



The Sound of Silence

by Alobear

illustrated by unbelievable2

“Ellison! Sandburg! My office!” Simon's familiar call echoed out across the Major Crime bull pen, and its targets dutifully got up from their desks and made their way to where the Captain was waiting for them.

Simon remained silent until they were both inside and Jim had closed the door behind them, making Blair wonder what was going on that needed privacy. It had been a slow morning, and it was reaching the point where he would welcome a case to break up the monotony. He immediately regretted that thought when Simon started to explain.

“We've caught a nasty one,” Simon said, once they were settled in the chairs on the other side of his desk.

Jim raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What's happened?”

Simon grimaced. “Earlier today, there was an arson attack on a warehouse downtown. The initial fire wasn't all that bad, but it turned out the perp was saving the main event until the first responders got there.”

“Oh no,” Jim breathed. “How bad?”

"Bad," Simon told them, his expression grim. "There were three firemen in the building when the explosion went off. Only one of them got out alive, and they're not hopeful he'll survive."

"Dammit!" Jim exclaimed, his fists clenched on his thighs.

Blair was almost breathless with horror. "How can somebody do that? It's the worst kind of sadism, waiting for the people who are trying to help and then targeting them. And notwithstanding the loss to their families," he continued, "it also destabilises the provision of emergency services. They'll be short-handed, and it might also affect their response times and quality of work."

He looked up to see both Jim and Simon staring at him stonily.

"Hey, I'm not saying they won't want to do their jobs properly," he elaborated hastily. "I'm just saying it's a natural – and unconscious – response. They're only human, after all – anybody would be adversely affected by something this horrible." He swallowed nervously, thinking that it was about time he learned to keep his big mouth shut in situations like this.

Jim pointedly looked back towards Simon, as if wiping the last minute or two of the conversation from his memory. "How many other people were in the building?" he asked.

"Nobody, as it turns out," Simon said, "so the emergency service personnel were definitely the targets. It was unusual for the warehouse to be empty at that time of day, though, which is why they went in. Apparently, someone actually pulled the fire alarm a few minutes before the bomb went off, so the workers who were on site evacuated and were well clear of the blast area."

"That suggests at least some concern for potential collateral damage," Jim said. "Whoever is doing this doesn't want to kill indiscriminately."

"Yeah," Simon agreed. "What I want you two to do is go to the scene and talk to the arson guys. You can also see if you can pick up anything that's been missed so far."

"Right," Jim said, and they both got up to leave.

"Sandburg?" Simon called out, and Blair spun back round to face him. "Try not to piss anyone off over there, okay? Everyone's a bit on edge about this, as you can imagine, and I don't expect they'll appreciate any of your anthropological insights." He punctuated the last couple of words with one of his patented sarcastic smiles.

"Sure thing, Simon," Blair said, ducking his head and following Jim back out into the bull pen.

He grabbed his coat and headed after his partner, towards the parking level, thinking he'd hit a new record of starting the day off badly with the Cascade PD. Setting aside his usefulness in helping Jim with his senses, Blair had originally thought he might also be able to provide valuable insight into police cases by dint of having a completely different perspective. How it usually turned out, however, was that he would say or do things that seemed perfectly reasonable to him, only to discover his police colleagues did not agree in the least. Generally speaking, they weren't very good at seeing things from other people's point of view, and often regarded him as a pest rather than an asset.

In the truck, Jim cleared his throat and started, "Sandburg..."

Blair cut him off before he could even start. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Think before I open my big mouth, right? It's okay, Simon already gave me that speech. I'll watch what I say at the scene, I promise."

"I know you didn't mean anything by it, Chief," Jim said, with a sympathetic grimace. "But other people don't know you like I do. So, yeah, just be careful."

Blair appreciated Jim not taking his head off about it. They'd come a long way from Jim basically yelling at him over every little thing, but there were still times when Jim reacted first and thought about it later, so it was nice when it worked the other way around, too. He felt like their partnership was now quite solid, both when they were working on a case, and outside the working environment, and it was always good to get confirmation that Jim felt the same way.

There was still a lot of activity at the warehouse when they got there. The fire was out and the bodies had presumably been removed, but there were press vans clustered outside the police tape, and both fire department and PD vehicles were parked inside with their lights flashing. People in various uniforms were bustling about, their demeanour reflective of the situation.

Jim parked up nearby and used his badge to get them through the cordon. They approached the main entrance to the building, where a middle-aged woman was issuing instructions to a couple of firemen. She had dark hair that was escaping from a ponytail at the back of her head, and her face was streaked with soot. She was wearing a bulky red fire department jacket and looked very weary.

"Jim Ellison, Cascade PD, Major Crime division," Jim said. "This is my partner, Blair Sandburg."

"Cass Henderson," the woman replied. "I'm the Fire Marshal in charge. I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you, but..."

She trailed off and rubbed her forehead, stress lines tightening at the edges of her mouth.

"I understand," Jim said. "What can we do to help?"

Marshal Henderson looked grateful for his attitude and Blair wondered if she had assumed they would just stomp in and try and take over. He knew there were often problems with different departments stepping on each others' toes in an investigation, but he figured everyone would want to work together as much as possible on this case, since the targets were some of their own. It wasn't that the police didn't care about civilian victims - far from it, but when cops or firemen or paramedics or the like were targeted, they tended to pull together and apply extra focus to the case. Nobody liked it when crime hit them where they lived, and it was always going to involve extra pressure and motivation when the victims were people you knew or felt some kind of connection to. That was why it was so hard to get people to give aid when there were disasters on the other side of the world, and why people were much more likely to donate to causes that touched them personally. Human beings were fundamentally selfish, and it was much more natural and easy to want to help those closest to you.

"This isn't the worst one I've ever seen," Henderson said, bringing Blair's attention back to the matter at hand, "but it's close. I'd appreciate some fresh eyes. I'm not sure I can be objective enough right now to focus properly."

