nodded at the young man's smiling face and decided to trust him; he looked honest and Jim's sense of smell could detect no deception. And, wonder of wonders, the younger man didn't smell unusual.

“Are you lost?” the boy asked.

“Yeah I seem to be. How did you know?” Ellison asked, his brow furrowing.

“We don’t get any visitors here,” the young man stated categorically.

Ellison gave the young man a second, more intense look. “None at all, huh?” the detective asked sardonically. Absently the Sentinel noticed that the young man had a large leather satchel in his lap, a rather unusual book bag for someone so young.

‘It looks like something Sandburg would carry,’ Ellison thought to himself.

“Nope,” the boy quipped. A thoughtful look crossed his young face and he tilted his head to one side, obviously thinking. “No, I take that back. There have been at least two strangers in town that I can remember.”

Jim was seriously reconsidering his evaluation of the boy being entirely normal. After all, no matter how small a town was there were always visitors. Always.

“Hi, Hook,” the young man called out suddenly.

Jim turned to look at who the young man was waving at and sure enough it was the man he had seen earlier, the one with a hook for a hand. He frowned, amazed that the man with an artificial hand didn’t seem to be offended by the nickname. But it was obvious from the smile on the bearded man’s face that not only was he unoffended but he considered the young man a friend.

“Hi there, Henry,” he called back as he continued down the sidewalk.

Ellison looked back at the boy and opened his mouth to ask him about some of the peculiarities the Sentinel had noticed in the town, but before he could say anything the young man began to speak again.

“So, yeah, like I said we don’t have visitors.” Not, very many visitors or just a few, but an absolute none.

“Uh huh,” the detective said, staring at the young man.

The Sentinel dialed up his sense of sight and looked down the street as far as he possibly could without his Guide there to ground him and still did not find any signs of a police station. Setting his sight back to normal Jim glanced down at the young man sitting on the bench. The boy had an amused little smile on his face and it was easy to see that Jim’s skepticism hadn’t gone unnoticed. Not that it seemed to bother him.

“What, or who, are you looking for?”

“I need to find somebody in charge around here; I want to file a complaint,” Ellison said, his fisted hands once more on his hips.

“Well, either of my moms would fit that bill.”

This, at least, seemed normal to Jim. Or rather, more normal.

“Moms? As in more than one? Have they taken advantage of the recent change in legislation and gotten married?” The detective asked in an entirely nonjudgmental tone of voice.

The young man’s eyebrows shot up and placed his hands over his mouth but wasn’t successful in hiding his giggles. “Married? My moms? To each other?” The younger man gave up trying to hold in his laughter and for the better part of a minute he was laughing so hard he was doubled over before he managed to get control of himself.

“Sorry,” he said wiping a hand over his eyes. “I wasn’t laughing at you.” Seeing the frown that Jim was giving him the boy waved a hand as if to clear the air. “No, seriously I wasn’t. I was just imagining their reactions to that suggestion. You see, I was adopted and when I was 10 years old I found my birth mother, so now I have two moms.”

“Oh, I see. Uh, sorry about that, kid.” Jim’s cheeks tinged pink in embarrassment at his assumption.

“No problem. Oh, by the way, my name is Henry,” the young man said sticking his hand out to be shaken.

“My name is Jim Ellison,” he said shaking the younger man’s hand. “What are your moms’ jobs?”

“Well, my birth mom is the sheriff. Her office is back that way,” Henry pointed back the opposite direction Jim had been looking. “My adoptive mom is the mayor and her office is a couple doors down,” this time Henry used his thumb to point in the direction Jim was facing.

Deciding to go with the closest option Jim thanked the boy and headed off down the sidewalk.

Still sitting on the bench, Henry watched the stranger stomping away. In a quiet and amused tone of voice, Henry muttered out loud, “Mom’s going to eat him alive.”

Not more than two or three minutes later Henry heard the bell that hung over the pawn shop door chime and he turned his head, interested in what would happen next. A man, not very tall but not exceptionally short either, with long curly brown hair hurried out of the door and turned his head quickly in either direction, moving so fast that Henry could actually hear his hair swishing back and forth. The man’s bright blue eyes spotted Henry almost immediately.

“Hello, Henry,” a man’s voice called out.

“Hi, Archie,” the young boy called back.

Blair gave a semi-interested glance over and saw the man with the Dalmatian he and Jim had seen when first coming into town.' I wonder what Jim sensed about him that set his alarms off. He seems like a regular guy to me.'

