

The Back Room

By TibbieB

I just *had* to have Italian. This is one time I should've listened to you, partner. Looking back, your offer to scramble up some eggs sounds pretty good. You can bet if I'd known the kinda mess we'd be getting into, I wouldn't have insisted we come here.

But we'd been on duty for almost twenty-four hours, with nothin' but candy bars and coffee all day, so you can't really blame me for wanting a good, solid meal, can you? Despite what you think, it wasn't just because this place reminds me of the one my grandma used to live over—they really *do* have good food here, and I could almost taste the pasta and garlic bread.

Okay...maybe we should've noticed the waitress didn't really seem too anxious for us to stay, but I figured she was just antsy 'cause she had a hot date, or somethin', you know—wanted to get out a little early.

When I came outta the john and saw that turkey holdin' a gun on you, I guess I just reacted. Obviously, not fast enough. I didn't even have time to get my gun out of the holster before I felt the impact. Funny...for a split second, it was like somebody punched me, knockin' me right off my feet. That's all. But when the pain spread through my shoulder and down my back, and my head started buzzing like a tin pail full of bumble bees—well, I knew I'd been hit. Then I couldn't seem to breathe. I think that was the worst part. Even pain is better than that suffocating feeling, gasping for air, not sure if your lungs are able to take it in.

I was scared, Hutch. Okay...I *am* scared. Scared I'm gonna die, scared you'll make the wrong move...say the wrong word, and they'll blow you away while I'm layin' back here on the stinkin' sofa, unable to do a damn thing about it.

From the minute I hit that wall, it seemed like everything went into slow motion. I could hear a stranger's voice, in the distance. At first, I thought maybe I was havin' one of those outta body experiences, you know? And maybe someone I once knew was 'calling me to the light.' Well...that's what they *say* happens...not sure I buy that, though.

Then I heard your voice, partner. You have no idea what music that was to my ears. I have to admit, your voice was like an anchor to me.... I hung onto it. Still am. You were mad as hell, but you were alive and kickin'.

Next thing I knew, you were beside me, your hands shaking. I didn't let on I noticed. Ya told me it wasn't serious, just a shoulder wound. Said I looked great. Yeah, right.... You might think I'm buying your act, but that little change in your voice told me all I need to know. It ain't good.

It seems like I've been back here for hours, even though it's only been minutes. I've replayed the whole thing in my mind more times than I can keep track of. I wish I could see you...see what's happenin' out there. I *need* to see you and know you're okay.

I can't help wonder if this is how you felt when Forest was holdin' you—tied to that chair, blindfolded, separated from the rest of the world. It's a terrible thing, being alone and helpless, having no control over what's happening.

I know how bad I'm hurt, but there's no point in tellin' you that I can feel the life seepin' out of me. You don't need to hear that. You've got enough to worry about, getting these people outta here. I'll just play along. We both know the reality, but won't say anything. Sometimes, sayin' nothing is better than hearing the truth.

Maybe I'm gonna die back here....

Man, I gotta quit thinkin' like that! As long as one of us is breathing, there's always a chance we'll come out of whatever scrape we're in. How many times have we beaten the odds already? Huh? Ever wonder why nothin's simple for us? Not even something as mundane as trying to eat a decent meal after pullin' a twenty-hour shift?

Geez, it's cold in here! Or maybe I'm goin' into shock...don't know...but I'm cold...so cold. What's going on out there, anyway? I can hear your voice, sharp as a razor's edge—same as it was when you told that turkey you were bringin' me back here to lie down. You really pushed it that time, buddy—staring him in the eye, pointing that self-righteous finger of yours at him, tellin' them both you were gonna help me, and he could just 'go ahead and shoot you right now.' Not one of your better moves, partner. Never—I mean, never—dare a psycho to pull the trigger! Sometimes, they do....

You said I'd be helping, but I knew from the beginning that it was a long shot. So I lay there, on that raggedly old sofa—stinkin' of stale cigarette smoke, the springs sticking me in the ribs—and waited to toss that aluminum pitcher against the wall. I guess what it boiled down to was, it may not have been a great plan, but, at the time, it was the best we could come up with.

Five minutes, you said. Give you five minutes and throw the pitcher. I could barely see the hands on your watch. Huh! That's another reason I think I must be dyin'—you've never let me use your watch before. My head's pounding and my vision is all blurry, but I did it, partner. At exactly fourteen minutes 'til midnight, I flung that pitcher as hard as I could against the wall. When I heard that gun shot ring out and the lady screamin', I thought you were dead. I rolled off the sofa and tried to make my way to you, but my stupid body just didn't wanna cooperate. I ended up here on the floor, a useless lump, unable to help you...unable to even find out if you were alive or dead. The years we been together—been partners—flashed before my eyes, buddy. The world stopped dead in its tracks while I was lying here strainin' to hear your voice, prayin' that turkey hadn't shot you.

I was so relieved to see your ugly mug come through that door, and all I could think of to say was, “I thought they’d killed you.” Brilliant. Seems like I can never find the words to tell you how I really feel. I could see you were disappointed our little scheme had backfired, but I also saw that spark in your eyes when you propped me up and pretended like it was only a minor setback.

Next thing I remember, you were showin’ me a gun Teresa had gotten from the old man. You said it was as apt to blow up in your face as it was to work. I have to say, partner, you sure know how to cheer a guy up. When you walked through that door—back out there to face them alone—I tried again to tell you how I felt, but the words kinda stuck in my throat. All I could come up with was that lame comment about gettin’ your teeth capped. But I think you got the message. I mean, since when do we have to actually *say* what we’re thinking? Right?

Now, here I sit. I just heard six gunshots, and I have no idea what’s going on. I’m stuck in this damned back room, when my partner may be lying out there bleedin’ to death—or worse yet, may already be dead—and I’m not even capable of standing up on my own.

Oh, God, please let him be okay. If one of us has to die, let it be me. I mean, I’m not in such good shape here, anyway. So if you wanna take somebody, I’d just as well go along with you...

“It’s all over, partner.”

I look up and see your face, fatigue lining your features. Then you kneel down beside me, your head bending forward, touching mine. As usual, I just can’t seem to find the words to say how glad I am that you’re safe. You know how I hate soapy scenes. Instead, the best I can come up with is, “No it’s not.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m hungry.”



The End