"No problem," Jim said. "Lead the way."

Jim followed Marshal Henderson into the warehouse, Blair a step behind him. The smell of the dowsed fire threatened to overwhelm him for a moment until he felt Blair's hand on his arm, grounding him. He dialled back his sense of smell a bit, throwing Blair a grateful glance over his shoulder as he did so. He briefly reflected on how great it was they had reached the stage in their partnership where Blair anticipated his needs like that without even thinking about it. The early days of endless tests and miscommunications were long over and they now worked together as an almost seamless team.

They progressed through the building until they reached what remained of a small office at the back. Henderson motioned for them to precede her inside.

"As far as we can tell, this is where the original fire started," she said. "It looks like someone set a small explosive device underneath the desk and detonated it remotely. The blast was enough to set all the paperwork alight and spread the fire to the main part of the building."

Jim zeroed in on various points in the room as she spoke, noting the detonation point and the clear track of the flames' progress. When he focused back on his two companions, Blair raised an eyebrow at him, but he shook his head slightly in response. There was nothing out of the ordinary he could sense; from the information he had available to him, the bomb could have been set by anyone with access to fairly basic materials and only a rudimentary knowledge of explosives.

Henderson led them back outside. "The firemen came in through that entrance -" she indicated a side door "- and concentrated their efforts here at the back of the building." She crossed to some machinery off to one side, which had been reduced to lumps of twisted metal. "The second, much bigger explosion went off here, increasing the intensity of the fire, and cutting the firemen off from all the exits."

Again, Jim examined the area minutely, but couldn't detect anything distinctive or useful.

"So, the arsonist must have still been in the vicinity," Blair said. "He must have known when the firemen went into the building to be able to set the second bomb off at the best time to trap them."

Henderson nodded at him grimly. "That's what I figured, too. He must have set off the first device, then waited around for the first responders to arrive before activating the second, the sick bastard."

Jim was imagining what it must have been like for the firemen to be doing their job, only to be targeted and trapped inside the burning building. He shook his head to clear it, and brought his mind back to focus on the task at hand. "I'm afraid I can't spot anything useful at the moment, Marshal. But we'll head outside to see if we can find out where he was hiding. I assume you'll be processing any evidence found here and making a report?"

"Yes," Henderson confirmed. "I'll send a copy to Major Crime."

"Thank you," Jim said. "And we'll keep you informed of anything we find, as well."

"I'd appreciate that," Henderson said. "I don't need to tell you I'm under a lot of pressure to catch this guy." She gave them a hard stare. "Not that my bosses are the only ones keen to get him."

"Understood," Jim said, taking the business card she offered him. "We'll keep in touch."

Once they were back outside, Blair caught Jim's attention. "Nothing at all?"

Jim shook his head, his lips thin. "There's nothing distinctive about this guy I could sense. Maybe forensics will come up with something, but I doubt it." He scanned the surrounding area. "If we can find where he holed up to wait for the first responders, though, we might find something more useful. People tend to get sloppy when they have to wait around."

Blair nodded, but he wasn't convinced. "I guess," he said, "but the fire department would have got here pretty quickly, wouldn't they? Especially if the fire alarm had already gone off, long enough before the bomb for everyone inside to reach a safe distance. This guy wouldn't have been waiting for long, and he probably would have been on alert the whole time, looking out for his real targets."

"You're probably right," Jim was forced to concede. "But I don't have any better ideas right now, do you?"

Blair shrugged. This case had been depressing enough to start with, and now it was looking like they wouldn't be able to close it any time soon. He knew from experience that arsonists generally didn't restrict themselves to a single crime, so it was likely only a matter of time until their perpetrator struck again. He shuddered to think of more dedicated emergency service personnel losing their lives in the line of duty. He knew their jobs were dangerous, but it was one thing to risk your life to save others; it was quite another to be deliberately targeted for that very same thing.

"This sucks, man," he said, as they set off. "What kind of mentality must it take to do something like this? I mean, I guess I can sort of understand crimes of passion – sort of – and I know there are people out there who are prepared to hurt people for money and stuff like that. But this? This is just evil."

Jim sighed. "In my experience, very few people are truly evil, Chief," he said. "If you ask any criminal why they committed their crime, they'll have at least some sort of warped reason that made it seem like the right thing to do to them."

Blair wasn't prepared to accept that. "What kind of reason could possibly make lying in wait to kill dedicated emergency service personnel seem like the right thing to do?"

"I don't know," Jim admitted. "But I bet there is one – at least to this guy."

Blair followed Jim around an increasing perimeter of the warehouse, keeping his eyes open for any possible clue, though he knew it was highly unlikely he would spot something Jim missed. He also kept a close eye on Jim, who was clearly, and understandably, frustrated by the case and their lack of an immediate lead. When Jim was on edge, he found it even more difficult than usual to use his senses effectively, so Blair was alert to any signs of trouble in that area.

But Jim remained calmly focused throughout their search, until they reached a narrow alleyway that ran between two buildings. It housed several dumpsters at the open end, and terminated in a high brick wall. There were back entrances to both buildings near where the dumpsters were, but it didn't look like the alley saw much traffic. Jim glanced down the alley, then seemed to zero in on something Blair couldn't see at the other end.

"What have you got, Jim?" Blair asked eagerly.

He followed, as Jim strode purposefully to one corner of the dead end. Jim crouched down and pointed to two cigarette butts that had been thrown on the ground. "I think this might have been where he waited," he said.

"Cigarette butts in an alley next to some dumpsters?" Blair countered. "Anybody could have dropped those."

"Not next to the dumpsters," Jim said. "Or near the doors. If workers used this alley for breaks, there would likely be lots of butts scattered about, but at the other end of the alley. There are only two here; same brand, burnt down the same amount, and you can see where the ash was flicked off them." He stood up and turned to look back at the warehouse. "There's a clear line of sight to the best approach for a fire engine. Someone actually stood here, not long ago, in the mouth of this alley, for the time it took to smoke two cigarettes."

