

# Time and Tide



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*Time and tide wait for no man.* ~English proverb

“So that’s it? Just no?” Jim doesn’t mean to sound so harsh, but he feels the disappointment like a blow.

Blair tilts his chin up defiantly. “What else do you want me to say? I can’t be a cop, Jim.”

“Why not?” Jim asks. “You’ve practically been one for the last few years, Sandburg.”

“Because they’re going to put me on the stand to testify, and every defense attorney in town is going to attack my credibility,” Blair shoots back. “And I will end up losing every case I work on because my presence alone will create reasonable doubt.”

Jim swallows. Blair isn’t totally wrong, but he’d started thinking that they might actually be partners in every sense of the word. If Blair took the badge, they could be together at work full time, without school distracting Blair. And maybe, in their off-hours... “We can figure something out,” Jim protests. “We’ll find a way to fix this.”

“You didn’t even ask if I wanted the badge!” Blair responds heatedly. “You just assumed I’d be grateful for the offer.”

The rebuke stings, because Blair is right; Jim and Simon had both assumed he’d be grateful for the lifeline, and that he’d jump at the chance to get a detective’s shield. “I thought you liked being my partner,” Jim says, knowing that his tone isn’t quite as reasonable as he’d like it to be.

But the sense of abandonment he’s feeling at the moment doesn’t lend itself to reasoned discourse, not when he feels as though everything he’d hoped for is slipping through his fingers, just when he thought he’d get it.

“Yeah, well, I’m not so sure I want to be a *cop*,” Blair replies, his tone bitter. “That’s your gig, not mine.”

“You’re going to give up on everything we’ve built, everything we are?” Jim asks.

Blair’s mouth twists. “From where I’m standing we aren’t anything.”

“What the fuck were the last four years then?” Jim asks harshly, the sense of loss leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

“Apparently, a waste of time,” Blair snaps. “I can’t be a cop, and I can’t stay in Cascade, not after what happened.”

Jim realizes that he’s losing Blair in every sense, that maybe he’d never stood a chance. “I never figured you for a quitter,” he snarls.

“You call this quitting?” Blair shouts. “I call it self-preservation. Fuck off, Jim. You’re going to be late for work.”

Jim can feel his fists clench. “Are you going to be here when I get back, or are we done?”

“I won’t leave without saying goodbye,” Blair replies, the fight going right out of him, and now some of Jim’s own sense of desolation comes through. “I’m not—I’m not even sure where I’m going, or what I’ll do.”

Jim hesitates. “You can stay here as long as you need, Chief. Just—at least give me a forwarding address, huh?”

“Yeah, of course,” Blair replies, in a tone of voice that says he might, or he might not.

Jim swallows. “Then I guess I’ll see you later.”

The conversation leaves Jim feeling like shit, like everything is falling apart, much like when the dissertation first leaked.

Jim thought he'd hit upon the perfect solution, a way to make up for doubting Blair, and a means for them to remain partners, but it seems he's just made it worse. Because Blair is barely talking to him, and the only reason they'd had a conversation today was because Jim had managed to corner Blair before leaving for work.

Fat lot of good that did him.

As soon as Jim enters the bullpen, Simon calls, "Ellison! There's a body. Take Joel."

A body leaves no time for questions or prodding from Simon, and Jim's not ready to tell him that Blair's turned down the offer. Joel is already on his feet, checking his gun and clipping his badge to his belt.

"How's Blair doing?" Joel asks once they're on their way to the beach where the body had been found.

Jim takes a breath and decides the truth isn't worth getting into. After all, Blair hasn't officially rejected Simon's offer. "He's still deliberating."

"Must be tough," Joel comments. "Having your whole life turned upside down like that."

Jim grunts, not wanting to get into the particulars.

"Guess you'd know about that, too," Joel adds.

Jim scowls. He has no idea how much Joel has figured out about his senses, but he's not going to ask. He doesn't need or want confirmation that Joel knows about the sentinel shit.

The unis have cordoned off the area where the body is, and Joel lumbers after Jim, carefully staying outside the crime scene tape. There are already footprints in the ground around the body, which appears to have been moved, judging by the sand clinging to the front of the man's shirt.

"What have we got?" Jim asks the young officer standing guard over the scene, his nametag reading "Moore."

"A jogger found the body about half an hour ago," Moore replies. "She thought he might just be unconscious, so she rolled him over to check for a pulse."

"Any other disturbances of the crime scene?" Jim asks.

