

Cold Is Blair's World



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Story by Bluewolf

The weather changed so quickly that even Jim was taken by surprise. And of course they were in the middle of nowhere...

Heck, even nowhere would have been on the map!

It had begun about a week earlier, when Gilchrist's, Cascade's most prestigious jeweller, was broken into at some point between Saturday night and Monday morning.

It was all very well planned.

A clothes shop next door had been closed for almost two weeks after the owner died suddenly. His widow gave the staff an extended holiday with pay while she decided what to do with the business - close it, sell it as a going concern, put in a manager... she had no interest in trying to run it herself; she knew her talents didn't run that way. She was artistic; she could design clothes, but not sell them. But until the lawyers sorted everything out, the shop would remain closed.

Someone had managed to get hold of a key to it, knocked a hole from the basement through to the basement of the jewellers, and had left again with several million dollars' worth of goods. At least one of the watches stolen would have left the buyer with almost no change from a million dollars; other items included rings worth up to half a million each, though most of the stolen items were valued at between ten thousand and fifty thousand dollars.

When notified that the break-in had been through the basement wall from the shop that was now hers, Mrs. Duncan was horrified, but unable to suggest anything that might be of help.

The police had checked all of Cascade's known fences and found nothing - though it was possible that the thieves were sitting on the goods, and would continue to sit on them for some time. \$100 watches or rings were easily resold. Anything costing five figures or more,

though... not so easily. And there was no point in stealing anything that valuable to sell it on for just a few dollars.

Burglary even got a couple of the office staff to check out Ebay, but nothing there matched the stolen items.

It was one of Rafe's snitches that came up with something, five days later. According to him, there was a cabin in Cascade National Forest, well off the beaten track; fully three miles from any road that a vehicle could negotiate. He claimed that the thieves were hiding out there.

In theory, because the info came from Rafe's snitch, he (and his partner) should have been the one(s) to follow up the lead; but one thing Rafe did not do, one thing he could not do, was cope in the wild - and Brown was no better.

There was only one partnership who could easily cope in the wild, who positively enjoyed camping, hiking, fishing and generally living off the land, and that was the partnership of Ellison and Sandburg.

And so Jim and Blair were sent off to check out this remote cabin.

They originally had only the vaguest of information as to its whereabouts; but a study of the land registry for the approximate area did pinpoint a cabin, with no direct road access. It still belonged to an elderly man who had enjoyed the comfort of the cabin he had built. Donald Winthrop was a hermit at heart, a loner who found the company of others uncomfortably stifling. His health had begun to fail, however, and two years previously his siblings - all younger - had insisted that for his own safety he had to remain inside 'civilization'. As a result, he was now living in a care home and hating every minute of it.

Armed with that information, Jim and Blair set off. It didn't take long for them to reach the road - actually more of a track - that, according to the information they had, led to the cabin - at least as close as a vehicle could take them. Jim turned his truck up it, quickly finding that the surface was rough and potholed, often with tree roots crossing it. At least the truck had a high enough suspension that it didn't get bogged down by the very unevenness of the surface; Winthrop must have driven a truck because there was no way a car could negotiate this route.

They had expected to find a vehicle at the end of the track, where a slightly wider area offered a turning area and very limited parking space, but there was nothing.

From here they had to walk.

Well, it was only three miles to the cabin.

It was quite cold - not surprising for November. There was no snow here, although they had seen some in the distance, higher up, as they drove. But they were dressed for the cold.

There was a faint path leading away from the end of the road.

Jim had brought a compass and used it to check their initial direction - and confirmed that the path was probably the one Winthrop had used when he went for groceries. He pushed the compass into his pocket and set off, confident that he would have no difficulty following

the path, badly overgrown though it was. Blair slung the backpack that was his constant companion, even now that he was a cop, over one shoulder and followed his partner.

They made good time; despite the poor condition of the path, despite its being an uphill route, in just over an hour they came in sight of the cabin, which stood in a clearing though some very small conifers scattered over it hinted that nature was reclaiming the ground.

It looked deserted.

Jim listened carefully, and heard nothing except the wind in the trees. Despite that they were very careful as they went forward.

Surprisingly, the cabin door was unlocked.

Inside, it was still furnished, and looked as if at one time it had been extremely comfortable.

"I can see why old man Winthrop liked it here," Blair said. "I could cheerfully live here."

"I'm not sure I'd like to live here on my own," Jim said, "but the two of us? That would be good."