"And someone on a break would normally only smoke one," Blair said. "So, you think he smoked one while he waited for the firemen to arrive..."

"And then another one while he waited for them to get into the building and in the right position to be trapped by the second blast," Jim finished.

"Man, that's cold," Blair said. He couldn't imagine what kind of mind it would take to stand around and casually smoke two cigarettes while dedicated men and women put themselves in the correct position to be victims. As an anthropologist, Blair found all aspects of the human condition fascinating, but some of the darker personalities he'd come across since working with the police were still a little hard to take. He found it particularly sad that what Jim had said earlier was actually true; that criminals, no matter how heinous, always had a personal justification for what they did. He may not have wanted to admit it to himself before, but he suspected that would turn out to be the case here, as well. He hated that there were situations in the world that could create the motivation to kill and destroy and for that to seem reasonable and necessary to those carrying it out.

Jim pulled an evidence bag out of his pocket and carefully scooped the two cigarette butts into it.

"Now what?" Blair asked.

Jim held up a hand. "Hang on a sec," he said, distractedly, his eyes still on the ground.

He scanned the area again, letting out a satisfied huff when he evidently spotted something else. Reaching into some scrubby weeds growing against the brick wall, he pulled out a discarded matchbook and brought it up to look at it closely. Blair noticed it was one of the type that had a shiny finish to the cover, and knew Jim was seeing a whole lot more than he was. Jim secured the matchbook in a second evidence bag and looked up at Blair with a grin.

"And now we might just have his fingerprints," he said, triumphantly.

Jim paced up and down the bull pen, his shoulders tight and his fists clenching and unclenching. Blair opened his mouth to offer him a cup of coffee, then decided caffeine was the last thing Jim needed right then. They had received word that the third fireman from the earlier bomb had died in surgery, and the news had done nothing to improve Jim's mood, or Blair's for that matter.

"What's taking so long?" Jim demanded.

Blair decided it probably wasn't worth trying to answer Jim's question. It wasn't as if he didn't already know the answer himself, anyway. They had delivered the evidence they'd found to the forensics team, and Simon had pulled some strings to get a rush on the search of the FBI's fingerprint database, but it was still going to take time to get results. There was also no guarantee the prints would be listed, or even that they did in fact belong to the arsonist, and that would put them back to square one, which was not something Blair wanted to contemplate.

In the meantime, all they could do was wait. The prints and the cigarette butts were the only potential leads they had, and the cigarettes had thus far offered up nothing in the way of useful information. If they ever found a suspect, they might be able to tie him to the cigarette butts by DNA testing, but that wouldn't help them find him in the first place.

Blair had started off trying to get on with some paperwork from a previous case, but had eventually given up and was now just watching Jim stalk up and down. Jim might have developed somewhat in terms of dealing with Blair, but he was still one of the most impatient men Blair had ever known. He was so bad at waiting, Blair found himself suddenly glad they'd never gone to a theme park together. He snorted into his mug at the image of Jim queueing for a rollercoaster, then had to swallow his laughter when Jim glared over at him.

"Something funny, Sandburg?" Jim asked, his tone dark.

"No, nothing," Blair said quickly. "I was just thinking about something else."

"Well, I'm glad you feel you have that luxury," was Jim's retort.

Blair caught Henri looking over at them from the other side of the bull pen and rolled his eyes. Henri grinned and shrugged as if to say, 'rather you than me', then went back to pretending to concentrate on his own paperwork.

After what seemed like an age, Blair spotted Simon beckoning to them through his office window.

"Jim!" he said. "Simon's got something."

Jim immediately changed direction and crossed the bull pen in a few short strides, wrenching open Simon's office door, as Blair scrambled to keep up with him. Simon was on the phone, but gestured for them to come in.

"Thanks, Jacobsen," he said. "I definitely owe you one." He put the phone down and looked up at them, an expression of grim satisfaction on his face. "That was my FBI contact," he said. "They got a hit on the fingerprints. Apparently, they belong to one Franklin Wainwright, who's in the database because he used to work for the Postal Service." Simon ripped a sheet of paper off the pad on his desk and handed it to Jim. "Here's his current address – it's right here in Cascade."

"Thanks, Simon," Jim said, already heading back out the door. As they re-crossed the bull pen, he handed Blair a business card. "Give Marshal Henderson a call," he said. "Let her know what we've got and ask her if she wants to meet us at the address."

Henderson was delighted to hear from them and absolutely wanted in on the next step of the investigation. She took the address details from Blair as he climbed into Jim's truck and said she would see them shortly.

"Do you really think this could be our guy?" Blair asked, as Jim drove through the mid-afternoon traffic. "The evidence is pretty circumstantial."

"Yeah, but it's all we've got," Jim said, "and it's enough to pick him up for questioning. Besides, my gut tells me this is the guy."

"Man," Blair chuckled. "I always knew people who littered were scumbags, but this.... That'll teach him to throw his trash away. It's not as if he was standing right near a dumpster or anything."

Henderson was actually there before them, due to a slight delay in confirming their search warrant. "Thanks for giving me the heads up," she said, as they climbed out of the truck. Blair thought she looked tired, which

was understandable, given the circumstances, but she moved with purpose, clearly as glad as Jim was to have something positive to do.

"No problem," Jim said. "Let's just hope we've got the right guy and he happens to be home."

The house was of a decent size, in a reasonably nice neighbourhood. Henderson and Jim both drew their weapons as they made their way up the front path, Blair following at a safe distance.

"You go round the back," Jim told Henderson, and she disappeared around the side of the building.

Jim approached the front door cautiously, and banged on it, calling out, "Franklin Wainwright? Open up! Cascade PD!"