Moore shakes his head. "No, sir. The coroner said it would be another hour at least before he could get here. There was a nasty accident on the interstate with multiple casualties."

Jim shrugs. "We got any techs on the way?"

"Same ETA," Moore replies.

Jim glances at Joel, who grimaces philosophically. "Price of doing business, I suppose," Joel says. "I can stay here, Jim."

Jim shakes his head. "Nah, it's fine. Let's do what we can to process the scene." He eyes the ocean. "Tide's rising, and if we don't move quickly, what evidence there might be will be washed away."

"Then we'd better get moving," Joel replies.

They work the scene together methodically. Joel has evidence bags and gloves in his kit, and Jim uses his senses judiciously to find things that even the crime scene techs would probably have missed. The man doesn't have any identification, so he's a John Doe for now.

The rising tide is lapping at the legs of the dead man, and Jim says, "Let's pull him further up the beach. I hate to disturb the scene, but we don't have a choice."

Jim's cell phone rings, and he fishes it out of his jacket pocket. "Ellison."

"Jim, we've got emergency services broadcasting a tsunami warning," Simon says briefly.

"Shit," Jim says. "The coroner isn't here yet."

"Forget about the coroner and the body," Simon orders. "They're estimating less than an hour before it hits, and people are already starting to panic."

Jim glances at the body and knows that justice isn't going to prevail in this case, not unless there's some kind of miracle.

"Where do you want us?" Jim asks.

"Back at the station ASAP," Simon replies. "There's no time to get anywhere else, and we'll need you for the aftermath. We're broadcasting a list of locations that might be relatively safe for people to go, but this is going to be a nightmare, Jim."

Jim lets out a breath. "Yeah. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Tsunami warning," Jim says when he hangs up. "We need to get everybody off the beach, and then get back to the station. I need to call Blair."

Joel nods and begins issuing instructions to the units to help clear the beach, before heading back to the station.

Jim dials the loft and gets no answer, so he leaves a message, "Blair, there's a tsunami coming. Be careful and stay safe."

He calls and leaves the same message on Blair's cell phone, and then joins Joel in the truck.

"Blair?" Joel asks.

Jim shakes his head. "He's a smart guy. He'll figure it out."

Blair has a brief panic attack when Jim leaves. There's a part of him that wants to be a cop, to be Jim's *partner*, so badly he can taste it. But every time he thinks about taking the offer, his pragmatic side wins out.

Jim can't go public because his senses are a liability. Blair can't take the offer because the only way he could convince people he's not a liar is to reveal Jim's gifts.

He's angry with Jim for a whole host of reasons, but he's angrier with himself. He should never have included Jim's name in the rough draft of his dissertation, because information isn't always secure, and he was asking for trouble. He should have gone into damage control immediately—told Jim what was going on, filed for an injunction, done *something*. The release of his work without Blair's permission broke a number of laws, but that doesn't matter now that it's out there.

Once everything had snowballed, Blair's only choice had been to discredit his own work. Maybe he can go after the publisher at some point but that doesn't solve his immediate problem.

The worst part, the very *worst* part, is that Blair has caught Jim's speculative looks, his aborted comments, and he knows that Jim might actually be open to taking their relationship to the next level. And now, Blair can't even let Jim know he's open to the idea, because he *knows* Jim. He's already told Blair to take his time making a decision; if they start a relationship, Jim will be even more insistent that Blair stay with him until he figures things out.

They're not on an even playing field, and admitting that he wants more out of their relationship will put Blair at an even bigger disadvantage, unable to leave Cascade without breaking Jim's heart.

Blair can't stay in the loft after his argument with Jim; he's too restless and heartsick for that. He doesn't think he's in the wrong, but he hates hurting Jim. He hates the idea of *leaving* Jim, but he doesn't see another option.

He heads down to a deserted beach he knows of and walks the shore slowly, his thoughts churning. If he doesn't stay in Cascade, if he doesn't take the badge, Blair has no idea what he'll do.

What Blair really wants is to go back in time—a few weeks, or even a few months. Maybe Blair could go back to the time after his death, after they returned from Peru. If he'd been more explicit about what he wanted out of their relationship, maybe they would have had a more solid foundation when the news broke.

Or if he had just left Jim's name out when writing his dissertation, or if he'd secured his laptop, or *something*—all of this could have been prevented.

Maybe he should have figured things out after Brackett. He should have known that nobody would have to look much past Blair to figure out that Jim was the subject of his dissertation.