They began to check the cabin.

They started with the bedrooms. There were two, as if - hermit though he was - Winthrop was willing to entertain the occasional visitor. The beds were still there, but no sheets or blankets. They checked the first one carefully, finding no sign that anyone had used it at any time recently. "I'd guess the mattresses are damp, though, with no heating in the place," Blair said as they entered the second one.

"There's a faint smell of mold," Jim agreed. Seeing a door in one corner of the room they were in, he crossed to it; it was a shower room that also held a toilet and sink. He tried the tap - nothing happened. The water was either turned off or the supply had failed.

Turning to follow Jim from the second bedroom, Blair happened to glance out of the window, and stiffened. "Jim."

The note in Blair's voice caught Jim's attention. "What?"

"Look."

Jim looked first at Blair, and then out of the window.

In the half hour or so that they had been in the cabin, the weather had completely changed; it had been cloudy but dry, but now snow was blowing past the window, driven almost horizontally by the force of the wind.

His jaw dropped. "Why wasn't I aware of the change in the weather?" he gasped. "And I did hear the wind when we got here, but why didn't I hear it rising?"

"Our minds were too concentrated on looking for signs that someone has been hiding out here," Blair replied. He watched the snow for a moment longer. "I think we're here for the night."

Jim moved quickly to the cabin door and opened it, glad that it was on the leeward side of the building. After a second or two he closed it. "I think you're right," he said quietly. "Going out in that, with a three mile walk in front of us, is a death sentence. It'll be hard enough getting out after the storm passes."

Mentally he was castigating himself for not realizing much, much sooner - like before they left the truck - that the weather was changing. "I should have felt this coming."

"Sometimes the weather changes very suddenly," Blair said.

"I should still have felt something," Jim insisted. "We've only been here half an hour! What good is a sentinel who can't warn of such a serious change in the weather half an hour before it happens?"

"You had other things on your mind," Blair reminded him. He glanced around the cabin.

"Well, we know there are beds, but no blankets, and in any case the beds are damp. How damp are the chairs and the couch?"

Jim checked. "Not as bad as the mattresses."

"Okay. If we sit close together to share body heat, we can pull that rug over us." He indicated the fireside rug.

Jim bent and tested it. "It's pretty damp too."

"Ah, well - something I remember reading, years ago. A damp blanket can actually be warmer than a dry one. 'Course, that mightn't apply to a rug... but if we can drape it over us to form a kind of tent, the air space under it will warm up. Certainly enough for us to survive the night."

"Well, we can try," Jim said, his voice doubtful. "Meanwhile, we might as well finish checking out the place."

"Anyone who was using this place had to have brought sleeping bags and slept on the floor," Blair commented. "Nobody would stay here any length of time if he was depending on what's here. Well, maybe in the summer when it's warm, but not at this time of year. I wonder if Mr. Winthrop's family used it for holidays after they moved him out?"

"I get the feeling that they probably didn't," Jim said. "They probably left the furniture because it would be too much hassle getting it out, and also they could placate him by telling him that everything was still here, if he was ever well enough to come back."

They went back to the kitchen. There were signs there that someone had been using the place quite recently, cooking on some kind of camp stove. Jim shook his head. "I think the tip-off was accurate, but late. I think the thief - thieves - were here, but they've moved on." He pulled out his cell phone to report to Simon, but - as he had thought would be the case - got no signal. He pushed the phone back in his pocket.

It didn't take them long to manufacture a sort of tent using the couch, the fireside rug and a second rug that they retrieved from beside the bed in the second bedroom.

Blair dug in his backpack and retrieved two bottles of water and four bars of chocolate. "Not much," he said wryly, "but it gives us something to eat and drink. I've got some trail mix, too - that'll do for breakfast."

They ate, drank sparingly of the water - there were only the two bottles and that water would have to do them as long as the blizzard lasted. Then - although it wasn't getting dark yet - they settled down to wait out the storm.

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Jim was half aware of the weather even as he slept, and knew when the wind dropped. The snow might still be falling - not even he could hear falling snow through the walls of the cabin - but at least the blizzard had eased.

As soon as there was enough daylight to let them see what they were doing, they dismantled their 'nest', shared the trail mix, drank a little of their water then left the cabin, closing the door carefully behind them.

