

# In The Shelter of A Smile

## *By The Blintz*

I stood poised at the top of the stairs, my eyes anxiously scanning the small group of people below. In spite of my hopes, the two men I most wanted to see were not there. Disappointed, I turned and went back to my room, sitting down in front of the vanity, and tried to occupy myself with touching up my make-up for the third time.

There was a light knocking at my door and, at my quiet response, my father walked into the room and took a seat on the corner of the four-poster bed. He smiled at me gently, his eyes bright with happiness and pride.

“Rosie? You about ready, princess?” he asked, peering over my shoulder to straighten the bow tie at his throat.

“Yes, Daddy,” I answered without enthusiasm. “Let’s see, I have Grandma’s locket, my wedding gown, and my blue silk garter. That’s something old, something new, and something blue...But I need something borrowed, Daddy. You can’t expect me to get married and not have something borrowed!” I began searching through the drawers of my vanity, looking in vain for anything that didn’t belong to me that I might consider borrowed. Coming up empty-handed, I turned to look up at my father. “Oh well. I guess we’ll just have to hold off the ceremony until I can borrow something from someone.” I shrugged my shoulders and turned back to the mirror trying to hide the disappointment on my face.

I should have known my father would see right through my little act. I had been anxious all day, waiting in vain for my two special guests to arrive, until he had finally had enough of my nervous pacing and questions. I had vowed to myself not to bother him about it any more, but he knew that my quest for something borrowed was just a flimsy excuse. “Sweetheart,” my father said, gently turning me around to look into my eyes. “I know you’re disappointed, honey, but I already told you they might not be here. They were on patrol this morning and there was a robbery...things got a little hairy. Now, you and I both know they’d be here if they could, and I’m sure they’re just as disappointed as you are, but we have a wedding to attend to and I don’t think those people down there are going to be willing to wait much longer. Especially poor James!” He smiled down at me softly, and planted a tender kiss on my cheek. “Now, let’s go. Okay?”

Taking a deep breath, I rose from my chair and nervously smoothed the wrinkles out of my gown. “Daddy?” I said, my voice catching in my throat. “I’m scared.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know,” he replied, wrapping a strong arm around my shoulders as he tried to steer me toward the door. “Everyone gets a little nervous on their wedding

day, honey. It's normal. As soon as you get out there and start down those steps, you'll be fine. You'll see."

"Daddy, you just don't understand!" I said vehemently, surprising even myself. "They're not here, and I need them. Can't you understand that? I *need* them to be here." The tears I had held back all morning finally spilled over and ran freely down my cheeks. Magically, a tissue appeared in my hand and I dabbed at the moisture, desperately trying to preserve what it had taken me hours in front of the mirror to perfect.

Daddy sat me down on the bed, put his arms around me and held on, whispering soothing words into my hair. He just didn't understand; how could he? He had no idea why I needed them so much or why I had come to depend on them to see me through some of the milestones of my life. And I wasn't sure I could explain it to him...

I was just a little girl when it all began. I must have been four or five years old, still at a tender age when time has no real meaning. I can't remember the exact day, date, or year, but I remember with vivid clarity everything that happened that night.

I was supposed to be in bed asleep. Mama had already tucked me in and read me a story, and she reminded me of my father's warning to stay in bed once I was put there unless it was an emergency. I had tried to go to sleep, but the smell of freshly made popcorn wafted up from the kitchen below, and I knew that Mama and Cal were sitting in front of the TV having a good time. I didn't think it was fair that Cal got to stay up later than me just because he was older. So, I lay there in my bed, sulking at the unfairness of life and trying my hardest to go to sleep.

Then, strange things started happening. First, the light in the hallway went off along with the night light in my room. Mama always left the hall light on for me when I went to bed so I wouldn't get scared and so I could see my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. But now, the lights were out, and it was pitch black in my room. Terrified, I jumped out of bed and was just about to step into the hallway when I heard the sound of breaking glass. I had a choice to make – I could either feel my way down the very dark staircase and try to find Mama, or I could grab my teddy bear and hide under the bed, safe from whatever it was that was making all the noise. I opted for the latter, diving under the bed with Franklin and my favorite blanket, and settled in to see what would happen.

A few moments later, Cal appeared in my doorway, quickly locking the door to my room from the inside and slamming it shut. He was too preoccupied to notice that I wasn't in my bed, so I stayed where I was, scared and alone. I heard his hurried footsteps rushing down the hallway, then several things seemed to happen all at once. I heard my mama screaming followed by a loud bang that sounded like the fireworks on the Fourth of July, followed by the unmistakable sound of the front door opening and closing.