And yeah, he's still angry at Jim for not trusting him, for not seeing that Blair hadn't intended for any of this to happen and lashing out in anger, but Blair has known Jim for years now. It might not be an excuse, but it's the way Jim is.

Maybe they each bear a share of the blame, but Blair's going to be the one suffering from the fallout, and that just sucks, because Blair feels like he *always* suffers the fallout. He took the heat off Jim, but only by falling on his own sword.

The day is overcast and cool, and the wind whips his hair around his face until he pulls it into a ponytail. The weather matches his mood perfectly, and he wanders down the rocky beach, his thoughts chasing each other with no real solution in sight.

The alarms break Blair out of his reverie, and it takes him a minute to recognize the sound as a tsunami warning.

He has no idea how much time he has, but if the alarms are going off, he'd better get off the beach and to higher ground immediately.

Blair gets back to his car and turns the key, listening to the engine churn to no effect.

"Shit," he snarls. "Shit, shit, *shit*. Can my luck get *worse*? What the hell did I do to warrant this kind of bad karma, huh?"

Blair reaches in the glove compartment and pulls out his cell phone, which is, of course, completely dead. That's what he gets for leaving it in his car and hibernating in the apartment for the last two weeks.

If he survives this, Jim is never going to let him hear the end of it.

Blair climbs out of his car and begins the hike up the deserted service road. There's really no other choice. He has to hope that he finds someone willing to give him a ride farther inland at least.

It takes him about fifteen minutes to get off the rocky service road that allows for beach access to the paved road bisecting the national park. Another fifteen minutes goes by, and a Ranger's Jeep screeches to a stop next to Blair.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the young woman demands. "Don't you know about the tsunami warning?"

"My car died," Blair replies with asperity. "I tried starting it when the alarms went off, and it wouldn't start."

"Get in," she orders. "We need to move. The earthquake wasn't that far off shore, and we don't have time to wait around."

Blair doesn't need to be told twice, and he hops in the passenger seat hastily. "I don't suppose you have a cell phone so I can call my partner?"

"You a cop?" she asks.

Blair hesitates. "No, but I work with one."

She navigates the road with practiced ease. "Sorry, I have a radio, but no cell phone."

Blair curses internally and asks, "How bad of a situation are we looking at?"

"An earthquake over 9.0 on the Richter scale, about a hundred miles off the coast," she replies. "That was an hour ago, so we don't have much time."

"Is that going to be long enough?" Blair asks.

She shrugs. "Maybe. I'm Becky by the way."

"Blair," he says.

She gives him a sharp look, but all she says is, "Nice to meet you, Blair. Hold on tight, because I think we're in for a bumpy ride."

The day is cold and cloudy, so there aren't many people on the beach—just a few hardcore surfers in wetsuits who take a little convincing to leave. It's precious time wasted, and Jim wishes that the beach alarms weren't just placed in isolated areas. He understands the theory, and the lack of funds to put the alarms all along the coast, but they're sometimes more convincing than a badge.

They clear their area of the beach in about thirty minutes, and that's precious time wasted. The roads are clogged with panicked people trying to get out of the city, even though there's no time, and Jim ends up taking back roads and side streets to the station, at least as much as possible.

"Don't these people know there's not enough time to evacuate?" Joel asks, looking at the clogged streets in horror.

Jim shakes his head. "Hope springs eternal, even when it's foolish."

He pulls into the garage and parks, knowing that if the tsunami gets this far inland, his vehicle is going to be a loss.

And then Jim thinks about all the people in Cascade who don't own transportation, and don't have a way to get out. The loss of his truck is meaningless in comparison to the devastation that the tsunami is sure to bring.

The ground trembles, and he and Joel brace themselves against the truck.

"Better take the stairs," Joel says quietly. "Last place we want to get stuck is in the elevator."

Jim nods. "Yeah. You going to be okay?"

"I'm just glad my wife decided to take the kids to see her parents this weekend," Joel replies. "First week after school is out, and I couldn't get the time off."

"At least you know they're safe," Jim says, beginning to climb the stairs, thinking of all the people still in town—like Blair.

They reach the bullpen, and Simon meets them. "Estimates are that it's going to be over thirty feet high."

"Could be worse," Joel says somberly.

Jim shakes his head. "Thirty feet is bad enough. The problem with tsunamis is that the water just keeps coming without a break. It's not like your normal wave."