There was no sign of movement inside the house but, a moment later, they heard Henderson calling out from the back. Blair followed Jim around the building to join her at the kitchen window.

"Doesn't look like anybody's home," she said, "but does that look like probable cause to you?"

She pointed through the window and Blair followed the gesture to see a mess of papers, wires, pieces of plastic and maps scattered across the kitchen table.

"I would say so," Jim agreed, and moved to the back door.

In one smooth motion, he raised his foot and kicked the door in, keeping his gun at the ready as he made his way inside. Henderson and Blair followed on his heels. There was still no sign of anyone being there, so they started sifting through the items, looking for any information that might prove useful.

It wasn't difficult. There was a whole mess of information, but it practically all related to the planning and carrying out of the crime. It was like the arsonist had deliberately left it all out in the open for them to find. Blair hit upon something almost immediately. It was a newspaper clipping dated from the month before, and it quickly told him why Wainwright was doing what he was doing.

"Hey, guys, look at this," he said, waving it in the direction of the other two. They broke off from their own searches to look over at him. "It looks like Wainwright's wife and two kids died in a fire not too long ago." He scanned the text quickly. "Firefighters were on the scene but the blaze got out of control and they weren't able to save them. He must blame them for his family's deaths."

"Definitely our guy, then," Jim concurred. "And there's your reason as to why this seems sensible in his mind. Is there anything that might tell us where he is, or where he might be targeting next?"

"Maybe," Henderson said, brandishing her own piece of paperwork. "This is a list of warehouses he's put together from somewhere. The one from this morning is on it, but there are six or seven others, so no way to tell which one he's going to target next, or when."

"Okay," Jim said. "Let's get the techs down here to collect everything, and we can go through it in more detail back at the station."

They made their way back outside, Jim heading to his truck to call in what they'd found. A burst of static sounded from the radio in Henderson's car and she jogged over to listen to the message. A couple of seconds later, she called out to them.

"There's been another fire, and the location's on this list," she told them, waving the piece of paper that was still in her hand. "I'll see if I can warn the first responders, but we'd better get there quick. Wainwright might still be there!"

They might now have ample proof he was behind the fires, but it looked like it might not be enough to prevent him hurting anyone else.

Jim drove the truck to the site at ridiculous speed, siren blaring, Blair bracing himself against the window frame to keep from sliding off his seat. A warning to the first responders had gone out on all channels, but they had no way of knowing if it had reached the relevant people in time. They screeched to a halt next to a fire engine and a couple of ambulances that had evidently arrived just before them, Henderson's car right behind them.

"You stop anyone else heading into the warehouse," Jim said, "and I'll check inside."

"Wait, what about...?" Blair started to say, but Jim was already out of the truck and running towards the building.

Blair jumped out, too, and sprinted to intercept some firemen and paramedics who were gathering their gear and preparing to head inside.

"Wait, stop!" he cried, much to their amazement. They did, however, pause in their activities to find out what he was doing there. He skidded to a stop, heart thumping despite the distance he had run being only a few feet. "The guy who set this bomb has a habit of waiting for the first responders to get inside and then setting off a secondary explosion," he explained breathlessly.

"But what about anyone who might already be in there?" one of the paramedics asked.

Henderson jogged up to the group and flashed her Fire Marshal's badge at them.

"So far, there haven't been any victims other than whoever's turned up to deal with the initial blast," she told them. "And, if you go inside and he sets off a bigger explosion, it's only going to put anyone who was already in there in more danger. Has anyone else gone in yet?"

"Not from our teams," one of the firemen answered, and the paramedics shook their heads as well.

Blair immediately spun towards the warehouse and yelled, "Jim! There's nobody inside!"

The firemen and paramedics looked at him as if he was mad, and then were even more surprised when Jim appeared from round the side of the building and jogged towards them.

"So, we're okay, then?" Jim queried as he reached the group.

"Looks that way," Blair said, offering up a satisfied smile.

But Jim wasn't paying attention to him any more, his focus instead back in the direction of the warehouse.

"There's somebody else here," he said.

"You think it could be Wainwright?" Blair asked, ignoring the confused looks of the firemen and paramedics.

Jim looked thoughtful. "Stands to reason," he said. "He'd have to be somewhere nearby to know when the first responders went inside. And now we've stopped them going in and are blocking the site entrance, he's trapped. You stay here and cover his exit, and I'll see if I can pin him down."

And he was off again, not giving Blair a chance to react.

Jim ran back towards the warehouse, then veered off to one side suddenly, shouting something Blair couldn't quite make out. A man shot out of the bushes next to the perimeter fence and Jim chased him towards the warehouse. With nowhere else to go, the man ducked inside the building, with Jim in hot pursuit.

Jim's senses were already on alert when he entered the warehouse, so the acrid tang of smoke from the initial blast hit him like a physical blow. He threw his hands up in front of his face and staggered, losing sight of his quarry. Missing Blair's usual steady presence at his side keenly, he drew in a cautious breath and quickly dialled back his sense of smell. He heard the sound of someone moving through the debris ahead of him and continued his pursuit.

"Wainwright!" he called out. "There's nowhere to go! Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

There was no response.

Jim made his way further into the building, treading carefully to avoid injury but still trying to make quick progress, so Wainwright wouldn't be able to get too far ahead. He knew the man couldn't escape, since the whole site was surrounded by a tall fence, and Blair and Henderson were guarding the exit. He had no idea what Wainwright hoped to achieve at this point, but he knew the man was unstable at best.

He pushed forwards, negotiating broken and twisted furniture and machinery, until he found himself in an open area towards the back of the building.

The man he assumed was Wainwright had stopped running and was scanning in every direction, as if searching desperately for a way out.

"There's nowhere to go," Jim said again, keeping his tone as neutral as possible and his gun down at his side.

Wainwright spun to face him, his expression wild and unfocused.