The anthropologist wondered what it was about this town that had Jim's nerves on edge. Of course, if Blair were to be totally honest with himself (and he usually was) then he had to admit that the detective's behavior the last several months had been off. The latest indication was Jim leaving for his vacation to Clayton Falls at the last minute. No planning weeks in advance. No strategizing the best and most efficient route to the spot. And most importantly, since he wanted to leave Blair behind, which was fine, but he didn't leave a 'what not to do list' for Blair to follow.

The Guide admitted to himself that he had been hurt by the exclusion. Until that time Jim had always insisted that Blair accompany him on any trip, citing that he might need Blair's help with his senses.

'So maybe this isn't as much of an aberration as I thought,' Blair thought to himself.

"Hey," the man started speaking even before he got to Henry, "have you seen..."

Henry, normally a very polite young boy, interrupted him. "A tall, really intense and angry man."

"Yeah, how did you know?" the handsome man asked, his brow furrowing.

"Just a hunch," Henry said with a smile. The young man pointed down the street and said, "He went that direction. The third building on the right, big office at the top of the stairs. You can't miss it."

The man glanced the way Henry was pointing and nodded his head. "Thank you very much."

"You're very welcome," Henry said to his retreating back. As he watched the stranger leave, he said again, very quietly and with a twinkle in his eye, "Yep, she's going to eat them alive."

Blair raced up the stairs as fast as his legs would carry him, because even just outside the front door to the building he could hear two people arguing. One male, obviously Jim, and one female, presumably the mayor. The anthropologist rolled his eyes and silently thought to himself, 'Jim sure knows how to make friends'.

He gave the closed door a perfunctory knock just to be polite before turning the knob and going inside. The scene he walked in on made him want to smack his head in frustration. Jim was standing in front of an elaborate desk, hands clenched into fists on his hips and even from where Blair was standing he could see that little vein on Jim's temple throbbing and a muscle in his jaw twitching. Sure signs that the detective's temper was boiling.

Standing behind the desk, her arms crossed over her chest, was a very attractive dark-haired woman. From the irritated look on her face it was easy to see that the couple of minutes Jim had by himself with her had been enough to ensure that whatever help Ellison wanted was likely not to be forthcoming.

"... So what are you going to do about it?" Jim asked through gritted teeth.

"And what exactly do you expect me to do, Mr. Ellison?" the mayor asked.

"Arrest him!" the detective said waving his arms as if that conclusion was obvious.

The dark-haired woman raised an elegant eyebrow and smiled at Jim although Blair could almost see the ice in her eyes. "On what charge exactly?"

The Sentinel waved his hands around, sputtering slightly. From the look on his handsome face it seemed to Blair that the detective's mind was racing to come up with a suitable charge.

"I don't know," Jim finally admitted. "How about fraud," he offered.

"So, Gold tried to sell something to you or your friend?" She nodded her head toward Blair.

"No," Ellison admitted reluctantly. "But he did lure us here on false pretenses."

The mayor walked out from behind her desk to stand in front of Jim. She uncrossed her arms and leaned negligently against the desk as if to say that her conversation with the Sentinel wasn't important.

Blair could see the vein and muscle in Jim's face going into overtime and knew that he had to do something quick before this escalated and they either ended up in jail or Jim's head exploded. Knowing that Ellison was probably going to react badly Blair inserted himself into the conversation, anyway.

"No, ma'am. Mr. Gold did exactly what he said he would." The Sentinel turned to glare at the younger man, but Blair continued on. "When I talked to him online Mr. Gold told me that he had

an ancient knife that he wanted me to look at. He did and I did. My friend reacted badly to the writing on the knife, perhaps rightly concluding that it was a fake.”

The ex-Ranger’s face was taking on a distinctly reddish hue when he turned to face Blair.  
“Perhaps? There is no perhaps about it. The fricken’ knife had Rumpelstiltskin engraved on it, for pity’s sake,” Jim expostulated.

“Yes, I know that and I can’t explain it, however, the knife does appear to be old.”

Out of the corner of his eye Sandburg saw a look of amazement cross over the mayor’s face and he looked away from Jim to see what had caused the surprise. She crossed her legs one over the other and Blair glanced down and thought to himself, ‘nice shoes,’ as he looked at the red heels.

“He actually showed you the dagger?”

Blair smiled his most winning smile hoping that he could pour oil on the troubled waters, so to speak. “Yes, ma’am,” he said politely. “He did.” The anthropologist was mulling over in his head why that would be so significant when Jim grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him behind the detective.