Gathering up all my courage, I slowly climbed out from under my bed and ran to the window to see what was going on. I saw Mama run out the front door over to a police

car, and then she just started screaming again. I began to cry, knowing my mama was in trouble, Daddy wasn't home, and I was helpless to do anything about it. But, just as I was about to be overcome with despair, I saw headlights come around the corner, and a familiar red car with a white stripe pulled up, stopping just short of Mama who was now standing in the middle of the road. I watched spellbound as Hutch grabbed Mama and hugged her tightly, stopping her screaming and ushering her gently back into the house. As long as Starsky and Hutch were there, I knew everything would be okay.

Things were hectic for a little while after those two showed up. Daddy came home, the police were there, and there was just a lot of commotion going on. By this time, all thoughts of sleep had left my head, and I was feeling a little sad and lonely. Cal had come up to check on me again, but other than that, no one had bothered to tell me what was going on or if Mama and Daddy were okay. It was like I had been forgotten, and I wasn't very happy about it.

I waited as long as I could, then I slowly and silently crept out of my room and made my way quietly to the first landing on the stairway. I wasn't sure if Daddy would consider this to be an emergency or not and I surely wasn't going to take any chances. I paused half-way down the steps and watched Mama and Daddy go into the other room, then turned my attention to the two men who were still standing at the bottom of the stairs. Something must have caught Starsky's attention because he stopped talking and looked up at me.

"Hey." I heard him say softly, getting Hutch's attention. Hutch looked at him expectantly, and Starsky inclined his head in my direction.

The next thing I knew, I was caught in the twin blue stares of Daddy's best detectives. For just a moment, I was a little scared. I was afraid they were going to tell Daddy I was out of bed when I shouldn't be, so I stayed where I was, ready to bolt back up the steps at the first sign of betrayal. But my worries were groundless. Instead of revealing my presence to my parents, they just kept looking at me and began walking toward the base of the staircase.

And then, they smiled at me. Back then, I couldn't really explain what happened in that moment. All I knew was that, for some reason, I immediately felt better, and I knew that everything was going to be all right. It was like I had been living under a black cloud for several hours and all of a sudden the sunshine had broken through the darkness and the long night was over. In that one moment, I knew that these two men cared about me and my family and that they would do everything in their power to protect us.

They met me halfway up the stairs, and Hutch took me in his arms and held me, explaining to me about the man who was trying to hurt my daddy while Starsky looked on with tenderness, his mere presence re-affirming everything that Hutch was trying to tell me. Then they promised me they would protect Daddy, and I let go, burying my face in Hutch's shoulder and allowing the tears to fall. I felt safe, and loved and protected while my two guardian angels stood watch over me.

That night started a pattern in my life. Every time I was frightened or lonely, I could always count on them to explain things to me in a way I could understand. They were always there for me – through braces and book reports, boyfriends who dumped me and bad prom dates, they always had an ear that was willing to listen, strong arms to hold me safe, and broad shoulders to cry on. They helped me through some of the hardest times of my life, and I have come to depend on them.

As I grew up, I came to understand what was so special about them. I watched them closely through the years—I saw how they treated each other and how they gave everything they had to help other people. Many times, if one of them was sick, wounded, or missing, the other one would show up on our doorstep, searching for comfort and strength from the only other place they knew to get it. I listened many times as they talked with either Mama or Daddy, sometimes through the night; it was really the only time I ever saw fear in either one of them. My parents would offer appropriate words of comfort and support, and it was appreciated, but it could never make up for the absence of the other one.

One night, while I was alone in my room, I heard Hutch come into the house. I knew Starsky had been critically wounded, gunned down in the police garage, and Daddy had told me that day that Hutch had finally tracked down and arrested the man responsible. Now, I guess, Hutch’s mission was over and he had nothing to do but wait and worry, the stress of watching his best friend fight for his life finally taking its toll.

I walked quietly down the stairs and peeked around the doorway to see what was going on. I was stunned to find Hutch standing in the corner of the kitchen with his head on Mama’s shoulder as silent tears trickled down his face. I hastily retreated, not wanting to intrude on such a private moment, and I finally understood what made these two special. They shared a bond much deeper than most people ever experience in their lives, and the warmth of that friendship naturally spread out from them, engulfing everyone in its path. Their natural caring and respect for one another carried over into their other relationships as well. To know them was to know acceptance and love, and they weren’t afraid to let you know just how much they cared. I knew I was blessed to have been touched by that very special relationship.

