

# *Just Before Midnight*

## *Musings from "Partners"*

*For Sue—The Blintz—my favorite ER chick!*

To say that I was tired would have been a gross understatement. Actually, I was *beyond* tired and moving toward comatose. The last three nights in the BCER could have made Dante's "Inferno" seem like a weekend in Cancun. To top it all off, it was New Year's Eve and every moron in the city had decided it was a good idea to ring it 1979 with a blood/alcohol level four times the legal limit.

I'd been assigned to the "C" room tonight, which is where they send the less severe cases to be treated. Now, it may sound like an easier place to be than, say, the triage, but "C" is where they send everybody's who's not bleeding to death or having a heart attack. So far I'd filled up the exam rooms with two cases of the flu, a drug addict hoping to get a prescription for something that would take the "edge" off until his next fix, and an underage high school student who snuck into her father's liquor cabinet and was now projecting a "Technicolor Yawn" all over bed four. Oh, and then there's the whining seven-year old who *had* a fever hours ago, but not now, and is accompanied by his irate parents who keep complaining that it's taking too long for the doctor to check out their snot-nosed kid. On top of all of that, my shift had started with two DOA's: a drunk that had been killed in a hit and run over six hours ago, was literally beginning to smell, and was still waiting to be pronounced dead by an available doctor. The other DOA was a six-week old baby. She was found dead in her crib, presumably of natural causes or crib death, but I doubted it. We were waiting for the morgue to do an autopsy pickup and get the poor thing out of here. Her parents had left hours ago.

Since four o'clock this afternoon I've had two spousal abuse victims, a knifing, three shooters—teenage gang members, no less—and a three-year old that drank drain cleaner. Oh, and four victims from a freeway crash. Add to that the litany of coughs, scrapes, pregnancies, and one of the local hypochondriacs who we see at least once a month.

Same old, same old.

I guess I sound a bit callous...probably because *I am*. Or I'm getting that way. It's just a little hard to listen to people gripe about a pulled muscle or a little cough when you yourself average a whopping total of four hours sleep a *day* because you've been working overtime on the graveyard shift since Christmas. At least, I think it was Christmas. I don't remember much about it since my kids spent the week with their father and his new Bimbo up north for the holidays.

I was tired. And maybe not just physically. I think I'm getting tired of people hurting one another. People not giving a rat's backside about anybody but themselves. People who...never mind. Like I said, I'm tired.

So here it is, 11:20 on New Year's Eve, my double shift's getting ready to end at midnight—*I hope*—and it's been another hellacious night. It seems like there's a hundred people all milling around, waiting to be seen. The duty nurse hands me the next chart. This case has only been waiting about twenty minutes—a lot shorter time than everybody else—and doesn't seem to be life threatening. Hmm, special treatment? Must be somebody's relative.

Rubbing the grit out of my eyes, I holler above the mass of confusion in the waiting room. "Hutchinson?"

Nobody responds the first time, so I yell again, a bit louder. In the far corner of the room I see some movement. This curly-headed ball of energy jumps up from his chair and motions for the blond next to him to follow. The blond, who must be Hutchinson, has one hand holding a handkerchief to his forehead. He gets up, a little unsteadily, and when he almost loses his balance and falls back in the chair, his friend is immediately beside him, supporting his elbow to get him to stand.

This irritates the guy with the head wound. I can tell by the scowl and how he finally manages to wave off the other's help. I wonder what their story is. They slowly make their way through the crowd, the darker of the two kind of "parting the sea" so the other won't be jostled. When they finally get up to the nurse's desk, Curly there looks like he's gonna bite my head off because they had to wait so long—twenty minutes, give me a break—but I don't give him the chance, just turn and lead them to cubicle eight.

I draw back the curtain for them to enter and gesture to the exam table. Curly there helps Blondie—Hutchinson—onto the table, again irritating him. I'm surprised that Dr. Bruner breezes in after them and takes the chart from me. Usually you spend an eternity sitting in the waiting room, then another lifetime in the exam room. Like I said, this must be a favor for somebody. While he reads it, I take a second to catch my breath. And watch.

The first guy's a real looker: that mop of dark, curly hair and blue eyes woulda set my heart to racing if I'd been alive at the moment. He keeps bouncing all over the place; jabbering a mile a minute at the doctor, trying to explain what was wrong with the other guy. At first, I thought they were drunk, until I really got a good look at the two of them. The blond sitting on the edge of the exam table was obviously in a bit of pain. Should have been by the looks of the goose egg on his head. The other was pretty anxious, and when we unexpectedly made eye contact, there was more than just a little concern for his friend.