"They couldn't get out," he said, his voice a throaty rasp.

"Your family?" Jim guessed. "I know what happened to them, and I'm sorry. But hurting other people isn't going to bring them back."

"They couldn't get out," Wainwright repeated. "And nobody went in to save them."

Jim extended one hand in a placatory gesture, walking slowly forwards as he spoke. "I know you blame the Fire Department, but they did their best. What happened was a tragedy, but it wasn't anybody's fault. You're targeting innocent people, who are just trying to help more people like your family."

"They're not innocent!" Wainwright cried. "They deserve to know what it's like to die, burning and knowing nobody is coming. And, if you're defending them, so do you!"

Before Jim could bring his gun up, Wainwright reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a detonator. He brandished it in Jim's direction, his thumb hovering over the button on top.

"Wainwright, you really don't want to do that..." Jim said.

But Wainwright wasn't listening. "It's time," he muttered. "I've done what I can to redress the balance. They've been watching, and now it's time for me to join them."

Jim realised there was no chance he'd be able to reason further with Wainwright. He was too far gone into his psychosis to be reached. Jim was also still too far away to tackle the man and hope to prevent him from setting off the second bomb that way. He glanced round and spotted some metal sheeting propped up against a table to one side of the space. Thinking the only thing he could do at this point was attempt to save himself, Jim dived sideways and scrambled behind the protection, hoping against hope it would be enough.

Outside, Blair watched as Jim disappeared into the warehouse on the heels of a known arsonist who had already killed several people. His first instinct was to follow, but one of the firemen grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"What the hell are you thinking?" the man asked. "You said there's another bomb in there."

"My partner's in there," Blair protested, pulling against the man's strong grip.

Then Henderson was in front of him, blocking his way.

"There isn't anything you can do to help Ellison," she said. "The only thing you'll achieve by going in there now is putting yourself at risk, too."

Blair couldn't explain. Jim was in unfamiliar surroundings, in a situation of high stress, with hostile environmental factors. Henderson and the others would never understand just how much Blair could do to help mitigate those circumstances. He wrenched his arm free and dodged around Henderson, heading towards the door where Jim had entered the building far too long ago.

He heard shouts from behind him, but he ignored them, focusing solely on the fact that Jim was in danger and he had to do whatever he could to help him. He was still several feet from the door when an explosion ripped through the warehouse. A blast of heat knocked Blair backwards off his feet, and he fell to the ground, stunned and horrified.

Other people quickly surrounded him. One of the paramedics knelt down at his side, while the firemen fought their way into the building. Blair struggled to get up and follow them, but the paramedic held him down and, this time, he was completely unable break free. He looked up to see Henderson regarding him with obvious concern.

"I'm fine!" he said, waving her away. "Get Jim!"

His head rang, and his face stung where bits of debris had struck him, but all he could think was that Jim had been inside the building, and nobody had previously survived one of Wainwright's secondary explosions.

Sensation came back slowly. Jim gradually became aware he was awake, which he realised meant he must have been asleep or unconscious. He felt warm and comfortable and surmised he was somewhere safe, so he took the time to assess his situation before trying to move. There was a soft mattress beneath him, and he

could feel a blanket tucked securely around him. There was a scent of disinfectant in the air, and that combination of variables told him he was most likely in a hospital. Before that could start to worry him, though, the faint smell of herbal shampoo and South American coffee insinuated itself into his senses and he relaxed. Sandburg was there, which meant everything would be fine.

But why was it so quiet? There was no beeping of machines, no footsteps in a corridor, not even the muffled voices of people in another part of the building. Jim dialled up his hearing, but no sound came to him. When he realised he couldn't even hear Sandburg breathing, when he knew for a fact that Blair was only a few feet away, his sense of safety and security fled in an instant. Jim's eyes flew open, and with the bright light came sudden pain in his head. It crawled through his brain like a thorny vine, causing him to tense, which just awakened more aches and twinges in other parts of his body. He thought he might have made an involuntary noise, but he didn't hear anything.

Sandburg was immediately in his field of vision, a mixture of concern and relief flashing across his features. His lips were moving, but Jim couldn't hear what he was saying. He panicked, crying out incoherently and thrashing around, straining his sense of hearing to the limit, desperate to pick up any noise at all. Then, Blair's hands were on his body, stroking, reassuring, providing comfort. Jim still couldn't hear what Sandburg was saying, but he focused on the sight of the familiar face, the smell of the familiar scent, and the sensation of the familiar touch, and allowed himself to be calmed.

Jim squeezed his eyes shut against the situation for a moment, took a deep breath, and commanded his body to lie still. He was relieved when Sandburg didn't remove his hands, leaving them resting lightly on Jim's chest and arm. When he opened his eyes again, Sandburg was looking down at him, his brow wrinkled in concern and his eyes worried. Jim focused on Sandburg's mouth and managed to make out the words he was saying.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, I'm here."

Jim nodded in understanding, but still felt the fear rising in his chest as he replied, unable to hear the sound of his own words as he spoke them.

"Blair, I can't hear anything."

Blair tried to listen to what the doctor was saying, knowing he would need to relay the information to Jim later. But he was finding it really difficult to concentrate, his focus mostly on Jim, who was lying in his hospital bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. The last few hours had been an agony of waiting and suspense. When the paramedics on the scene had dragged Jim's motionless body out of the wreckage of the warehouse, Blair had feared the worst. Jim was battered and bleeding and covered in soot, but the paramedics had assured Blair he was alive. Blair had ridden with him in the ambulance, watching him breathe the whole way, but then Jim had been snatched from him and he had been forced into the waiting room.

The news eventually came that Jim was stable, so then it had just been a case of waiting for him to wake up, since the medical professionals would be unable to assess any further damage until then. And now Jim was awake but unable to hear, and yet another knot of anxiety had taken up residence in Blair's stomach.