“The why doesn’t really matter,” Jim said. “What does matter is that my friend here was lured to this town on false pretenses. If I hadn’t come along who knows what would’ve happened to him.”

Although Blair couldn’t see it, Jim’s back currently being in the way, he heard the mayor laugh, a deep, throaty and altogether sexy laugh. “Oh, I see. That’s the way it is, is it?”

“What do you...?”



Blair had a brief moment to wonder what she was talking about, then the mayor stepped away from her desk and into Blair's line of sight. The Guide could almost see the power sparkling around her in an aura that looked like Fourth of July fireworks going off. Sandburg wondered if the Sentinel could see it. She raised a hand and waved it in his direction. A path of purple smoke flew from her fingertips towards the observer and suddenly Blair's world changed.

Jim didn't actually see the aura that Blair did but he could sense the raw power flowing off the woman. He tensed when she waved her hand at Blair but he didn't move because what could an empty hand do. Purple smoke emanating from her fingertips changed his mind. He swiveled his head around so fast that the tendons in his neck actually creaked only to find... No Blair.

Croak.

The Sentinel glanced down at the floor and where Blair had once been now stood a medium-sized green frog. Ellison blinked his pale blue eyes unable to believe what he was seeing.

"What in the hell?! What have you done?"

With a self-satisfied smirk on her face the mayor gestured to the amphibian sitting on her carpeted floor. "I would think it's fairly obvious what I did," she said. "I just turned your friend into a frog."

"You...what? But that's impossible," Jim stated the truth as he knew it.

"Then where is your friend, Sandburg isn't it?" the mayor said leaning back against the desk in a relaxed pose.

Ellison looked back and forth between the mayor and Blairfrog several times. "I..."

"I'm assuming that you want your friend back," she waved a hand at the frog, "the way he was of course...before."

"I...of course I want Blair back," he admitted after a little more sputtering.

"Well then it's easy, all you have to do is kiss him."

The Sentinel looked at the dark-haired woman like she had grown a second head. "Kiss? The frog?" Jim looked down at the innocent frog who was gazing back at him.

"No, I mean me," she said sarcastically and rolled her eyes. "Since your young friend is the one who is now a frog, naturally you would have to kiss him." She peered at him and asked questioningly, "Haven't you heard of the Frog Prince?"



“Yes of course I have. What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?” Jim asked in a slightly belligerent tone; he didn’t want to anger this powerful woman any more than he already had.

“Well then how did the story end? The girl kissed the frog and he turned into a prince.” She gave the Sentinel the once over and shrugged. “There are a few minor changes but you get the gist of the idea.”

The detective glanced down at the little frog, a frown on his face. “Kiss it?”

“Yes,” the mayor drawled out the word. “Hopefully you are aware of the concept,” she answered dryly. Walking back behind her desk she bent down and picked up a rectangular box. “Here.” She waited until the befuddled man looked up from his contemplation of the amphibian before tossing it to him. Jim caught it easily. “Since you don’t look like you’re going to kiss him any time soon you’ll need this.”

Jim looked at the box she had thrown him. The white lid read Michael Kors. Ellison had no idea who the hell that was, but since he was holding a shoebox the detective went out on a limb and decided he must make shoes. Still being more than a little off-balance from all that had happened in the last few minutes, the ex-Ranger gave the mayor a questioning look. The pretty woman rolled her dark eyes.

“Unless you plan on carrying him around in your hand you might want to put him in the box. Do you have a pocket knife?”

“Yes,” Jim half-way asked it as a question.

“To poke holes in the box,” she spoke very slowly, as if to someone with a serious head injury. “Unless you want him to suffocate.”

The Sentinel glanced from the box to the frog, back to the mayor and back to the box again. In a daze he reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small knife and began to poke a few holes in the top of the box.

Jim walked down the sidewalk in a daze, a stunned look on his face. The Sentinel kept looking down at the box he was carrying in his hands. Because of his distraction every once in a while he would stumble, making him look like an overgrown drunken child carrying his worldly treasures around in a shoebox.

“Are you all right, mister?” the young boy he had been talking to earlier asked.

“Yeah mate, you look befuddled.”

“Befuddled?” one of the women asked, amusement clear in her voice.

“Yeah...befuddled. It’s a good word and fits the situation,” he defended.

“True but it doesn’t really sound like you.”