"Great," Joel mutters. "Is the station secure?"

Simon hesitates. “There’s enough distance between here and the shore that we probably won’t feel the full effect of the wave.”

“Joan and Daryl?” Jim asks.

Simon breathes out a sigh. “Thank god she insisted on moving them to the eastern edge of the city. They’re out of what’s considered the danger zone. Have you talked to Sandburg?”

Jim thinks of their fight that morning and shakes his head. “No. I left a couple of messages, but I haven’t heard anything.”

“Well, he’s a resourceful little shit,” Simon says. “If he’s smart, he’ll stay home and ride it out there.”

Jim does the math. “The loft is safer than being out on the street would be.”

He tries not to think of the unanswered call to the loft. Maybe Blair had just been pissed off enough to ignore him; he’d prefer that option to Blair going out and being in harm’s way.

The idea of losing Blair, before he even has a chance to tell Blair how he feels—Jim pushes the fear aside. He can’t afford to think about that right now.

Becky drives recklessly down gravel service roads, fishtailing a couple of times, but always managing to control the Jeep. The road isn’t climbing in elevation, and there are a lot of switchbacks, which means they’re not putting much distance between themselves and the shoreline.

“How much time do we have?” Blair asks, bracing himself against the dashboard.

“Not enough,” she mutters.

He glances over his shoulder and sees the ocean still, although it’s grown a little hazy. The route is an indirect one, winding along the coast and through the occasional stand of trees. The scenery had been part of the allure of the drive, and now might end up killing him.

They finally hit a turnoff that’s going to take them farther away from the shore, but Blair sees a rise on the horizon, and a churning of the water that doesn’t look natural.

“I think it’s coming,” Blair says.

Becky grimaces. “I can’t go much faster on gravel without risking rolling over.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that,” Blair mutters.

He stares at the ocean, and the tsunami doesn’t look quite like what he expects. It’s a huge wave, but not as tall as he expects. The problem is that the water just doesn’t *stop*. Unlike a regular wave that rolls back out, this one just never stops coming, pushing inexorably inland, and then it rises a bit and keeps rolling, and rises a bit and keeps coming.

Blair can’t look any longer, and he turns and faces the windshield, bracing himself on the dash.



“Don’t do that,” Becky orders. “If the airbags go off, you’ll break your wrists.”

Blair grabs the door handle instead, and can’t help but glance at the side view mirror, seeing the words, “Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear,” and thinking that the water looks pretty fucking close.

Becky puts on a burst of speed, but it’s not going to be enough, and the water rushes around the back wheels, then the front doors, then the front tires. There’s a thump as a piece of debris hits the passenger side of the car, then another thump, and the water washes out the road right from under them.

“Brace yourself,” Becky advises, and the Jeep begins to spin. Water creeps inside, covering the floor of the vehicle, and then they’re swept away, unable to do anything other than just hang on.

Jim can’t stay inside. They’ve pulled all personnel from the lower levels, and it’s crowded in Major Crimes. The mingled scents of flop sweat, deodorant, cologne, and perfume had quickly become too much. The frightened heartbeats had grown deafening, the murmured fears as loud as shouts.

Because Jim has his own fears, and his own worries, and his own regrets, and he can hear the double-time beat of his heart. The air is close and hot, and Jim has to get out. He has to get away from the crowd of frightened people, and the roof is his only option.

He stares out over the city, *his* city, and he wonders if he could leave all of this behind. He could go somewhere else, start fresh, and that way, he could stay with Blair. Or he could stay and lose Blair. Right now, in this moment, he knows what he’d choose.

If Blair’s not gone already—but Jim is trying not to think about that.

“You okay?” Simon asks from behind him. He’s chewing on his cigar, and Jim can smell the tobacco, as well as the sharp tang of salt water.

“Just needed some air,” Jim replies. He’s looking in the direction of the Pacific, barely able to see the water, even with his enhanced eyesight. They should be safe enough this far away.

The loft, in contrast, is much closer to the shore, and that worries him.

“You thinking about Sandburg?”

“Maybe,” Jim says. “I have no idea where he is. Tell me you don’t feel more comfortable knowing Joan and Daryl are out of danger.”

Simon’s face is sympathetic. “You know I can’t.”

“Blair wants to leave Cascade,” Jim confesses abruptly.

Simon sighs. “I wondered if that would happen. You can’t blame him, Jim.”