The snow was still falling but if it had been rain it wouldn't have been called more than a light drizzle. Jim was sure of their direction, but checked his compass to make certain - these were not conditions where it was safe to get lost! - then headed towards the trees. Blair hitched his pack higher on one shoulder and followed. Their feet sank deep into the snow; each step was a laborious lift and place and sink, lift and place and sink... Even following in the track Jim left, Blair found it heavy going.

Halfway to the trees, Blair lost his balance when one foot slipped. With his weight on that foot and the other lifting from being knee-deep in the snow, he fell awkwardly. The snow should have given him a relatively soft landing, but with his legs trapped in it his landing was hard, and one knee hit something as he went down.

Hearing Blair's gasp of pain, Jim turned as quickly as he could. He scrambled his way back to where Blair lay on top of the snow, his legs now free. One knee was bleeding, whatever it had hit, and Jim didn't like the look of the angle of the lower part of the leg.



He checked quickly, determining that the bleeding gash on Blair's knee wasn't particularly serious; what was serious was the broken bone in Blair's lower leg.

Jim made his way back down the twice-trodden trail he had left to the trees, where after a frantic search he found two short, straight branches. He went back to Blair, who had retrieved a first aid kit from his pack and managed to put a dressing over his gashed knee.

Jim carefully set Blair's leg, then used the sticks, held in place by bandages from the first aid kit, to splint it.

He looked at the cabin, considered the conditions, and thought about the three miles back to the truck.

He was reluctant - more than reluctant - to leave Blair while he went for help. There was no heating in the cabin, everything was damp, they'd eaten all of Blair's emergency 'rations'. And there was always the possibility - unlikely though it was - that the thieves might come back. All right, easy enough for Blair to be ignorant of who they were, claim that he and a friend had been out walking, he'd broken his leg and the friend had gone for help - but in Jim's experience criminals weren't likely to accept coincidence like that.

No. He couldn't - wouldn't - leave Blair.

Under the trees, the snow wasn't as deep - not more than a few inches, though the branches were thick with snow that might start falling to the ground as the day warmed. He could carry Blair. It wouldn't be comfortable for the younger man, but Jim could carry him. He knelt beside Blair.

"Right, Junior, can you get yourself onto my back."

"Huh?"

"Onto my back," Jim repeated. "The quicker you do, the quicker we can head back to the truck."

"Jim, you can't carry me out of here! The cabin... "

"Blair, those thieves might come back - yes, unlikely, but not impossible. But in any case it's cold in that cabin, it's damp - you'd freeze!

"Okay, it'll take longer than the hour it took us to get here, and it won't be comfortable for you... but it'll be far quicker getting you to the ER than if I leave you here, head for the truck, phone as soon as I get a signal - then there's the time it'd take for a SAR chopper to get here. No, easier and quicker for me to carry you out. So either you climb onto my back or I take you in a fireman's carry, which would be even less comfortable for you."

"You're a stubborn cuss, aren't you?"

"Takes one to know one, Junior."

Using his good leg to steady himself, Blair scrambled onto Jim's back. Jim pushed himself to his feet, then made his way down the now well-beaten route to the path, and set off down it.

Each step jolted Blair's leg, but he gritted his teeth and suffered in silence. Jim knew he was hurting; there was no point in stressing the fact when there was absolutely nothing either of them could do about it.

They were now going downhill, of course, which helped, and the thin covering of snow under the trees became thinner as they went, leading Jim to think that the blizzard had hit only the higher ground - which excused him slightly from not noticing the change in the weather, he supposed, but he still thought he should have noticed it once they reached the cabin.

It took just on two hours for them to reach the truck. There was more snow on the ground in this space slightly more open than the treed area they had been traversing; but Jim had no doubt that he would be able to drive out in safety.

He unlocked the truck, opened the passenger door and carefully helped Blair in, pulling the pack off Blair's shoulder as he did and putting it at Blair's feet. Then he went round to the driver's side. He got in, and before setting off, checked his phone.

Still no signal.

He began to return the phone to his pocket again, then changed his mind and gave it to Blair. "Every few minutes, try to get a signal," he said, "then when you do, let Simon know the situation and that we're heading straight for Cascade General." Then he belted up, started the truck and began to bounce down the rough track, heading back to Cascade.

Blair sighed with relief when, after a few minutes, the heater began to blow warm air into the cab.



They were still on the track when Blair eventually got a signal.

"Hi, Simon."

Jim edged his hearing upwards.

"Sandburg! Are you two all right?"

"Yes and no. We were hit by a blizzard - "

"Tell me about it! We had a blizzard here. A lot of the side roads are still impassable."