Rolling his eyes the man tried again. “All right fine, you look like my brother, Liam, did that time we made port and he kissed a girl in a bar only to find out she was a guy instead,” the man with a hook for a hand quipped, an amused and reminiscent smile curving his lips. “Is that better?” he asked sarcastically.

“Much,” she chirped.

The attractive blonde haired woman standing beside him ignored the byplay between the tall dark-haired woman with red and black hair and her companion and she gave the dark-haired man a backhanded smack on the chest. “Killian, don’t tease. Can’t you see that something has upset him?” She turned to face Ellison and gave him a warm inviting smile. “I’m Sheriff Emma Swan,” she introduced herself, “can I help you?”



Jim, who quite frankly was in too much of a state to pay attention to what the man with the hook was saying, looked up. The detective gave a quick glance at the waiting group trying to decide what to tell them, he certainly couldn't tell them the truth.

"She turned him into a frog," he blurted out. Maybe he could tell them the truth, after all.

"She who?" the sheriff asked.

"Uh Mom, he probably meant Mom."

The blonde woman turned to face the young man, her eyebrows raised. "Why would he go see Regina?"

"And how would you know where he was going, anyway?" asked Killian as he gave Henry a fond look.

"Well," the boy began hesitantly, "I kind of sent him there," he admitted. "He came out of the pawn shop really mad and said he wanted to see somebody in charge." Sheriff Swan raised her eyebrows at him and he continued, "Since your office was way down that way," Henry pointed to his left, "and Mom's office is just a couple doors down he decided to see her instead." The young man gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders tactically denying culpability.

"Ah," the sheriff stated, turning back to face Ellison. Seeing Jim still standing there with the box in his outstretched arms she gently lifted the lid on the cardboard box, asking, "May I?"

Jim gave a slight nod of his head and watched as Blairfrog appeared. He gave a slight whimper before deciding that didn't sound very manly and he cleared his throat.

Several of the people standing around him leaned forward to look inside the box. No one seemed particularly surprised to find a frog inside. Jim didn't know which surprised him more the fact that Blair was now a frog or that no one seemed particularly shocked.

"So, you came out of Gold's shop, pissed off, and you," she waved a hand at Henry, "sent him to Regina. And I'm assuming that you," she pointed to Jim, "were still ticked off when you got to her office." She peered over the edge of the box at Blairfrog. "He followed along and got caught up in the aftermath. Am I right?"

Ellison thought over what the sheriff had said and nodded his head in agreement. "Pretty much, yeah."

Emma sighed and shook her head. "Regina," she said with a deep sigh.

Her comment was echoed by couple of the other people. "That's Mom for you," Henry said and Jim could swear he saw a hint of a smile.

"Why am I not surprised," Killian said.

‘Yes, why aren’t you surprised?’ Jim thought to himself.

“Soooo this is a problem,” the sheriff stated.

“Obviously,” Jim said in a subdued tone. He didn’t react as he normally would because quite frankly he was afraid to piss off anybody else in this whacked out town

Killian scratched his bearded chin as he eyed Blairfrog in the box. “Did she give you an out?”

“An out?” the Sentinel asked.

“Yeah, mate. A way for you to turn him back to normal,” the man with the hook for a hand asked as if it was the most obvious question in the world.

The ex-Ranger glanced around at the crowd uneasily and several people, seeing that he was loathe to talk in front of them, said their goodbyes and left. When it was just Jim, Sheriff Swan, Killian and Henry left Jim finally answered.

“She said I have to...kiss him,” he whispered.

The three people waited for a moment obviously expecting more before Killian spoke. “Kiss him. That’s it?” He spoke the last two words louder than Jim would’ve liked.

“Shhhh.” Ellison said as he glanced around looking for people who would’ve overheard him.

“Yes, I’m supposed give... him a kiss.”

“Why are you whispering?” the Sheriff asked.

“I, uh, I’m not really sure,” Jim admitted.

“Yeah, people around here are used to weird things happening,” Henry stated.

Jim glanced around uneasily, shuffling the box in his hands slightly, and glanced back at the unusual smelling people. “I see,” Jim said, not really seeing anything.

“So, what’s the problem?” Killian asked.

Ellison looked over sharply at the man. “What’s the problem?” he parroted back. “What isn’t a problem? My partner gets lured to this town by Gold over some phony knife with a fairytale name carved on it.” Jim frowned when most everybody gave a little laugh when he said fairytale, not seeing what was funny by the situation at all. “I go to the Mayor to file a complaint and end up with my friend turned into an amphibian and to top it all off I’m supposed to kiss it, I mean, him,”

“Right. I can see where that would be confusing,” admitted Emma. “But you know what to do to make it right again, so just do it.”

