

Chance Encounter

By The Blintz

I was playing a gig in a seedy little bar on the south side of town. It was the same as a hundred other juke joints I'd been in - dark and smoky with watered-down booze and broken-down people. There was only one reason I came to such establishments and that was to play my music. I felt uninhibited in places like this. No one cared what I played or how I played it. No one cared who I was or why I was here. I was just another in a long line of starving musicians that paraded through on a weekly basis. And I always made it a point not to look at their faces. To me they were just nameless huddled shapes drowning their sorrows in liquid psychotherapy.

That's how I always saw things and I could justify my detachment until that night and that man. I finished playing a set and sidled up to the bar for a drink when I noticed him out of the corner of my eye. He didn't belong here, that much was evident. He had a beautiful profile, finely chiseled features, dark curly hair, and clear blue eyes that were staring sightlessly into the mirror behind the bar. He had a look of casual elegance about him, in spite of his rather worn blue jeans and the two-day growth of beard on his face. The hands wrapped around his beer glass were strong, yet sensitive. I heard him sigh deeply as he straightened his shoulders and tried to ease some of the tension out of his posture. Even in that one simple motion, I could see the grace and ease with which he moved.

Intrigued, I scooted a little closer to him under the pretence of reaching for a napkin. I made sure that my long blonde hair brushed his wrist as I wiped at an imaginary spot on the bar top. He ignored me completely and I was perplexed. Usually guys were all over me with their pick-up lines and phony smiles. Most guys begged for my attention, but this man was somewhere far away. I decided to try a more direct approach.

"Excuse me," I began in my best sexy voice. "Would you mind passing me those pretzels?" I received no response so I tried it again, this time resting my hand lightly on his arm. "Excuse me, mister, would you mind passing me those pretzels?"

Ever so slowly he turned to face me, his eyes gradually regaining their focus. He looked at me questioningly and cocked an eyebrow. So, I repeated my question for the third time. "I said, would you mind passing me those pretzels?"

"Sorry," he mumbled as he reached over and handed me the bowl. "I guess my mind must have been elsewhere."

"That's ok. I'm sorry I intruded on your thoughts. Oh, and thanks for the pretzels." I made a show at eating a few of the snacks, after all I didn't want him to know I was

coming on to him. He didn't seem to care one way or the other. "So, you come here often?" I tried again to engage him in conversation.

He heaved a great sigh and looked at me, eyes boring into mine. After a few seconds I had to look away. There was something in those eyes that unsettled me, but I couldn't say what it was. I can usually read people, as much time as I've spent in bars I've had lots of practice. But there was something inscrutable about this man. It was like his eyes were one-way mirrors and I could feel them probing my soul, but they revealed nothing about him.

I picked nervously at the pretzel in my hand and studied him covertly. My first impression had been right - he was beautiful. I know that's a strange word to use to describe a man, but it suited him. Not beautiful in the Vogue or GQ kind of way, but beautiful in a down-to-earth absolutely genuine kind of way. His eyes were the most amazing shade of blue and provided a unique contrast with his dark hair. I could see the smile lines etched around his mouth and wondered what it would take to see the smile that had made them. Something told me I wouldn't see it tonight.

Finally, he broke the silence. "It's obvious that you really didn't want the pretzels, so why don't you just tell me what's on your mind and cut to the chase? I have neither the time nor the energy to play games with you."

Mentally, I cringed at the thought that I was so transparent to him. How did he know? But I plastered on my best smile and my most successful come-hither look and somehow got up the courage to look him in the eye again. "If that's a pick-up line, mister, it needs work!"

"It's no pick-up line. I'm not here lookin' to score a hot date."

I saw my opportunity and pounced on it. "So, why are you here?"

He stared at me again for a moment or two and seemed to struggle with himself before he answered. "My captain kicked me out of the hospital, so I came here for a few minutes. It's close by and I can be back there in a heartbeat if I need to." His voice was flat, emotionless as if it were a great effort for him to share even that much of himself with me.

"You'll have to forgive me, but I don't understand. Your captain kicked you out of the hospital?"

"I'm a cop. My captain told me if I didn't leave the hospital for even a little while he would have me locked up and sedated. So I came here for a few minutes to appease him."

"So, what's the attraction at the hospital?"

“My partner’s there.” He said it simply, as if that explained everything. He hung his head and stared into the depths of the beer he had barely touched. There was a palpable cloak of sadness wrapped around him and I wanted to reach out and take him in my arms to make the pain go away. But that was one more thing I knew wouldn’t happen tonight.

“Your partner?” I asked. “What do you mean, partner?”

“My partner, you know, police partner. We work together.”

“Oh. He get shot?”

“No, I think I could deal with that. At least then I’d be able to visit him, talk to him, be by his side. Now all I can do is watch him through a glass wall as he struggles for every breath. A cop like Hutch deserves better than that. He should go out in a blaze of glory, not behind some glass barricade like a damn specimen in a zoo...” He stopped suddenly as the glass he had been holding shattered in his grip, though his face and voice showed no evidence of the emotional turmoil that had lent strength to his hand.

I quickly retrieved a towel from behind the bar and dabbed at the blood seeping from several cuts on his palm. Somebody shoved a first aid box in my hands, and I began to tend to his wounds as the bartender cleaned up the spilled beer and broken glass. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention to me at all, so I was startled when he reached over and captured a strand of my hair between his fingers. I looked up into his face and saw that he was watching me intently.

“You remind me of him,” he began quietly as for one brief moment his eyes focused and he actually saw me. “That blonde hair and those blue eyes. And the way you’re lookin’ after me...that’s the way he is, always lookin’ after me. I got to see him one time, just one lousy time since this whole thing started, and he made me leave. Oh yeah, he made it seem like I was doin’ him a favor by leavin’, gave me this long speech about hoppin’ in holes and hittin’ the streets. But I know what he was really doin’. He didn’t want me in there ‘cause he didn’t want me to get sick - I could see the terror in his eyes. So I left, and now they won’t let me back in until they’re sure the serum works.”

His eyes took on that glazed, unfocused look again as he continued to speak. “If Hutch were here right now, he’d be doctorin’ my hand, tellin’ me I needed to get it checked out and hollerin’ at me for being so clumsy. He has a way with people, especially with me. No matter how crummy I feel or how moody I get, he always knows just what to say or do to bring me out of it. And it’s not just me, either. Everyone seems to feel better when he’s around. And I can’t begin to tell you how many times he’s saved my butt, kinda like a grounded guardian angel, I guess. He’d laugh at that, though, be the first to tell you he’s no angel. I just hope he’s not gonna become one anytime soon...”

By this time, his hand had stopped bleeding and I finished bandaging it the best I could. I really had no idea what he was talking about, but I was fascinated by the play of emotions across his face. Anger and desperation seemed to be predominant, but then, every time he talked about his partner, a different look came into his eyes. It took me a while to pinpoint it, but I finally realized I was looking at love. Not the mushy, romantic Hollywood idea of love, but a pure, unselfish love that seemed to well up from inside him. And as jaded as I like to think I am, and as tough as I pretend to be, I couldn't ignore the lump in my throat or the tears that threatened to spill down my cheeks.

“Hey, mister,” I began in a voice that was quivering with emotion, “I think you ought to go to the hospital and get this hand checked out. After all, I'd hate for you to get an infection or lockjaw or gangrene or something. And you know how slow they are in emergency rooms. I wouldn't be surprised if you were there all night long.”

He looked at me again, a trace of a smile creeping across his face. He didn't say another word as he grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and turned to leave. He reached down, cupped my face in his hand and kissed me gently on the cheek. Then, with one last deep sigh, he was gone.

The End