Now, here it was, my wedding day, and they weren’t here. Daddy had gotten a phone call from the station early that morning, and it didn’t sound good. There had been a robbery at a liquor store and Starsky and Hutch had responded to the call. Shots were fired, and an ambulance was dispatched to the scene, but so far there was no word on who was hurt or how badly. I pushed myself out of my father’s embrace and looked up into his eyes. He had put on a brave front for me all morning, but I knew he was as worried as I was.

“Have you gotten any more news?” I asked hopefully, saying yet another prayer for their safety.

“No, honey. Nothing.” He placed his massive hand on my shoulder and tilted my face up to meet his gaze. “Look, Sweetheart, I know this is hard for you. It’s tearing me up right now too. But you’re about to be married and we both know that they wouldn’t hear of you postponing the ceremony on account of them. They think the world of you and James, and we owe it to them to carry on. I know them,” he shook his head and gave me a reassuring grin. “If there’s any way possible, they’ll be here. In the meantime, we gotta do what we gotta do. Now, why don’t you dry those eyes, and let’s get started, shall we?”

I smiled up at my father, and heaved a large sigh of resignation. I had chosen to get married at home so that James and I could put the down payment on a little house on the edge of town, and I realized that Daddy was right. We had a house full of people and I couldn’t delay another minute. It wouldn’t be fair to James or our wedding guests for me to stay locked in my room all day waiting for two people who may not show up. “Okay, Daddy,” I acquiesced, reaching up to place a kiss on his cheek. “Why don’t you go downstairs and tell everyone to take their places, and we’ll get this show on the road.”

“Now, that’s my girl,” he replied, pausing only long enough to caress my cheek before he turned and headed out the door of my room. I glanced at myself in the mirror one last time and decided my recent crying jag hadn’t done too much damage to my make-up. Taking a deep breath and squaring my shoulders, I turned to walk into the hallway when I heard my father’s voice.

“Rosie?” he asked softly. “I think you should see this.”

I hurried over to Daddy’s side and looked down into the foyer just in time to see two scraggly-looking detectives make their way through the front door. They weren’t paying attention to anyone but each other, and I took the opportunity to study them. Starsky had his right arm in a sling, and there was a large bruise on the left side of his jaw. But, in spite of his injuries, he was focused entirely on Hutch who was hesitantly making his way into the house on a pair of crutches, his left leg wrapped heavily in bandages up to his knee. Both of them were smudged with dirt, but somehow they had managed to find a couple of bright purple cummerbunds which they wore jauntily over their abused clothing. They were quite a sight to behold, and several of the wedding guests shook their heads in amazement. Luckily, everyone there knew the guys so they weren’t too taken aback at their strange appearance.

As I watched, my face creasing into my first genuine smile of the day, I saw Hutch turn to Starsky and meticulously try to straighten his clothing, as if he could somehow turn Starsky’s faded jeans and old T-shirt into a tux by just smoothing the wrinkles and brushing off some of the dust. Starsky whispered something into Hutch’s ear, and I saw him chuckle softly as Starsky, in turn, reached into his pocket with his good arm and pulled out a comb. He valiantly tried to get Hutch’s hair to lay flat on his head but, failing that, he shrugged in resignation and settled for smoothing down the back of the blond’s collar.

Just as he was finishing, something again caught his attention, and, like that night so long ago, he glanced my way and saw me standing at the head of the stairs. He nudged Hutch in the ribs, nodded once in my direction, and the *deja vu* ran over me in waves. Twin blue eyes once again caught me in their stare, and my two dearest friends made their weary way forward, never once breaking eye contact with me. I felt tears of happiness spring to my eyes, and my father pressed his handkerchief into my hand.

I smiled up at him gratefully. “Well, Daddy, it looks like I have something borrowed now, so I guess we can finally get started,” I said, slipping his handkerchief into the sleeve of my gown. He engulfed me in a quick embrace, then headed down the steps to get everybody in their places.

I turned my attention back to the two men at the base of the staircase. They were still there, standing and talking quietly with each other. They were here for me on my wedding day just as they had been there for me so many times before. Once again, I knew I had been blessed, and I said another quick prayer, thanking God that they were safe.

And then, as if on cue, they looked up at me and smiled. The sunshine broke through the clouds, my fears were laid to rest, and everything was right with the world once again.

***The Blintz***

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