

Broken

By the Blintz

I know he's watching me. I can feel his eyes boring into the back of my skull like twin laser beams cutting through foam rubber. I look at the girl standing, laughing in front of me and I feel a piece of me break. I don't trust my voice as I gently grab her arm and, ignoring her protests, push her sleeve up above her elbow. There I find the proof of her downfall – neat little track marks turning her smooth flesh into a gory tattoo. I realize that Amboy owns her and God knows how many more just like her, and another piece of me breaks. I stammer out something about how she should be flunking Latin and dating football players, but my insides are twisted into hard little knots. Somehow, even my partner's silent vigil behind me cannot comfort me enough.

I know where she is, because I've been there. If I were to raise my own sleeve she would see for herself that, although the physical marks have faded somewhat, I bear the same tattoo on my arm and on my soul. And I really want to tell her, but the words won't come. I still can't bring myself to talk about that chapter in my life with anyone but Starsky. It's too painful, too fresh, and I know that I'll feel the same way years from now. There's a part of me that will never forgive myself for what happened, even though he's told me a million times that it wasn't my fault. He insists that I was innocent, dominated body and soul, a victim of a violent crime. Victim...How I hate that word!

Time passes, and I think of her constantly. I wish there was some way I could tell her, let her know she's not alone and I've been there before. It seems that we'll be pulled off the case, until she calls us from Amboy's house, crying, scared, and alone. She's not laughing anymore and I want to kill someone. I can't get to her fast enough and it feels good to attack the guy who's trying to kill her. Afterward, as I hold her, she rocks back and forth, kneeling on the floor as her heart rips in half, and another piece of me breaks. I wonder how long it will be before I'm no longer so sensitive, so crushed when I see someone like her. I relinquish her to the paramedics who have come to take care of her, but I don't want to let her go. I don't trust them to understand.

We finally have enough evidence to arrest Amboy, and it gives me so much pleasure to watch him fall flat on his face. Starsky comes up behind me and asks if I'm okay. We both know he's not talking about my physical well-being. But for now, that's all I can answer for and I nod once to reassure him that I'm not injured. I feel his hand on my shoulder, but I'm not ready for that yet. I don't feel like I deserve his comfort and support so I shrug it off and head to the station to fill in the never-ending reports. I can still feel his eyes on me – truth is, they haven't left me since this whole thing started. I know he trusts me - that's not the issue. But I wonder if the memories are still as devastating and disturbing for him as they are for me?

Later, I turn down his invitation for a round at Huggy's. I need to be alone to sort out everything I'm feeling and I can't stand to feel his eyes on me anymore as I wonder what he's thinking. The darkness of my apartment is a relief, but it is a short-lived one. I barely have time to shrug out of my jacket and open a beer before I hear him knocking on the door. For just a minute I consider not answering it, but then I hear his key in the lock and I know it's pointless to protest. He's come to talk to me whether I want to hear it or not, so I might as well listen.

He crosses to the fridge and helps himself to a beer before plopping down on the chair. For several moments we sit in silence, his eyes staring a hole through the side of my head while I stubbornly refuse to turn to meet his gaze.

Finally, with a deep sigh, he breaks the silence. "You didn't *have* to tell her; she already knows."

It still amazes me that he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "I'm a coward, Starsk. Maybe if I'd told her, I could have helped her sooner. Maybe I could have saved her some pain. Maybe she wouldn't have had to suffer for so long..." My voice breaks as I stand up and walk over to the windows. The night is still, dark, and quiet, almost as if it's responding to my mood.

"I'm tellin' ya, Hutch. She already knows."

I can still feel his eyes boring a hole through the side of my head. I'm not quite sure what he's trying to say, kind of unusual for the two of us. I didn't tell her, and I *know* he didn't tell her; he wouldn't betray me that way. I think for a moment about what he just said and finally I have to ask. "How could she, Starsk? How could she know that I was an...addict?" Even after all this time, that word still feels like poison on my tongue. "How could she know that I know what it feels like to be willing to trade your soul for just one more hit? How could she know that I've been there, that I begged and pleaded and..."

"Stop it." His voice is quiet when he interrupts my tirade, even though I was nearly shouting. I stop, but I have to turn my back to him as I try to regain some control. I know he can hear the anger and self-loathing in my voice, and I know it hurts him almost as much as it does me, but I can't stop myself. He gives me a few minutes to pull it together, then he breaks the silence once again.

"Hutch, why do you think she trusts you? What made her turn to you in the first place? When the two of you first met, there was an instant bond there and she's not the only one. What draws these people to you?"

I'm not surprised to feel his hand on my shoulder, only this time I don't try to brush him off. I turn around and finally, for what feels like the first time in days, I actually meet his eyes. I think I know where he's headed now, but I don't know if I'm ready to hear it. I let him continue.

“Hutch,” he says, eyes bright in the near darkness. “You don’t ever have to say the words. Yes, you’ve been there. And yes, you know how she feels. But you don’t have to tell her. Even though she doesn’t know why, she still trusts you and finds something in you that she latches on to. She doesn’t know what that is, and she doesn’t need to know. It’s enough that she feels it here.” He taps his fist lightly over his heart.

I take one more look into his guileless blue eyes and once again I have to turn away. At some level, I know he’s right, but there are things inside me that even he doesn’t know. But I know I’m safe here with him. So I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “She’s going to testify against Amboy, probably put him behind bars for the rest of his life. But what did I do, Starsk? I didn’t even *tell* anyone. Here I am, supposed to be a cop, and when it happened to me, I ran and hid behind my partner and did *nothing!*” My voice is getting louder again but I can’t seem to stop myself. “Yeah, Forrest went to prison, but not for what he did to me. And why? Because I couldn’t bring myself to let anyone know. I was too ashamed. And here’s this seventeen year old kid doing what I should have done but didn’t have the guts to do.” My teeth are clenched together in anger and I’d like nothing more than to run from the room screaming.

But I can’t run away from myself.

I feel his hand on my arm and he urges me to look at him. He speaks very slowly and deliberately, studying my face to make sure I understand what he’s trying to say. “You – did – what – you – had – to – do. Period. You had to survive, not only as a person, but as a cop, and you took the only option you had. Nothin’ more, nothin’ less. And in my book, that doesn’t make you any less of a man. It means you’re strong enough to do what you had to do, and man enough to own up to it. You got that?”

He has both hands on my arms as our eyes meet. I look closely, searching for any trace of recrimination or loathing, but all I find is acceptance and strength. Time stands still for the briefest of seconds, but in that time I understand exactly what he’s been trying to tell me. Finally, the knot in my chest loosens imperceptibly and I can breathe again. It’s not a deep breath, but it’s cleansing all the same.

“Yeah,” I answer softly. “I got it.” My head falls to his shoulder and he automatically releases one of my arms to rub my back in slow, soothing circles. My mind flashes back to a similar scene so long ago in a tiny upstairs room and once again I know he’s saved me. Maybe not from an addiction I never asked for, but from myself.

And I feel another piece of me break as the healing begins.

The Blintz

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