The Sentinel curled up his nose and gave her an incredulous look. “But, but, I mean, kiss a slimy frog,” Jim’s voice rose an octave on the last two words.

“First of all, frogs are slimy especially when they’re out of the water,” the man with a hook for a hand stated. “Secondly, what’s the bloody problem? I mean really he’s your friend, he has been cursed and all it would take is a little peck on the lips...” Killian glanced at box, “or whatever, and everything will be right again. You don’t want him to stay a frog do you?”

“Of course not,” Jim’s answer was immediate and automatic. He glanced down into the box and saw that Blairfrog was looking back up at him; he realized for the first time that the frog had Blair’s sapphire blue eyes. Ellison wasn’t sure what color eyes frogs normally had but he knew those eyes as well as he knew his own. “Definitely not,” he reiterated. “You’re right.”

Jim pulled his truck over to the side of the road and turned the engine off. From what Jim remembered on the drive into town this road was mostly deserted. In fact, he didn’t remember seeing any other vehicles at all; neither the earlier trip nor now.

He sat there a couple of minutes his mind awhirl with all that had gone on that day. A soft ribbit from the passenger seat had the Sentinel glancing over guiltily to where Blairfrog still sat in his shoebox.

“Yeah I know I’m being a coward,” he admitted to his amphibian friend. “It’s just so damn weird. And by weird I mean everything that’s happened since we drove into this godforsaken town.”

Ellison laid his head on the steering wheel that he was still gripping tightly with both hands and gave a deep, heavy sigh. Some soft rustling sounds from the box had him turning his head without sitting up.

“Okay, fine. I give up.”

The detective put his hand into the box and Blairfrog dutifully hopped onto his palm. Ellison swallowed hard he gave his dry lips a nervous lick.

“All right, here goes nothing.”

Jim raised the frog up to right in front of his face, scrunched his eyes tight and leaned his head forward as he pulled the frog closer. The Sentinel’s lips touched the much smaller frog’s and Jim was surprised at how dry it was.

And suddenly getting bigger, softer.

The small body in his hand started to grow and his mind automatically anticipated that he was soon going to be supporting a much heavier weight, so as Blair's body grew Jim lowered his hand and set it to rest on the seat... right under Blair's butt.

'Nice,' Jim thought to himself.

The Sentinel's senses were humming along nicely. Blair smelled like himself again. His hair felt like silk under Jim's one hand while the other was feeling something much firmer. Ellison could hear Blair's familiar heartbeat, although it was beating a little faster than usual. And taste, well he assumed Blair tasted the same, not having had any prior knowledge.

Blair pulled back, licking his lips, and stared into Jim's eyes for several seconds. He wiggled his butt a little bit and Jim, realizing he was groping his Guide, eased his hand out from underneath the younger man.

"Not that I'm complaining, man, but what made you kiss me all of a sudden?"

"Uh," Jim struggled with a way to explain what happened without coming off sounding like a lunatic. Before he could answer the anthropologist leaned back farther and glanced around.

"And when did we get out in the country?" Blair asked. "The last thing I remember was, uh," his brow furrowed as he tried to think, "being in the Mayor's office, I think."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Ellison admitted. "Do you remember anything else?" Jim asked, trying to avoid Blair's question.

"No... no wait; I do remember bits and pieces." Blair frowned as he thought. "I have the feeling... no, never mind. It sounds too silly; you wouldn't believe me."

Jim sighed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Try me, Chief. After today you might be surprised what I'll believe."

Blair looked closely at Jim's face; he seemed to be trying to gauge what was going on in the Sentinel's head. "Okay, you asked for it." Sandburg licked his lips, differently than he had when they'd been kissing, and cleared his throat before he started to speak. "I...was I... a frog?"

It bothered Jim to see Blair ducking his head, obviously waiting for and expecting Ellison to not believe him. The Sentinel knew that he had only himself to blame; Blair was anticipating Jim to react the way he normally did. Which was, the ex-Ranger had to admit to himself, normally would have been not to believe Blair.

"Well, Chief, I mean, Blair, that's exactly what you were."

Blair's head snapped up so fast that Jim could actually hear the tendons in his neck creak.

"What?!"

The next several minutes were filled with Jim bringing Blair up to speed on what had happened. A wide range of emotions crossed the younger man's expressive face; from surprise, to shock, to fear and finally amazement.