He forced himself to listen to what he was being told, since Jim couldn't.

"...likely sensorineural rather than conductive damage...only cuts and bruises other than the hearing...very lucky considering the force of the explosion...acoustic trauma to be expected...can be temporary..."

That last word caught Blair's attention, and he raised a hand to stop the doctor in mid flow.

"Wait, did you say it would only be temporary?" he asked.

The doctor ran his fingers over his moustache and looked uncertain. "Well, it's difficult to tell with this kind of injury," he said, dashing Blair's hopes for a definitive answer. "Depending on the type and severity of the damage to the ears, the hearing loss could be permanent, or it could repair itself over time. There's no way to know until it happens."

"How much time?" Blair wanted to know.

"If the hearing is going to come back, I would expect to see some significant improvement within forty-eight hours," the doctor said.

That was something, at least, Blair thought. It would be good to have some kind of timeframe to manage Jim's expectations.

"When will he be able to come home?" he asked next.

The doctor glanced over at Jim, who didn't acknowledge either of them. "Apart from the hearing, there's nothing really wrong with him, other than cuts and bruises. So, there's no reason why he can't go home today. I'll go and sign the discharge papers right now, if you like."

"Thanks," Blair said, keen to get the process underway, as he knew Jim wouldn't want to stay in the hospital any longer than absolutely necessary. Blair was also eager for them to be left alone, so he could let Jim know what was going on. Given Jim's propensity for impatience, he was surprised at how calm Jim had become after his initial panic on waking up. If he was honest, Blair would have to admit the quiet and stillness from Jim was rather worrying.

The doctor nodded and went out of the room.

Before he crossed back over to the bed, Blair went to his satchel and pulled out a notepad and pen. It was going to be quite a painful process, imparting all the relevant information to Jim by writing it down, but he couldn't immediately think of a better way of doing it. Jim didn't look at him as he approached, and Blair had to lay a hand on his arm to get him to realise he was there. Jim focused on him slowly, as if he had just been very far away, and Blair wondered what he had been thinking about. It wasn't hard to imagine, really, and he felt his heart constrict.

"So, what did the doc say?" Jim asked, his voice both resigned and pitched far too loud.

Blair waved the notepad at him, and Jim nodded wearily.

The first thing Blair wrote down was, "You're talking really loud."

He showed it to Jim, who grimaced. "Sorry," he said, a little more quietly. "I can't hear myself, so it's hard to tell."

Blair nodded in understanding, then bent over the notepad, summarising what the doctor had said as quickly and succinctly as possible. It still took quite a while, and then he had to wait while Jim read it through and took it all in.

"Forty-eight hours?" Jim queried. "And then we'll know for sure?"

"Maybe," Blair shrugged.

There was a lot more he wanted to say, but the thought of having to write it all down wasn't very appealing. Jim was looking at him expectantly, so he had a quick think.

Then, he wrote down, "Can you use your sight to read my lips? It would make things a lot easier – for both of us."

He saw Jim's head start to shake almost before he'd got to the end of the sentence. Blair waved his hand under Jim's nose to get his attention, then pointed at his own lips. He formed his words slowly and in a much more exaggerated fashion than normal.

"Just try, okay?"

Jim glared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Okay," he said.

Blair smiled his thanks. "You can come home with me today," he said.

Jim immediately started pushing the bedclothes off and swinging his legs off the side of the bed. Blair laid his hands on Jim's chest, attempting to make him pause.

"Wait," he said. "Let's take things slow, okay? You did get blown up this afternoon, after all."

He saw Jim tracking his words as he spoke them, understanding coming more quickly than before. Jim gave a short nod, acquiescing, but grudgingly.

"Okay," Blair said, laying a hand on Jim's arm. "Before you get up, how do you feel?"

Jim considered for a moment, then replied. "Mostly okay, I think, though my head feels kind of tight."

"Tight?" Blair wasn't sure what he meant.

"Yeah," Jim said, waving his hand vaguely near his right ear. "Like there's a tension headache forming, or I'm concentrating really hard on something I can't quite remember."

Blair had a thought. "What's your hearing dial set at?" he asked.

Jim's eyes unfocused for a second, then he looked at Blair in surprise. "It's way up at maximum," he said.

Blair nodded; his assumption had been correct. "You're straining to hear. That's understandable. And the fact that your hearing is normally so powerful makes it strain much further."

Jim was shaking his head, clearly finding it difficult to follow as Blair warmed to his subject and sped up to more like his usual way of speaking. Blair grabbed the notepad and scribbled quickly.

"Turn it down to zero. You'll feel better."

Jim unfocused for a second again, then his shoulders visibly relaxed. He smiled at Blair.

"You're right," he said. "That is better."

"Okay, let's go home," Blair said. "And I'll call Simon." He mimed using his cell phone, then raised one hand high above his head to indicate Simon.

Jim laughed. Then he suddenly sobered and looked at Blair searchingly, as if he had only just noticed something.

"What's wrong?" Blair asked.

In answer, Jim reached up and ghosted his fingers across the butterfly bandages on Blair's cheek, where he had been caught in the blast.

Blair shrugged. "That's nothing," he said dismissively. "Let's just worry about you, okay?"

"No, tell me," Jim said, his voice over-loud again.

Blair tried to look away, but Jim took hold of his chin gently, forcing him to maintain eye contact. He sighed.

"I was trying to get into the building when the bomb went off, okay?"

"Dammit, Sandburg!" Jim said. "I told you to stay outside and block Wainwright's escape! You could have been killed!"

Blair jerked his head away, glaring down at Jim. "And what about you?" he demanded. "You were in there – without back-up. It's a miracle you survived at all, and we don't know if your hearing is ever going to come back. And what was I supposed to do? Just let you run into a building with a bomb in it and hang around outside, waiting for you to come back?"

Jim shook his head helplessly at the barrage of words. Blair grabbed the notepad angrily and scrawled something, almost throwing the paper into Jim's lap. "It's what we do."

