

It's a Private Thing by Brit

I was tired. I admit it. Drop-dead tired, actually. It felt so good just to stretch my legs out from Hutch's big ole chair, kick off my shoes, and prop my feet up on the coffee table. He doesn't put his honkers up there. Too proper I guess. He's curled up in one corner of the sofa, one leg tucked under him. Even sprawled out like that he looks like a gentleman—refined, you know?

I was tired, but felt pretty good considering the case we just finished up. It was only our third major case together, me an' Blondie over there, but it felt great when the judge passed out the sentence: three life sentences with no opportunity for parole. Felt real good.

Hutch did some real slick work on this case. Showed a lot of sensitivity to the kids we had to talk to. Sicko molesting little kids, mostly preteen boys. Things that shouldn't happen to anyone, let alone some ten-year-old. Jerk admitted to ruining the lives of over twenty-four kids between the ages of two and fourteen. Two-years-old, for crying out loud. One kid turned up dead. Very dead. Homicide. That's when we came in.

I let Hutch do most of the talking to the victims. I couldn't hardly stomach it. Took in only as much as I had to without getting too close. But when we hit the streets, I hit them hard. Leaned on a few people for the info we needed. I'll bet the Cap'n would think I leaned a bit too hard, but I got results and we nailed him. Nailed him good, me and Hutch.

Hutch and I met at the Academy, worked out together, had a couple a brews together after classes sometimes. Didn't really hit it off at first, actually. I thought he was some kinda rich snot gettin' his kicks and he thought...well, I'm not exactly sure what he thought of me, but I can tell he didn't really like me at first. We competed a lot—wrestling, boxing, shooting range, grades, drinking, women, whatever we could try and best the other in. But through all that we found out that we had a lot more in common than we had differences, and we spent more and more time together.

Really got to know the guy during his divorce from that wench Vanessa. Now there's a piece of work. I thought he'd have more brains than to get involved with her. We spent a lot of nights talking. Or I should say that he'd do a lot of talking and I'd do a lot of listening. As fierce as Hutch can be when things heat up (*never* let this guy get you in a headlock, I'm telling you), he really wears his heart on his sleeve, you know? Real gentle guy. Big heart. Her leaving messed him up good. He'd tell me a lot of stuff I figure you'd only tell your best friend.

Best friend.

I was surprised to realize that I actually wanted him to be my best friend. Hadn't had one of those in a long time. A long time.

So here we are sitting in his apartment drinking a beer, waiting for the air conditioner to really make a difference in his cottage. At least it's cooler in here than outside. I'm content. Stretch out my legs a little bit more and hunker down in the chair to ease my back.

"So, you want to talk about it?"

Now where did that come from? I peer over at him. The sun's setting lower and he's just a bunch of shadows. "What do you mean? Talk about what, the case?"

He takes a pull on his beer.

"Whatever it is that's been eating away at you over the past month."

I start to protest, but he shuts me up with a glance, holds my gaze.

I look away first.

"It's nothing." I'm not sure what he's getting at, so I get up to get another beer out of the fridge. Okay, so maybe I *do* know, but I know I don't want...don't need to talk about it. He waits for me, just like he waited for the kids—the victims—that we had to interview. Greater than the pain was their fear, shame, and resentment that kept them clammed up. Hutch reached out to those kids like I once saw him coax a neglected dog out from behind a dumpster. Gently coaxing, patient—healing with a touch.

I walk back into the living room and he seeks out my eyes, knowing I'm lying. He's told me a couple of times that I'm a lousy liar.

"Really, it's nothing, Hutch." Instead of sitting back down I turn away and wander over to the window, looking out at the canal, fiddling with the blinds. The setting sun's making the water dance with light. Somehow I'm lulled into a kind of numbness, either by the sparkling waters or the silence in the room. I can almost feel the concern radiating off my partner. "It's just...it's...."

How do I explain this to him? To another guy? To anybody? I don't even really understand it myself. I mean, yeah, I've taken some psychobabble courses, criminology classes, but textbooks just can't describe living through....*it*.

"It's a private thing, you know?"

"What is, Starsk?" His voice is soft, gentle.

“I don’t know...I don’t know how to explain it.” *It.* Pain. It’s a private thing. I don’t know how else to describe it, but I think he understands somehow. “I mean, you can be in a room with fifty other people who have experienced the same kind of thing, but it’s still all yours. Understand?”

He pauses a minute and answers carefully. “Yeah, I think I do.” He waits another moment before he speaks again. “What those kids went through was horrible, wasn’t it?”

I don’t want to follow where he’s going with this, but somehow I knew I would, knew I had to. But I...I was afraid to. I didn’t want to change his perspective of me. His opinion of me had become important somewhere along the way. I didn’t want him to think less of me somehow.