“Maybe not,” Jim says, “but I don’t like the idea.” He doesn’t say more than that, doesn’t mention that he doesn’t want to stay in Cascade without Blair, but Simon probably can guess

that, too. Jim's eyes pick up unusual movement at the water's edge, and he says, "It's starting."

The tsunami doesn't quite start out like he expects. Intellectually, Jim understands how a tsunami works, and why it's so destructive, but he'd still had a mental image of a huge wave hitting the shore, and then continuing inland. Instead, the water rises and rolls in, inexorable and seemingly never-ending.

Before long, Simon can see it, too, and he curses, and then lights his cigar. "Might as well, right? Could be a long time before I get to smoke one again."

"Might as well," Jim echoes.

The ocean turns white with the breakers, and the height of the wave grows. Jim can see the small dots of boats torn from their anchorage and swept inland, the buildings along the shore standing fast at first and then giving way or being engulfed.

It's a breathtaking sight, and Jim watches with his heart in his throat, mentally calculating the possible death toll and feeling sick to his stomach. Sicker yet to think that Blair is out there.

"Maybe we should go inside," Simon suggests.

Jim shakes his head, unable to explain why he can't look away, only knowing that he has to bear witness.

If he can't protect his city, he can at least do this much.

Simon sighs but takes his place next to Jim, close enough for Jim to feel the heat of his body. Simon has his back, which is all to the good, because when this is over, Jim knows he'll be using his senses to the max to find survivors, and that might just blow Blair's lie wide open.

Blair wakes to find Becky shaking him. His head hurts terribly, and his vision is a little fuzzy, plus his legs seem to be submerged in freezing water. "What—"

"We have to get out of here," Becky says urgently. "The worst of it seems to be over, but we're in a low spot, and the water is rising."

Blair looks outside and sees that the water is nearly up to the window, and it's rushing past the Jeep, but Blair immediately takes Becky's point. They're in a shallow ravine, and there's higher ground close by if they can reach it.

"I know this area," Becky says. "There's an old church close by. It's built pretty solid, and there are a couple of stories."

Blair blinks a few times to try and clear his head. He's not at his best right now, and he can tell the current is strong. On the other hand, staying in the Jeep is not a good idea.

"Okay," he replies. "I can do it."

She gives him a worried look. "Can you get out and hang onto the door? We need to be on your side of the car anyway."

The door is easier to open than Blair expects, aided by the water flowing past his door in the right direction to fling it open. Blair climbs out and clings to the Jeep while Becky scrambles across the seat and out next to him.

"We should try to stay together," she shouts over the sound of the rushing water. "Hang onto me."

Becky's size belies her strength, and she tugs Blair along, letting the rushing water help them along and making their gradual way to the slope out of the ravine. Blair feels something hit his leg and he nearly goes down. Becky grabs the back of his shirt and prevents him from going under.

Her expression grim, Becky keeps him upright and hauls him up the slope. Blair limps along next to her, his head aching, and his right leg stinging.

"It's not too far now," Becky says encouragingly. "Stick with me, Blair."

Blair doesn't really have another choice; he grits his teeth and pushes forward. He doesn't know how far they walk. Every step is a misery, and it's all Blair can do to keep going.

"Here," Becky says, and Blair looks up to see a country church built solidly of stone. The first floor has been flooded, but there's a choir loft, and a couple of people up there.

"Can you manage the stairs?" Becky asks.

Blair nods wearily. "Yeah, I think so."

He grabs the handrail and starts to climb, and wonders how Jim is doing, and if he's safe.

Blair hopes he is. Right now, he's ready to forgive just about anything, to make any promise, just as long as Jim's in one piece.

His leg and head throb in time to his heartbeat, and he offers up a silent prayer for Jim's safety.

Jim doesn't think about Blair; he *doesn't*, he *can't*. The phone lines are down, electricity is out over wide swaths of Cascade, and there are fires from burst gas lines. Once the waters recede, Jim and the rest of the force are out on the streets. The uniforms have instructions to keep order and prevent looting, whereas Jim is going out to locate those who might need help. Simon goes with Jim.

"Someone needs to watch your back," Simon says reasonably.

Jim pushes himself hard, mostly to keep himself from thinking about Blair, and where he might be. There aren't enough EMTs to go around, and Jim has medic training. The water is still high closer to the shoreline, and Jim and Simon wade through water that's up to their knees.