"No, it's what I do," Jim threw back.

Blair added another word under the first four. "Partners." Then he turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

He stepped out into the corridor and called Major Crime. Simon was relieved to find out Jim was awake and mostly unharmed, though obviously he was concerned about the prognosis for his hearing.

"What if it doesn't come back?" he said, worriedly.

Blair sighed. "Let's not borrow trouble, Simon," he said. He was still feeling somewhat over-wrought from the argument he'd just had with Jim, and the last thing he wanted to do was think about that possibility. "We'll deal with that if and when it happens, okay? Right now, I just want to get Jim home and settled. I'll let you know if anything changes."

"Sure," Simon replied. "And, of course, Jim's on medical leave for as long as necessary."

"Thanks, Simon," Blair said. "I'll talk to you soon."

The next twenty-four hours was a severe test of Blair's patience. Jim was understandably very unsettled by his lack of hearing, and more than a little anxious about whether or not it was going to come back, as was Blair. But it felt to Blair almost like they'd gone back in time to when he'd first worked with Jim on his senses and Jim had been less than receptive to anything Blair had suggested.

Blair came up with loads of ideas of how to make things easier for Jim, primarily using his other four senses to compensate for the one that was lacking. He thought about how Jim could use his sight to work out when

things might be making noise, he suggested concentrating on smell so Jim could tell when there were changes to his environment, and he even devised an experiment to test if Jim could use his sense of touch to feel vibrations like bat radar. But Jim didn't seem to want to try; he just got frustrated about not being able to hear, and declared everything Blair put before him to be too difficult or just not worth attempting. Blair tried to be understanding, but he couldn't figure out why Jim was being so damned stubborn, when a little effort would improve his situation no end. It was like trying to persuade a five-year-old to eat his vegetables, and Blair quickly got sick of being regarded as the evil parent torturing a child for the child's own good.

Eventually, Blair gave up attempting to help, deciding he might as well just let Jim get on with wallowing for a while, and come back to potential solutions if it turned out the problem was going to be more permanent than they still hoped. He guessed Jim must be figuring the same; that it wasn't worth expending effort that might be entirely unnecessary in a couple of days. It was still frustrating, though, since, if nothing else, it would give them interesting data about Jim's senses that might prove useful in the future. Blair had to admit that probably wasn't something Jim really wanted to think about right then, though, so he let it go.

At least they didn't have to worry about the case, since that had all been wrapped up rather neatly. Jim managed to write up his report about what had happened in the warehouse, describing how he had chased the arsonist inside and through the damage already done by the initial bomb, how he had tried to talk Wainwright down, but had been unsuccessful. Blair's heart had been in his mouth as he'd read how Wainwright had evidently decided death was preferable to capture and set off his secondary bomb in desperation. He was amazed Jim had managed to dive behind the metal sheeting that had protected him from the worst of the blast, and was why he had survived and the arsonist had not. There had been no indication Wainwright had been working with anyone else, and so the case was now closed.

Late on the day after the explosion, Blair was just attempting to extricate several grocery bags from his car to take them inside when his cell phone rang. He dumped the bags back on the front seat and answered it.

"Sandburg?" came Simon's deep voice. "How's our patient?"

"Grumpy as hell," Blair said. "Refusing to let me help him with anything. Frustrated, touchy, liable to bite my head off at a moment's notice... Have I forgotten anything? Oh yeah, how about a major pain in my ass?"

"Sounds like Jim," Simon said, though the humour in his tone didn't quite ring true. "So, there's been no change to his hearing, then?"

"No, there hasn't!" Blair snapped. "And you calling up every five minutes to ask really isn't helping the situation, okay?" There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line, then Blair sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Simon. I know you're as worried about him as I am. And apparently Jim doesn't have the monopoly on biting people's heads off for no good reason."

"Don't worry about it, Sandburg," Simon said. "This must be harder on you than any of the rest of us."

"It's actually hardest on Jim," Blair pointed out. "And I have to keep reminding myself of that. He must be terrified, and you know he generally reacts to that by getting angry. Still, it's only been just over twenty-four hours, so there's still hope."

"Well, you hang in there," Simon said. "And let me know if either of you need anything, okay?"

"I will. Thanks, Simon. I'll call you as soon as there's any change."

Blair cut the connection, collected up his shopping and made his way inside. At the top of the stairs, he opened the door to the loft and struggled his way in with the grocery bags. He glanced over into the lounge area and saw Jim stretched out on the couch. He was facing away from the door, reading the paper. Blair spent a few minutes putting things away in the kitchen, then made his way over to Jim and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Jim immediately lurched forwards, letting out a cry of alarm and spinning round to face Blair, his eyes wide. He relaxed marginally when he saw who it was, but his expression hardened into annoyance.

"Sandburg! Don't do that!" Jim practically yelled. "Give a guy some warning!"

Blair was alarmed by the violence of Jim's reaction, but he did his best to remain calm, in an effort to diffuse rather than intensifying the situation. He stepped carefully round to sit on the other end of the couch, capturing Jim's gaze with his own before speaking slowly and clearly.

"I got home several minutes ago. Didn't you smell me?"

Jim's features twisted in exasperation. "I don't sit around, randomly smelling stuff," he said, his words still unnecessarily loud.

Blair put one hand out, palm down, then lowered it in attempt to get Jim to reduce his volume a bit. He kept dropping his hand until it came to rest on Jim's knee; he could feel tension vibrating through the thick denim of Jim's jeans.

"Why not?" he asked. "In normal circumstances, you would have heard me come in. You would have seen me if you'd been facing the door. Why not have your smell dial set higher so you can notice things you now can't hear?"