Dr. Bruner can be a bit of a stuffed shirt sometimes, but I can't fault him on his genuine concern for people. He stood there, reading Blondie's chart, still listening to the hyper guy rush on about how they'd almost been broadsided by a car that had run a red light. Apparently he'd been driving, and while he was able to miss the car, they had slid and hit the curb pretty hard, throwing his buddy against the passenger side window, which is what caused the goose egg. Ah. It was all a bit of a jumble, but I followed.

I slapped on a pair of gloves and brushed the patient's bangs away from the bruise. It had stopped bleeding, but the dried blood in his hair told me that it had bled pretty good early. I'm

sure Blondie had quite a headache, so I tried to be as gentle as I could. He glanced up at me, and that's when my heart really did start to beat a little faster. Besides being drop-dead gorgeous, he had these piercing blue eyes that seemed to reach right through me with just a glance. For half a second I forgot what I was doing and just stared back at him, his friend's tirade fading away in the background. The blond broke the contact first, sighing lightly and closing his eyes.

"Starsk." When he spoke, it was so soft that I wondered if he had really even said it out loud. But it was just as if he had thrown a switch: Curly's monologue immediately stopped, and he was at the other's side in a heartbeat. The blond looked at him directly. "Shut up."

Instead of taking offense, Curly smiles widely. I'd bet he'd broken more than a few hearts with that grin. At the moment though, it was simply filled with relief and maybe humorous affection.

Dr. Bruner politely moved the friend aside and examined the patient's abrasion, then checked the dilation of his pupils and asked him a few questions to determine if there'd been a concussion from the impact. Apparently the cut wasn't deep enough to warrant stitches, so the Doc instructs me to close the wound with a butterfly Band-Aid. I could then release the patient with the standard mimeographed sheet on what to watch for in case any further symptoms developed due to the blow to his head. I followed Dr. Bruner out and went to gather up the materials, but I could still hear the two of them.

"Starsk, cut it out."

"I just want to see how bad it is."

"It's no worse than the last time you looked at it. Leave it alone."

"You sure you're okay? 'Cause he didn't really spend a lot of time looking you over...maybe we should get a second opinion or something."

"Oh, for crying out loud, it's not that big a deal. All I need is some aspirin and for you to quit pok—"

"You hit the window pretty hard, ya know. You could of—"

"I'm fine."

"But last time—"

"The last time was different."

"What's my name?"

"Starsky—" He's sounding pretty hot now.

"Good! What's *your* name?"

“Starsk!” His voice takes on a different tone, but I’m not sure exactly what or why. “What happened before, that was different, and you know it.”

“Yeah, well...”

“You did everything you could to avoid the accident, okay? This isn’t like...*then*. I’m not blaming you for this, all right?”

There was a pause, then the one he called “Starsky” finally responded. “Okay.”

I didn’t mean to intrude on them, but when I got back, the blond—Hutchinson—had a hand on the other’s shoulder. When Curly finally looked up from where he had been staring a hole through the floor, the blond smiled, and his hand gently patted the side of Starsky’s head. The wounded consoles the guilt-ridden. Huh. Who woulda thunk it?

I don’t know why, but that tableau—that one instant—touched me. I know, I know, maybe it’s just because I was exhausted. Still, I had to swallow the blasted lump in my throat all the same. I rattled the packaging, announcing my arrival. Curly moved off to his friend’s side, though not too far away. It didn’t take long for me clean the wound and apply the strips. I ticked off a list of things to watch for in case any of the symptoms showed up for a concussion and the two of them humored me without too much eye rolling. Apparently they’d heard this song and dance before.

As soon as the words “You can sign out at the desk” were out of my mouth, Hutchinson was already out of the cubicle, headed for the nurse’s station. Curly there zips right after him, leaving me to stretch the kinks out of my aching back, gather up the bandage wrappers, and strip the bed. I don’t even have the papers in the trash can when I feel somebody slide up beside me, and the next thing I know Curly—Starsky—gives a kiss on the cheek, real quick-like, and says “Thanks, Schweetheart.” I think it was supposed to be Bogey.

I went on through the next half-hour like a robot: doing my job, doing it well, but not remembering a whole lot of the names and faces. Miracle of miracles, Jean, who was taking the midnight to noon slot, showed up fifteen minutes early, and told me to get out of Dodge. You didn’t have to tell me twice. I finished my paperwork in record time, and filled her in on the pending cases. After yelling “Happy New Year” to the duty nurse, I grabbed my sweater and purse, and got out the door before anybody hollered at me for anything else.

The cold air hit me hard, reviving me just a bit as I headed out to the parking lot. A quick look at my watch told me it was just before midnight. For some reason I thought about the two friends we had treated earlier, and probably for the first time all night, I smiled.

~Brit  
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