"Anyway," Blair said, "the weather changed for the worse just after we got to the cabin. It was empty; we think someone had been staying there recently, but probably not for long - the place was damp, cold, there was no heating or water... No guarantee it was our thieves, either. It could have been a winter hiker taking advantage of a roof.

"We decided it was safer to stay there till the blizzard blew itself out, which it did overnight, and started out this morning - I think we're almost back to the main road, but this is the first time we've been able to get a signal.

"We... We're heading first for Cascade General, but we'll come in to the station as soon as possible."

"What's wrong? Which of you is hurt? How badly?"

"I slipped just as we were leaving the cabin and broke my leg," Blair admitted. "Jim carried me out."

"He's all right?"

Blair grinned even though Simon couldn't see him. "Cursing what the surface of this track is doing to his springs, but yes, he's all right. He wasn't hurt unless carrying me three miles gave him a hernia. Ah - "

"Ah?"

"We've just turned onto the main road. There's been a snowplow along it, thank goodness; I'd say that blizzard dumped a good two feet of snow in a very few hours."

"Two feet sounds about right," Simon agreed. "All right - Jim, I know you're listening - drive carefully. We don't need the pair of you banged up in an accident. Bad enough that Sandburg has a broken leg."

Blair glanced sideways, to see Jim nodding. "Yes, sir."

"He says 'Yes, sir'." Blair grinned and closed the phone.

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Jim maintained a steady speed that was possibly ten miles an hour slower than he would normally have driven as they continued to Cascade. Anxious though he was to get Blair's leg properly seen to, he was well aware of how potentially treacherous the road was. But it seemed to him that it was taking forever to reach Cascade.

Eventually, however, they passed the first houses...

Jim pulled up at the hospital entrance normally used by ambulances. As he jumped out an orderly came out and crossed to the truck.

"Sir - "

"I know, I'll move as soon as possible. My passenger has a broken leg, so I reckoned this would be the best entrance to use. A wheelchair will do, if you've nothing else immediately available - I'd guess you've been busy with accidents?"

"Yes. I'll get a chair." He hurried back inside, to return a few seconds later with a wheelchair.

Jim lifted Blair from the cab and put him in the chair. "Okay, Chief, you behave yourself - no trying to get any phone numbers from the nurses! I'll be in as soon as I find a parking space." He swung back into the cab and was already moving before the orderly had taken Blair inside.

It took him longer than he expected to find a parking space, but from the snow-covered condition of a lot of the cars there he guessed that they'd been left since the day before by people reluctant to drive in a blizzard and who were still reluctant to retrieve their cars given the current condition of many of the roads. Eventually he did find a space and headed for the waiting room. He stopped at the desk and the girl on duty grinned at him. "Blair's turn to be hurt?" But her voice was sympathetic.

"Hello, Ruth. 'Fraid so - he broke his leg."

"We've had a fair number of fractures today, with people slipping and falling awkwardly."

"Ah, there you are, Jim."

Jim glanced around. "Hi, Simon. Ruth's just about to give me the paperwork to fill in for Blair."

"So how exactly did he manage to break his leg?"

"The snow was pretty deep, we were sinking in up to our knees and somehow he overbalanced. Went down at an awkward angle, and his leg was held by the snow... "

"And you carried him out."

"On my back. If I'd left him all we'd have found when we got back to him was a lump of ice."

"Cold as that."

"Yeah. It wasn't a pleasant night, though it could have been worse. At least we were out of the wind." As he spoke Jim was filling in Blair's details.

"And you drew a blank at the cabin."

"At a guess, I think the tip-off was accurate, it was just too late, probably by a couple of days." Jim finished the form before he spoke again. "Call me suspicious, Simon, but that cabin is way off the beaten track; I didn't realize how far until I actually went to it. Nobody could have found it by accident. I'm just wondering... is there any connection between Mr. Winthrop, who still owns the cabin, and the clothes shop next door to Gilchrist's."

"The deceased owner was called Duncan."

"But his wife? What was her maiden name? Remember, although it's been closed for a couple of weeks, there was no sign it had been broken into. The people who went in and broke through the basement wall had to have had a key."

"I spoke to Mrs. Duncan, and I'm sure she didn't know anything. But I'll get Rafe and Brown to check up on the rest of the family," Simon said. He headed off to phone them, and when he returned he sat beside a restless Jim. "Something wrong?"

"Something's bothering Blair. I don't think it's anything serious, but there's something he's not happy about."