He saw Jim following his lips with intense concentration, a frown embedded in his forehead. It was a lot of words to figure out, but Jim remained focused until Blair had finished speaking and then was silent for a moment afterwards, his brain evidently taking a while to catch up with what he'd seen. Blair was just glad Jim was making the effort to understand him, rather than dismissing it as too much trouble. Eventually, Jim blew out a long breath and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Maybe," Jim said, finally, and Blair decided that was as much agreement as he was going to get at this point. He would leave the idea to percolate in Jim's mind, hoping it would have a positive effect once he'd had a chance to process it. "All this lip reading is giving me a bitch of a headache."

Blair squeezed Jim's knee. "You're really tense, man," he said. "Where's your hearing dial at right now?"

Jim closed his eyes for a moment, then the lines in his face suddenly smoothed out a bit. He opened his eyes again and managed a sheepish smile.

"Zero now," he said, "but it was right up again. I guess it's just instinctive to push it to try and hear something." The frustration came back into his expression. "This is just so hard!"

"I know," Blair said. "But it will get better. I have faith. And you just have to have patience."

Jim slumped back into the couch cushions, scrubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. It was hard for Blair to see him at such a loss. Jim was normally so strong and so sure of himself, the rock against which Blair set his back in times of adversity or danger. And now, he was so weary and beaten down - and so afraid. It made Blair want to reach out to him and tell him everything would be okay. But they both knew

that might be a lie, and false platitudes wouldn't help Jim one bit at the moment. Blair decided he could still find a way to provide Jim with some comfort, though, even if it wasn't reassurance that he would get better.

Blair scooted forwards, keeping one hand on Jim's knee so he wouldn't be startled by the movement. With the other hand, he reached up and gently pulled Jim's hands away from his face. Jim looked at him in confusion, but acquiesced when Blair brushed his hands over Jim's eyes to close them. He placed one hand on either side of Jim's head and started massaging his temples.

"That feels so good," Jim murmured, after a moment.

Blair kept up slow circles of gentle pressure until the tension gradually drained out of Jim's body and he relaxed properly against the couch. When Blair took his hands away, Jim let out a little moan of disappointment. He opened his eyes and grabbed one of Blair's hands.

"Don't go away," Jim pleaded, placing his other hand flat against Blair's chest. He shifted it to the left side slightly, then smiled. "I'm used to listening to your heartbeat," he said. "I miss it always being there, at the back of my mind, but I can feel it if I do this."

Blair was stunned. He wasn't accustomed to Jim being so vulnerable, or at least not showing it. He got an inkling of just how terrified Jim must be right now, trapped in his silent world, if he was used to being able to hear Blair's heartbeat from across the loft. The intimacy of Jim's revelation wasn't lost on him, either. He felt warmed by the importance Jim evidently placed on his presence, and not a little aroused by the idea of Jim paying that much attention to his heart. He inched a little closer to Jim on the couch, and was pleased when Jim didn't move away. He placed his own hand over Jim's and pressed it harder into his chest, willing their flesh to merge so Jim would know he wasn't alone.

Jim smiled again, then brought up his other hand and buried it in Blair's curls.

"I guess I'll just have to find different ways of keeping track of you," he said softly. "Aside from smell..."

It was impossible for Blair to mistake the undertones of the situation. He had often wondered how Jim felt about him, and now he was apparently getting the answer he had always wanted. The situation felt extremely fragile, as if a sudden move on his part might break the spell of their current closeness and push Jim away again, so he remained absolutely still, his eyes locked with Jim's. But Jim seemed to be waiting for him to make the next move, so eventually he shifted forwards a bit more, reaching up to cup Jim's face in his hands. Pulling Jim down towards him, he brought their lips together in a kiss. Jim responded immediately, keeping one hand in Blair's hair and reaching the other one round behind his back to bring him in even closer. Jim pushed his tongue between Blair's willing lips and they enjoyed a leisurely, sensual exploration of each other's mouths.

When they finally broke apart, Jim was grinning like the cat who got the cream.

"Taste works!" he announced.

When Blair awoke the next morning, it took him a moment to realise where he was – Jim's bed rather than his own. Things had developed quickly the night before, leading to an extended experiment involving touch and taste that had opened Blair's eyes to several new uses for Sentinel senses.

Everything felt right. It was as though something vital that had been out of kilter had finally slotted itself into place. Obviously, there was the ongoing issue of Jim's hearing, but Blair was confident that would sort itself out with time. And, if it didn't, they would get through it together. He stretched, and felt the weight of Jim's arm shift over his abdomen. Fingers clutched at his t-shirt and he placed his own over them, squeezing reassuringly. Jim's hand relaxed and he let out a satisfied sigh in his sleep. Blair rolled over to face Jim and took in his sleeping face. There was a slight smile playing over Jim's lips and he looked younger, his features smoothed out and peaceful. Blair reached out and ran a finger gently down Jim's cheek.

"I love you," he murmured.

Blue eyes cracked open and regarded him fuzzily.

"I love you, too," Jim said.

Blair felt a wide grin spread across his face; then a sudden thought struck him.

"Wait, what?" he asked.

"You heard me," Jim grouched. "Don't make me say it again."

Blair bounced up into a sitting position and looked down at Jim, his excitement building. "Yes," he said, eagerly, "but the point is you heard me!"

Jim stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then Blair watched as realisation slowly dawned, bringing with it an answering grin on Jim's face.

"I did, didn't I?" Jim said, wonderingly.

He grabbed Blair and pulled him down on top of him, hugging him close and planting a smacking kiss on his lips.

Blair laughed. "See? I told you all you needed was a little patience."

"Well, you know patience has never been my strong point," Jim replied. "And, speaking of which, I think this calls for some kind of celebration, right this very minute."

"What did you have in mind?" Blair asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Jim mused. "I think I did pretty well with only four senses last night, but we should probably explore exactly what I can do with all five."

"An anthropologist's work is never done," Blair said, with a mock sigh, then dived in to begin the exploration.

THE END