Some people have been swept inland, battered by debris and half drowned, and Jim and Simon pause to bind up wounds and offer aid. Jim locates an injured woman who had taken shelter in an office building, and he and Simon carry her out to find an ambulance.

They carry her for six blocks before they find a fire and rescue truck, and they get her loaded up. From there, it's three scared kids who had lost track of their mom when she'd urged them to head up to a higher floor while she assisted her elderly mother. The oldest girl, Stephanie, had done her best to keep her two younger brothers calm, even though it's clear she's scared to death.

Simon takes them back to the station, assuring them that their mom is likely to check with the police when she looks for them.

Jim chases off some looters, and finds a group of teenagers who had been playing hooky in the park and were caught in the tsunami, hanging onto trees and each other to keep from getting swept away. One of the boys has a broken leg and is going into shock, and one of the girls has a concussion.

He gets them organized. He and one of the other boys support the injured party, while the second girl supports her friend until Jim can find someone with a vehicle he can commandeer to take them to the hospital.

A middle-aged woman driving around in a truck stops when she sees them. "Do you need a ride to the hospital?"

"The kids do," Jim replies, flashing his badge. "Will you take them?"

She nods. "That's what I'm here for."

"Thanks," Jim says, and gets the kids loaded up.

"I'll be back," she calls.

Jim stops in at the station once the sun goes down and finds that someone has brought sandwiches and bottles of water from somewhere. "Have you heard from Sandburg?" Simon asks when he catches Jim.

Jim had been doing a bang-up job of *not* thinking about Blair. "No," he says shortly.

"Do you want to go home?" Simon asks, looking concerned.

Jim shakes his head. "The temperature is dropping now that the sun is going down, and I'm not going to be as hampered by the lack of light as others."

"You should get some rest, Jim," Simon says.

Jim shrugs it off. "No rest for the wicked, Simon, or for the people who are trapped or injured."

"Be careful," Simon says.

Jim finishes his cup of coffee and says, "I'll check in later."

If he's working, if he's dead tired, he can push his worry to the side. There are people who need him right now, and he has no way of knowing where Blair is.

But Jim is certain that Blair will come to the station when he can, and Jim just has to wait. He refuses to even consider the possibility that Blair might not be okay.

Blair hisses as the pastor tightens the bandages around his leg. "Sorry," Pastor Tim says. "You're still bleeding. I'm pretty sure you need stitches and antibiotics."

"The water is receding," his wife, Mariam, inserts. "If the truck starts, we can probably make it into Cascade."

Becky squats down next to Blair. "How's the head?"

"I'm not seeing double anymore," Blair says hopefully.

"Progress," Becky agrees.

"You're both very lucky," Pastor Tim says. "You could have been injured a lot worse."

Blair nods. "Don't I know it."

"I have parishioners I need to check on," Tim says. "But Marty lives on higher ground, and he has a couple of vehicles. One of those might get you back to Cascade. We can stop there first."

It's not ideal. Blair wants nothing more than to get back to Cascade and find Jim, who might joke about Blair's penchant for finding trouble, but is just as likely to run into problems. Whatever their issues, however fierce their fight might have been this morning, they're still best friends, and Jim is going to be worried sick.

Hell, Blair's pretty damn worried for Jim, and incredibly afraid that he'll never get a chance to tell Jim exactly how he feels.

Still, he doesn't have much of a choice. Blair's car is gone, and the phone lines are down, so he has to take whatever help he can get.

"That would be great," Blair says, trying to inject gratitude into his voice. "I really appreciate the help."

Pastor Tim pats him on the shoulder. "The church should be a place of sanctuary, and I'm glad it was that for you today."

Blair's views on organized religion aren't terribly positive, but he has to admit that Tim and Mariam are examples of religion gone right. "Thanks again."

"Thanks, Pastor Tim," Becky adds. "I can check in with folks once I'm back in Cascade."

The drive to Marty's farmhouse is painful, since Blair feels every bump in the road, and there are plenty. Marty comes out to greet them. He's older, maybe 60, with iron gray hair down to his collar. "Pastor Tim! Glad to see you're in one piece. What can I do?"

"I need to check on people, and I need a way to get these folks to Cascade," Pastor Tim replies. "Mariam can drive them, if you don't mind us borrowing a vehicle."

"For you? Anything," Marty replies. "You okay to drive, Miss Mariam?"

She nods. "No problem, Marty."

"Be safe, then," Marty replies, and that's all there is to it.

Maybe Blair shouldn't be surprised, though. He's had plenty of experience with the kindness of strangers over the course of his life.