"Do you remember anything, Chief?" Ellison asked.

The observer ducked his head and frowned as he thought. "Bits and pieces," he admitted. "Mainly darkness and lots of movement." Blair stopped talking and looked back up at Jim questioningly.

"Uh, well." Jim scratched his head as he tried to think of a diplomatic way to say what he needed to. "Well I had to carry you around, so that would explain all the movement, and, uh, I was afraid I'd drop you or you'd hop away so I carried you in that," he waved a hand at the shoebox still sitting in the passenger seat.

Blair turned his body a little so he could see what Jim was gesturing to. Seeing the Michael Kors shoebox the younger man stiffened and gave out a gasp of surprise. "I was in that little thing?"

"Yeah I'm afraid you were," the Sentinel said softly, giving his friend and maybe more (hopefully) a look of commiseration.

Sandburg, normally a staunch recycler, picked up a shoebox, rolled down the window and tossed it out. Jim didn't make a comment, hoping that the grad student could justify the littering when he realized that the box was biodegradable.

Blair rolled the window back up and rubbed his hands together as if to brush off contamination. "So why did she do it?" the observer asked.

"So why did you do it?" Emma asked Regina.

The beautiful dark-haired woman shrugged one elegantly clad shoulder. "Ellison came thundering in here like a troop of horse bound soldiers, practically banging his chest and demanding that he be 'given justice, immediately'." Regina waved a hand negligently. "He made me mad and when his younger friend came hurrying in trying to calm things down I could see the longing and unfulfilled desire in Ellison's eyes. I decided to open those eyes."

Sheriff Swan thought about what the mayor had said as she watched her walk over and sit down behind her very expensive desk. "But I thought you were trying to be good now," Emma interjected, raising one eyebrow.

“I am, I am.” She smiled, a wide, beautiful and very evil smile. Eyes sparkling with mischief Regina added, “but I’m not that good.”

There was silence in the truck. Jim and Blair stared out the windshield looking at the setting sun. It was a beautiful sight, all pinks and golds, but neither man was really focusing. The Sentinel kept giving Blair sideways glances and the younger man didn’t seem to be focusing on anything.

“Chief? Are you all right?” Ellison asked, worry coloring his words.

Sandburg jumped slightly at the sound of Jim’s voice and he turned to face the detective. “What? Oh, uhm, yeah I’m okay. Just thinking,” he admitted.

“What about?” Jim asked, wondering which of the insanities that he witnessed today that his friend was pondering.

“Well, mostly time.”

The ex-Ranger frowned. “Time?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t even lunchtime when we arrived in town and here it is... well, the sun is setting. That means I was a, uh, frog for several hours.”

“That’s true,” Jim admitted. “I hadn’t really thought about it. It all seemed to happen so fast, but I guess you’re right.”

