

Grounded

by Linda B.

“Hi, Ma.” Starsky sank down on the couch, leaning his head against the sofa pillows, fingers massaging his temples, hoping to relieve the constant nagging throb. Starsky tried to keep the exhaustion from creeping into his voice. His mom was a master at reading him even over the phone. It had been a grueling week, but he knew he couldn’t explain everything that had happened without frightening her.

Hutch was still in the hospital, still recovering from the plague that had almost killed him. Starsky had been halfway out the door, headed back to the hospital to visit him, when he remembered it was Friday evening and his mother would be waiting for his call. Picturing her in New York City, sitting there pretending to watch TV while her eyes constantly glanced at the phone, willing it to ring, his guilt drove him back inside to dial her number.

His Friday night calls home had become something of a tradition. One that Hutch teased him about, but it was always good-natured ribbing. Deep down, Starsky knew Hutch understood why he called so often, so he didn’t let it bother him. Sometimes he thought it was possible that Hutch even envied him a little.

Despite the fact that Hutch was waiting for him, Starsky knew he had to call. If he didn’t, his mother would be worried about him, and he worried her more often than he wanted to. But even more importantly, in his and Hutch’s crazy world, *he* needed to call. He needed to stop his world from tilting for a few minutes. He needed to feel grounded again. Only two people in the world could help him keep his world from spiraling out of control, help him keep everything in perspective—Hutch and his mom. Hutch was still too weak; besides, right now it was *his* job to help Hutch keep his world on an even keel, not the other way around. So tonight, he was depending on his mom.

“David, how are you?”

“Fine, how you doin’?”

“It’s getting late, and I was about to get ready for bed. I thought you weren’t going to call.”

“Sorry, Ma. I’m just runnin’ a little late.” He knew he should tell her about the week’s events, but he couldn’t lay that on her. How could he ever make her understand what his and Hutch’s job entailed? How, once again, one of them had come so close to death’s door.

“You sound tired.”

Starsky straightened up; he could already hear concern in her voice, and it made him feel guilty. “It’s been a long week, Ma, but I’m fine. Lookin’ forward to some time off.” He couldn’t explain that he needed the time off to care for Hutch.

“You have a date?” As usual, a hint of optimism appeared in her voice, and the questions she didn’t ask raced through his mind. Is she nice? Does she make you happy? What’s she like? When do I get to meet her? He hated to disappoint her again. He knew she wanted him to find someone, someone to settle down with. Over the years, he’d talk about girls he was dating, but none of them ever became serious, and he’d stopped even mentioning them. Maybe one day there would be someone he could tell her about.

“No, Ma. No date. Hutch and me’ll probably spend time playing cards or watching TV. Don’t have anything special planned.” The truth was, he’d probably be playing solitaire and watching TV by himself while Hutch slept. But that was okay. Hutch would be there—and that was most important.



“Is Hutch with you?”

Starsky swallowed hard. Inevitably, when Hutch was there, he’d grab the phone out of Starsky’s hand to chat and joke with his mom. Starsky couldn’t bring himself to explain why Hutch wasn’t there. He hadn’t yet come to grips himself with the fact that he’d almost lost Hutch. The aftershock was out there—lurking on the fringes—waiting for him to let his defenses down. And he couldn’t;

not yet. He had to be strong for Hutch. Despite what the doctors had said, there was a part of him that wasn’t convinced that Hutch was really out of danger. “Hutch couldn’t be here, but he sends his love.” Hoping to change the subject, Starsky asked, “What have you been doing all week? How’s Nick?”

“I’ve been fine; so’s Nicky. I went to lunch with Mrs. Schultz. You remember Mrs. Schultz, don’t you, Davey; she lives next door?” He still got a kick out of how his mother always referred to her best friend as Mrs. Schultz whenever she mentioned her to him. It was as if he was still a little boy, and she’d sent him over to borrow some milk or eggs. “*Go borrow two eggs from Mrs. Schultz, Davey,*” she’d say. “*I need to make these brownies for lunches tomorrow, and I don’t have time to run to the store.*”

“Yeah, Ma; I remember her.” His eyes were growing heavy, and he really had to fight the urge to close them.

“I’ve got a doctor’s appointment tomorrow—”

“Doctor?” In that instance his world tilted a little more. He wasn’t sure he could handle any more bad news.

“Don’t worry, Davey; it’s just my annual checkup. I’m fine. Are you sure you’re okay? You sound kind of funny.”

“I’m fine, Ma. Like I said, I’m just tired.”

“I think I should talk to that captain of yours. He works you way too hard.”

“Ma...” Starsky couldn’t help chuckling at the idea of his captain trying to go head-to-head with his tiny mother. “You leave Captain Dobey alone. He can be a little hard on us sometimes, but he looks out for Hutch and me.” What he didn’t say was how their captain had gone out on a limb letting him appear on TV to try and get Callendar to surrender, let him promise to escort Callendar to the airport so he could go wherever he wanted to outside the country, let a wanted murderer go free just to save Hutch’s life. Someone couldn’t look out for you any better than that. “Any plans for the week?”

“Well, Mrs. Schultz wants me to go to a painting class with her. Me, painting? Can you believe it, Davey? It’s at the senior center down the street. I don’t know if I’ll go, but she’s been nagging me for weeks.”

“Go, Ma,” Starsky urged. “I’ve seen you draw before. You’re fantastic. I think it would be a great hobby for you.”

“Oh, Davey. I have so many hobbies I don’t have time to complete anything I start. I’ll have to think about it.”

Starsky could imagine the blush on her cheeks, and smiling, he relaxed into the couch. “Oh, just go for the fun, to get out of the house. Besides, aren’t you always telling me that you have to keep your mind active so you don’t get old?” He loved teasing his mom about aging; she would never grow old in his mind.

“Well, maybe...”

Starsky thought of the paintings—the completed ones, as well as the unfinished ones—scattered around Hutch’s apartment. Hutch always said painting was his way of dealing with the pressures of the job. “You know Hutch paints, don’t you? Maybe he could give you some pointers.”

“Oh, ask him for me, will you?”

“Of course.” Starsky glanced at his watch and realized he really needed to head out if he had any hope of catching Hutch still awake. “Ma, I hate to say this—”

“—but you have to go. I know. You boys are always in such a rush. Go, go have a good time.”

“Ma—”

“I love you, Davey. Give Hutch my love and look after him.”

“Just like he looks after me.” He hated to end the conversation, but Hutch was waiting and the phone call had worked its magic. He was feeling better, and his world was once again a little more in balance. “Bye, Ma. I love you, too. Talk to you next week.”

Starsky slowly returned the phone receiver to its cradle. As soon as he got to the hospital, he would ask Hutch what paint supplies he should buy and send to his mom. Maybe he’d look for a candy-apple red, then ask her to paint him a picture of his beloved Torino. After all, when he’d asked Hutch to do it, Hutch threw a pillow at him. Grinning, he hung up the phone, grabbed his jacket, and headed out the door—whistling.



Please send comments to [Linda B.](#)