The drive into Cascade is horrific. There are vehicles scattered along the side of the road, some of them on their sides, others flipped over. There are a few emergency vehicles around, but not enough. Mariam glances at Blair. "Are you okay if we stop?"

"Of course," Blair says. "Might as well load up."

They end up picking up a mother and her two kids, and then an elderly couple, which maxes out the space. "I'll drop you all off at the hospital, and then come back for more," Mariam says, sounding worried.

"That's fine," Blair says quickly.

It's late by the time they get to the hospital, and Becky leaves him in the waiting room, intending to offer whatever help she can, after checking in with her superiors. It's later still before Blair is seen for his head injury and the wound in his leg. The doctor is fairly brusque, obviously having plenty of other patients to care for, probably with injuries more serious than Blair's.

"You have a mild concussion," Dr. Vega says. "I don't suppose you have someone who can stay with you tonight."

Blair thinks about Jim. "I hope so. My roommate's a cop, so I'll probably just head to the police station, and see if I can help."

"Be sure to take your antibiotics, and keep the wound clean," Dr. Vega says. "Stay off the leg if you can."

"Right," Blair mutters. "No problem."

Dr. Vega shrugs. "Sorry, Mr. Sandburg. We can't keep you here overnight. We just don't have the beds."

"I get it," Blair replies, getting off the bed, the leg of his shredded jeans flapping around his calf. "It's no problem."

Dr. Vega grimaces. "You may want to at least stay in the waiting room until the sun comes up. It's a few hours before sunrise, and the streets are a little dangerous at present."

Blair thinks about trying to make the hike to the station on his sore leg, and with his head still aching, and has to agree. "Yeah, you're probably right."

“Take the doctor’s lounge,” Dr. Vega says. “Sleep for a few hours. There should be enough people in and out that someone will know if you’ve taken a turn for the worse.”

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Blair says sincerely, because he knows he needs to rest if he’s going to try to hike anywhere. A little longer isn’t going to make much of a difference. With any luck, Jim’s either asleep at the loft or has crashed at the station.

Blair’s clothing is tattered and stiff with dried salt water and dirt, and he longs for a shower, but the small cot Dr. Vega points him at is just comfortable enough to have him falling asleep immediately, in spite of his physical discomfort.

He wakes up a couple of times when other medical personnel come in to catch an hour or two of sleep on one of the other cots, rousing fully around 10 when Dr. Vega comes to kick him out. “Sorry, man,” he says around a yawn. “I need to catch a few hours if I’m going to be of any use at all.”

“No problem,” Blair replies. “Thanks.”

He stumbles out into the waiting room, the white paper bag holding his antibiotics in his hand, and he’s surprised to find Mariam waiting for him.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, knowing he probably sounds like an ungrateful idiot for even asking.

“I was dropping off some others, and I asked around,” she replies. “They said one of the doctors let you get a few hours of sleep, and I thought I’d offer you a ride. You probably shouldn’t be on that leg.”

Blair swallows around the lump that’s suddenly in his throat. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Well, I feel kind of responsible for you now, after you stumbled into our church half-drowned,” Miriam replies with wry humor. “Plus, Becky’s gone back out to help, and there’s coffee here. I didn’t mind having a few minutes to pull myself together.”

There’s a streak of dried blood along one side of her jaw, and her hair has straggled out of her braid to hang around her face. She’s a fairly plain woman, but her compassion gives her a certain glow.

“Rough night?” Blair asks sympathetically.

Mariam shrugs. “No worse than anyone else’s night, and probably better than a lot of people. Can I take you somewhere?”

“The police station? Um, Major Crimes? It’s downtown,” Blair suggests. “I’d go home, but I have no idea if it’s still standing or not, but I’ll bet I find Jim there.”

“Jim?” Miriam asks.

Blair shrugs. “My roommate, best friend, partner, whatever you want to call him. I need to know he’s okay.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” Mariam replies. “I’ve been driving people around all night. This is an easy request. I hope your friend is okay.”

Blair grimaces. "Yeah, me too."

The station is only a few miles away from the hospital, but it takes nearly thirty minutes to get there. Traffic is lousy with people trying to get out of the city, and there are stalled cars and debris in the streets that make the drive even more difficult. Mariam handles it like a pro, though, and finally pulls up just outside of the building.

"Stop by the church sometime and let us know how you're doing," Mariam invites. "It doesn't even have to be on Sunday. We're there almost every day."