“Yes, it was horrible.” Saying it out loud was a struggle. I know that Hutch understood the double meaning. Somehow he knew. I clear my throat because suddenly there’s a lump there. There was no use denying it, he’d know I was lying anyway. “How did you...?”

There’s a warmth in Hutch’s voice that’s calming. “I just figured it out Starsk. A couple of days ago. Though I don’t know why it took so long, all the clues were there—the way you couldn’t meet the kids’ eyes when we talked with them, the way you’d pale when they described something horrible that was done to them. Their terror was yours. This must have been a month of pure hell for you, buddy.”

I can’t believe that after all this time I actually had tears welling up in my eyes. Since I left New York when I was fourteen I had never told anyone what had happened to me. I never spoke of it again with my family. I pushed it out of mind, except for the occasional nightmare that would wake me up, drenched in sweat and shaking like a leaf. The nightmares that had returned with a vengeance at the beginning of this case.

I finally turned back toward my partner. I was more than half afraid that I would see disgust in his eyes or pity. I wanted neither. What I did see there was concern and sympathy. I hesitated, but then crossed back over and sat in my chair staring at the bottle in my hands.

“Tell me.” His words were soft, gentle. I felt rather than heard his patience. His compassion. His plea to trust him.

Pain—it’s a private thing. I tried to share it once before, alert the adults in my life of what was happening to me but they didn’t believe me. Refused to believe me, take my side. Accused me of making the story up in order to lash out in the rage that consumed me after my father’s murder. The people who were supposed to protect me, be on my side, sided with my abuser by not believing me. The ultimate betrayal. The ultimate loneliness that kept pain a private thing.

I told him. I told him things I had never told a living soul. I told him of how a grieving fourteen-year-old boy sought out the companionship of an uncle, trying to replace his murdered father. I told him of a friendship, someone to be my best friend—do stuff with, share stuff with. Someone I could respect, love. Trust. I told him how the hugs grew longer, tighter. I told him of the uneasy feeling I began to experience as my uncle's behavior became more intimate. I told him of how the touches became—*wrong*. I told him how my uncle became uncontrollable and finally brutalized me.

I told him of how dirty I felt, the shame I took upon myself, thinking I had brought this on because I wanted to be loved. I told him how my uncle told me I wanted more, asked for it, liked it. I told him how totally destroyed I felt and that the part of my heart that wasn't buried with my father seemed to shrivel up and die that day.

I told Hutch how when I was finally to overcome the shame and tell my mother about what her brother had done to me she slapped my face. Told me I was a liar and that I would never speak of this again, and that I must be a horrid, horrid person for making something like that up.

I told him how I hated my uncle for destroying my trust, hated my mother for not believing me, protecting me, loving me. Hated her for betraying me and siding with him. Hated my father for dying and leaving me all alone.

I told him of my growing rage and pain—how I began to hang out with one of the city's most volatile gangs. How I began fighting at the slightest provocation. Made this group of misfits and outcasts my family through a bond of hatred for the rest of the uncaring world. They were family, but we knew we'd turn on each other in a heart beat to protect ourselves. A brutal way to live, but honest and with no misconceptions of trust and love.

I told him how I had grown so wild that in desperation my mother sent me away. Sent me to California to live with her sister and her husband, hoping that they could straighten me out. That I refused to let myself grow close to either of them, especially my uncle. I told him the pain and rage always seemed too be there, boiling beneath the surface. How I never want to see someone else taken advantage of, victimized as I was. I told him that seeing those kids brought it all back like it was yesterday.

I told him how I always seemed to push people away when they got too close...until now.

I told him that I was afraid of him. Sounded weird, even to me. Not that I thought he was gonna try anything, nothing like that. I'd die before that ever happened to me again. I'd die and take them out with me. But I was afraid to let him "in." Afraid to let him see inside because that would open myself up, make me vulnerable.

Yet I was more afraid to lose his friendship.

I was afraid he would feel like I was less of a man for something I had no control over and that for some irrational reason he wouldn't want me as a partner.

Once I started talking, exposing this portion of my life, I couldn't stop. The pain and rage and sense of betrayal that I had kept hidden for a lifetime came pouring out. I couldn't even stop it if I'd tried. Somewhere along the line I began to cry, though I don't have a clue as to when. And at some point Hutch had moved from his corner of the couch to kneel in front of me, his hands resting gently on my shoulders.

When I finally finished talking I couldn't stop crying. I was sobbing so hard that I couldn't speak anyway and didn't have the strength to push him away when my partner wrapped his arms around me. Years of anguish came pouring out of my heart and onto the shoulders of my partner.

It's still a private thing, this pain. But it's a burden shared.

Shared with my best friend.

~ Brit
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