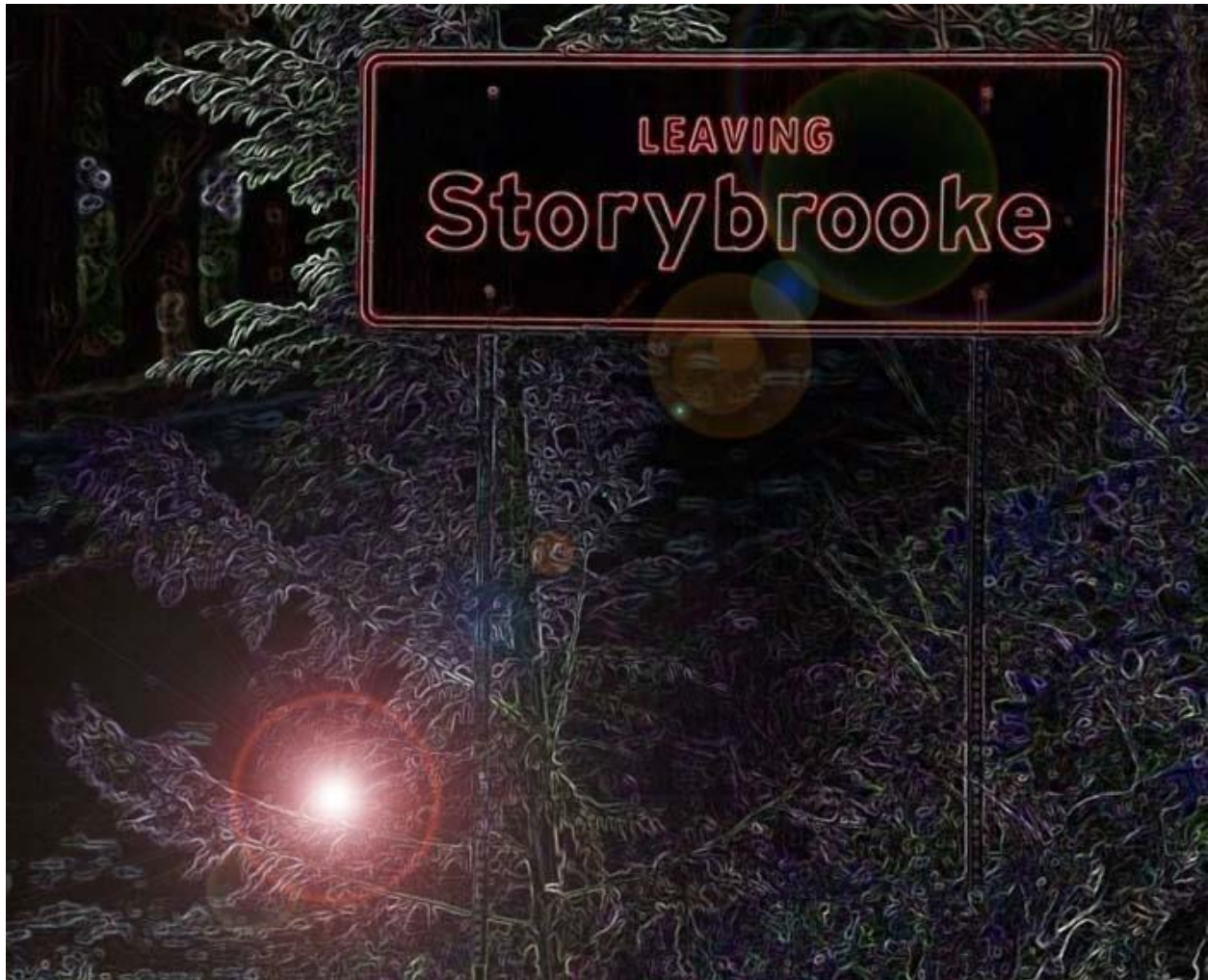
The Sentinel watched as his Guide shivered. Jim decided enough was enough. He glanced over to the side of the road and read the welcome sign, thinking how much of a lie that welcome was.

“What say we get out of here, Chief?”

“Man, I am so down with that,” Sandburg agreed.

Jim started the truck and put it into gear. He gave an automatic glance in the rearview mirror to make sure there weren’t any vehicles coming down the road, even though he hadn’t seen a single car or truck in the whole time he and Blair had been sitting there, before he pulled off the shoulder and back onto the road. So, it just so happened that he was still halfway glancing back as they passed the town sign.





“Whoa!”

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Sandburg’s voice sounded a little panicky and who could blame him.

“The sign,” the Sentinel said as he turned in his seat to look back the way they had just come.

“What about it?” Blair asked as he turned to look out the back window as well.

“It’s disappeared.”

“It’s...” Whatever Blair been about to say was ended when Blair’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“It was just there,” he exclaimed.

“I know,” the Sentinel admitted.

“But, but how could that just disappear?”

“I don’t know, Chief and I don’t care.”

Blair looked at Jim and gave a brief firm nod in agreement. Ellison put on the gas and neither man looked back as they sped away.

Henry shut the door behind him and pulled off his lightweight jacket. He laid his coat neatly on the back of a chair before he sat down cross-legged on his bed. He laid his satchel in front of him and opened it, pulling out a large leather bound book. On the cover were the words *Once Upon a Time*; the first letter of each word was ornately drawn, easily twice as big as the other letters.

The young man opened the book and being mindful of the age of the tome he carefully began turning pages. Words and pictures tumbled past. He saw drawings of his mother mostly doing evil things. He saw pictures of his grandparents, meeting, falling in love and escaping one pitfall after another. Henry saw his other mother as a baby being placed inside a hollowed out tree.

Finally, Henry got to the section more towards the end of the book and he stopped turning pages. There was a picture of a man, who he now knew to be Jim Ellison, in military camouflage garb, gun in hand and eyes ever alert.

Turning the page, Henry saw another picture of Jim but this time Blair was there as well, dressed as a doctor. Several pages later showed Blair fighting with another man inside an apartment.

Henry knew from reading the story that the man Blair was fighting had been an insane man called Lash. It was nice to know that even though Lash won that fight had taken Blair prisoner, Jim rescued him in the end.