"Does he never get tired of you checking up on him all the time?"

"If he does, he's never said." Jim thought for a moment, then went on, "Sometimes... sometimes I wonder if it gives him a sense of security. He loves Naomi, but from some of the things he's said, I wonder if he ever felt totally secure with her. She sometimes left him with friends while she went off on one of her searches for 'enlightenment' - were there times when he wondered if she'd come back? It's not impossible."

"You don't like Naomi much, do you?"

"It's more... I don't entirely trust her. Oh, she doesn't have any kind of criminal instinct, I'm sure of that, but I don't trust her not to suddenly decide to walk away and never come back."

"Jim!"

Jim swung round, to see Blair sitting in a wheelchair, a blanket over his knees, accompanied by an obvious doctor, though he was one Jim didn't know. He crossed quickly to them, Simon at his heels. Blair was smiling, but it was clear to his friend that he wasn't totally happy; what had he been told that was worrying him?

"What's the damage?"

"It's a simple fracture - he can get the plaster off in six to eight weeks. Blair tells me he does have crutches at home?"

"Yes; he's been hurt a few times, and it was easier to get him his own crutches."

"That sounds ominous," the doctor said.

"Just have a look though his notes," Simon put in.

"Right then, Junior," Jim said. "Let's get you home."

The nurse wheeled Blair to the door. "If you go and get your car - " she began.

"We can use mine," Simon said. A few steps took him to where it was parked in the area marked 'medical personnel'; his police badge was clearly displayed.

As soon as the blanket was removed they saw what was bothering Blair. The cast that covered his leg from foot to knee was a rich, attention-drawing red.

Jim took one look at Blair's face and said nothing; Blair would get enough grief from Brown when he saw it. Simon, it seemed, had the same idea. They maneuvered Blair into the back seat then Simon drove off while Jim, with a muttered, "Thanks!" directed at the nurse, headed off to retrieve his truck.

When they reached 852 Prospect, Simon parked and leaned back to await Jim's arrival - at least all the roads on their way had been cleared. Jim wasn't too long, and between them he and Simon got Blair into the elevator and home.

Once there, Simon said, "So what's with the red plaster?"

Blair scowled. "There have been so many accidents between yesterday and today they ran out of white plaster, so there was just kids' plaster left - and pretty well everyone who had to get it opted for the blue. By the time they reached me, there was only this red left... "

Simon peered at it. "At least you got it signed! And is that a phone number I see?"

"Some of the nurses felt sorry for me," Blair muttered.

"You realize you won't be able to take a shower while that's on," Jim said.

"Dr. Pritchard said that if I'm careful and can keep my leg out of the water I can have a bath," Blair said. "Jim? You can help me with that, can't you?"

Jim nodded. "I think I can do that, Chief."

"Meanwhile," Simon said with a cheerfulness that was almost offensive, "I see a lot of paperwork in your immediate future. If Rafe and Brown are chasing up your cases, the least you can do is type up their reports."

Blair grinned. "Paperwork? that's easy."

"Just make sure you don't do so good a job that Simon makes you the official report-typer-upper for the entire bullpen," Jim told him.

"He wouldn't do that - would you, Simon?"

"Oh, I don't know." Simon's face took on a faintly anticipatory look. "Getting everyone's reports in on time, spelling and grammar correct... Yes, it could be worth it."

"Just try it," Blair said. "I also know how to make every mistake in the book... and I would!"

"I believe you would," Simon said. "But I certainly have to give you some busy work until that plaster is off. Maybe a few cold cases?"

Blair grinned. "As long as they're not going to give me hypothermia," he said.

"They won't. And if you're very, very good I'll let you both work from home, with Jim ferrying the files between the PD and here."

Jim nodded. "It'll be worth it to not have Brown making wisecracks about the color of the plaster."

Blair smiled happily. "For that, it's almost worth having the plaster this ghastly color."

"Now," Jim went on, "I'm hungry, and I bet you are too. That trail mix this morning was a long time ago. Simon? Stay for dinner?"

Simon shook his head. "I need to get back, see if Brown and Rafe have dug up anything on the Duncan family. Jim, if you come in tomorrow about 10 I'll have some files for you to check out."

"Right, Simon. And thanks for your help today."

Jim closed the door and turned to Blair. "What do you want?"

"Chinese, I think. Nice and filling."

Jim picked up the phone and hit speed dial for their favorite Chinese restaurant.