Blair smiles. "Thanks for everything."

"Good luck, Blair," she says. "I hope everything works out for you."

Blair limps into the lobby, seeing signs of water damage, but not as bad as it might have been if the water had come farther inland.

He grimaces at the thought of climbing the stairs to Major Crimes, but limps in that direction anyway.

"Blair? Hey, Sandburg!" Blair turns to see Joel pushing through the crowd toward him. "Jim's been worried sick about you, kid!"

Blair grins, relieved to see Joel in one piece. "Yeah? Me too. Are you okay? Are the rest of the guys okay?"

"Everybody is fine," Joel assures him. "Jim went out again this morning to look for survivors. He should be back around lunchtime. We've been trying to keep ample supplies in here for people looking for their relatives and for police who are helping."

Blair grimaces. "And Jim?"

"He's limping pretty good, but otherwise, he's fine," Joel says. "He's saved a lot of lives. What happened to you?"

"I took a very ill-advised drive down to the shore," Blair admits. "And I got very lucky."

"Come on," Joel says. "Let's get you back up to the bullpen. I'll put word out with the sergeant that you're here, and he'll grab Jim when he gets back."

Blair has to admit that sitting down and putting his leg up sounds pretty good right about now. "Sounds good."

Joel supports Blair up the stairs, and although it's slow, and they have to pause at every landing, they make it. In a lot of ways, it feels like coming home. The worst part is that Blair can see himself here, see himself sitting across from Jim, answering calls and filling out reports and questioning witnesses and suspects.

He collapses in Jim's chair and feels an overwhelming sense of sadness. He doesn't want to lose this, and yet he doesn't know how to keep it either. He doesn't want to lose Jim, and yet he knows that if he leaves Cascade, there's no other choice.



“Here,” Joel says, pushing another chair over for Blair to prop his leg up on. “I’ll get you something to eat and a cup of coffee.”

“You don’t have to,” Blair protests, although his words fall on deaf ears.

The next thing he knows, he has a cup of the sludge the station calls “coffee” and a hastily assembled sandwich. Blair’s going to miss this camaraderie as well.

He’s eaten his sandwich and is sipping desultorily from his cup of coffee when there’s a commotion near the stairwell, and Jim stumbles into the bullpen looking like hell. “Blair?”

Blair’s out of his seat in a moment, anxious to get Jim sitting down before he falls down. “Hey, Jim. Come on, sit down.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Jim demands, grabbing Blair’s shoulders. “I’ve been trying to reach you!”

Blair can recognize fear under the anger. “Bad luck, man, and then some good luck. Come on, you should sit down.”

“I’m not—” Jim stops. “Come on, not here.” He hauls Blair along behind him, and Blair notices that Jim’s limp is worse than his. They really do make a pair.

Jim pulls Blair into the men’s room and locks the door behind them.

“Jim?” Blair asks hesitantly.

“I spent the last day thinking you were probably dead,” Jim says in quietly intense tones. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Blair flushes. “You’re not losing me.”

“No, I’m not,” Jim says. “If you have to leave Cascade, I can go with you.”

Blair stares at Jim, searching his face, and sees nothing but sincerity. “No, man,” he says quietly. “Let’s not make that decision right now, okay? We’re both hurting and exhausted, and it’s been a shitty couple of weeks. Let’s get through this crisis, and then we can talk about our options.”

Jim hauls him into a hug, holding him tightly, his cheek pressed against Blair’s hair. Blair hangs onto Jim, because he has no idea how long he’ll have this.

And then Jim pulls back, gives Blair a penetrating look, and kisses him.

It’s not entirely unexpected, and it’s definitely welcome, so Blair kisses back with the same passion that Jim’s pouring into it. The kiss is searing and real and kind of overwhelming, but nice.

*Really nice. More than nice. Maybe even perfect.*

“I’m sorry,” Jim murmurs. “For what I said.”

“Me too,” Blair says. “The thing about there not being an us was a really low blow.”

Especially considering that kiss, and the fact that Jim's thoughts have clearly been running along the same lines as Blair's, even if neither of them had said anything about it.

"Fair, though," Jim admits. "I should have—I should have said something sooner. I should never have doubted you."

Blair shrugs. "We both fucked up, man. But maybe we should focus on fixing this together."

Jim presses his forehead against Blair's. "Yeah. I hear you."

And Blair feels a flare of hope that can only be expressed in another kiss.