Their story was a lengthy one. Henry knew because he had read it several times. There were a great many ups, and quite a few downs, especially recently. Jim had gone on a sudden vacation and Blair had unwisely been talked into following him.

That part of the story showed a picture of Blair and their captain, Simon, driving away as Jim laughed with the local veterinarian. A lot of things had been said and hurt feelings were involved. Henry wasn't sure if their trip to Storybrooke was going to be able to mend things and he hoped and prayed it would. Maybe future misunderstandings and tragedies could now be avoided.

Henry closed the cover on the book reverently before sticking it back into his backpack. The young man patted the closed carrier and gave a little smile. If you didn't know he was adopted anyone watching would have sworn that he looked like the Evil Queen.

"Man I'm good," Henry muttered before giving a little snicker.



## Epilogue

Jim sat at his desk in the bullpen and watched Blair who was watching him watch and gave a little sigh. Since coming back from Storybrooke things had been a little strained between the two men.

Blair still felt odd knowing that he had spent the better part of the day as a frog. And Jim, well, he couldn't stop thinking about The Kiss.

Ellison couldn't help from thinking about their brief kiss in capital letters, because it had been so momentous to him. Jim could tell how Blair felt about it, and quite frankly he was too much of a chicken to ask the anthropologist outright.

'What if Blair wasn't as moved by it as I was?' the Sentinel thought to himself. 'Or worse yet, he was disgusted or outright hated it.'

Ellison gave himself a little shake and decided that it wasn't worth the risk to ask Blair. Better to leave that part of their relationship unexplored than to risk rejection. He looked down at the paperwork on his desk and decided to immerse himself in his work.

Blair gave Jim a sideways glance, using his curtain of hair as camouflage. Somewhat concealed, the observer felt free enough to watch the older man while pretending to grade some school papers. In actuality, the grad student hadn't made any headway in his backlog of grading, because he couldn't get his mind off the trip they'd made to Maine.

He wasn't sure how Jim felt about The Kiss. And yes, he felt slightly ridiculous in thinking of it in those terms. For all Blair knew Jim's only motivation was to turn Blair back to human and nothing more. The idea that the kiss was done out of necessity alone made Blair feel cold all over.

However, a guy could dream. And dream Blair did.

He could only remember the end of their kiss, but that was enough to fuel his imagination. Blair could feel Jim's lips on his and feel the Sentinel's big hand holding his backside. Blair licked his lips he could almost taste Jim and...

"Ellison. Sandburg. My office, now."

Captain Banks' voice, while not quite a bellow, still startled Blair from his remembrances. He glanced over at Jim, a questioning look in his eyes. Jim shrugged his shoulders indicating that he too didn't know what Simon wanted. Blair stood up and followed the detective into the captain's office.

Simon had been watching the two men since they returned from their road trip couple of days ago. He did hope that some of the tension between Jim and Blair would've burned off on their little trip. Heaven knows that things had been off kilter for a while now, ever since he had been foolish enough to, not only follow, but convince Sandburg to go with him when Jim went off on his own to Clayton Falls. The captain winced as he remembered their "welcome" by Jim.

However, as evidenced by the distance Jim and Blair were still keeping from one another this trip had just ratcheted up the tension. Banks resolved himself to help fix the situation. He wasn't sure how to do it. So he called the two men into his office.

"So, how was your trip?" Simon asked as he watched the two men staying as far apart as they could in his office, i.e. Jim by the windows and Blair sitting in the chair closest to the door.

"Fine," Jim said tersely.

"Oh, you know, okay," Blair said, trying to sound casual and failing.

"Uh huh," Simon retorted. "So you had a good time, then."

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Sandburg muttered.

“Then you had a horrible time,” the captain said.

‘It’s like trying to pull teeth... from a crocodile,’ he thought to himself.

“No,” the two men chorused like they had rehearsed it. Jim added, “Not all of it.”

Simon was amused to see Blair ‘I’ve dated 1 million women’ blush at Jim’s comment and pointed look. “Would you go back?”

“NO!!!” they chorused once more.

Simon blinked at the vehemence of their answer, not sure what to make of their attitudes.

“Okay,” he drawled out. Since they were obviously not going to elaborate, or explain themselves, the captain waved a large hand dismissively. “All right you two get out there and get back to work.”

Banks watched the two men as they walked out of his office. Maybe things weren’t as bad as he thought. With more hope for the future Simon picked up his pen and began to work on his never ending paperwork.



**The End**