

Lesson Learned

by Linda B.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” John Blaine watched David Starsky open the passenger door of the black-and-white and carefully shift to exit the car.

“Yeah.” A soft moan escaped involuntarily as Starsky grabbed the window frame, using it to push himself up and out of the seat. He straightened and, because it was so painful to move, chose not to bend down to reply. Sucking in as little air as possible with each breath, he added, “Thanks for staying at the hospital and bringing me back.”

“Now, if I didn’t stay, do you think Maggie would ever forgive me?”

The thought that John would tell his wife had never entered Starsky’s mind until that moment. His stomach suddenly lurched, and, despite the pain, he grabbed his side and leaned into the car and pleaded, “John, please don’t tell Maggie. If you do, she’ll tell my aunt and uncle, and if they know, they’ll tell my mother and she’ll be on the phone telling me to get out of this town before the sun rises. Please....”

John smiled and winked. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I’ll just tell her I had to work late on a case. What happened today stays between us—between police officers.”

Starsky couldn’t bring himself to return the wink. He had grown up next door to John and his wife, and John had always treated him like the son he didn’t have. As a kid, Starsky knew he was headstrong and a little impulsive, but John had helped him channel that energy. John taught him to fight, helping him to control and bury his anger at losing his father and the fact that his mother had sent him out to California to live with his aunt and uncle. It was later, in Vietnam, when Starsky had lots of time to think and wonder about whether he’d ever make it home, that he realized John had been trying to wear him out so he wasn’t roaming the streets at night, getting into trouble. It was then that he understood how much he really owed John and Maggie. John had been particularly proud of him when he had decided to enter the Police Academy. After all, it had been his suggestion. After returning from Vietnam, Starsky had been searching for where he belonged and what to do with his life. When John tried to convince him that he had the makings of a good police officer, he didn’t believe him at first. But John had been emphatic, insisting he would make an *excellent* police officer. So, Starsky had finally decided to give it a try. Now, he had blown it.

Starsky and the other new recruits had been in the Academy for six weeks now. Every evening, he called John, filling him in on every aspect of the training and how much he enjoyed going out on patrol. John laughed at him, saying Starsky’s enthusiasm made him yearn for the good old days when he was young and innocent. This week, John had pulled a few strings and managed to get Starsky teamed up with him.

Relieved that John would keep what had happened tonight to himself, Starsky managed a weak smile. “Thanks. I appreciate it.” He shut the car door and slowly headed up the sidewalk to the Academy dorm, right arm pressed to his ribs.

At the large double doors, Starsky pulled one side open and entered the hallway. The stairs stretched ahead of him, seemingly insurmountable. His room was on the third floor, and from where he stood, it looked like a long, painful way up. He paused a second, as he considered going to the elevator at the end of the hall. Then he heard voices coming toward him down the hallway. The last thing he wanted to do was face his fellow cadets. No doubt, he’d been the topic of conversation at the dinner table that night. He glanced at his watch. It was 7:30 and the dinner hour was over. Maybe later, if he felt up to it, he’d heat some soup in his room.

Starsky grabbed hold of the railing and, leaning heavily onto it, helped himself up the first few steps. He was right; it was going to be a slow, painful walk.

Keeping his eyes forward, he continued upward, gently increasing his speed when he heard snickering at the bottom. No doubt it was directed at him, but he chose to ignore it. He was in no shape or mood to take on his fellow cadets who would delight in his misfortune. They might think it was funny, but he certainly didn’t.

He’d made it to the second-story landing, when he heard the sound of humming coming toward him. Cadet Ken Hutchinson was coming down the stairs. They didn’t know each other well, but ever since they’d started their training in the Academy, Hutchinson had always seemed to stand apart from the rest of the class. While some considered him standoffish, Starsky couldn’t help admiring the blond’s knowledge—he’d proven to be the top student four out of the last six weeks—and his obvious desire to be a good cop. He excelled in almost everything. Starsky had even grudgingly admitted to himself that Hutchinson had been hard to bring down during last week’s defense training, but he had finally succeeded in toppling his lanky opponent.

He shifted his eyes downward and continued past Hutchinson. He’d almost made it.

“Hey, that’s quite a bruise on your cheek.” Hutchinson reached out and briefly touched Starsky’s arm to slow his escape, but quickly withdrew it when he saw Starsky draw back, wincing. “How’d you get the shiner?”

Starsky weighed his response. Hutchinson’s comment had sounded sincere—not a hint of sarcasm in it. Obviously, he hadn’t heard about what had happened, but Starsky ached and he was too tired to offer an explanation. “Don’t wanna talk about it.” He again started up the stairs to his room.

Letting his arm drop to his side, Hutchinson watched as Starsky painfully continued his ascent.



Starsky reached his room and thankfully sank against the door as he fumbled for his keys. Locating them in his back pants pocket, he walked into the room, shut the door with a kick of his heel, and tossed his keys on the desk before sinking onto the edge of the bed. Pulling his arm tight against his ribs, he levered himself to semi lie back against the headboard, stuffing his pillow behind him. In the privacy of his room, he could finally exhale the sigh he'd been holding ever since exiting the car. He could finally admit to being stupid.

He was just about to drift off when there was a knock at the door. He tensed, praying that whoever it was would go away. He didn't want company. Didn't want to talk to anyone.

There was another knock and then the door opened slowly. Hutchinson's blond head came around the door first as he hesitantly looked in the room. "Sorry...I...I just... You sure you're okay?"

Starsky stared at his visitor. "I'm okay. Just wanna get some sleep."

Hutchinson straightened and came farther into the room. "You get any supper?"

"No." Starsky couldn't believe the nerve of this guy. Couldn't he get the hint that he wanted to be alone?

Hutchinson scanned the small room, obviously taking in the details despite the evening shadows, his eyes finally settling on him. Starsky watched as Hutchinson reached out and flipped on the desk lamp and then proceeded to pull the chair out from beneath the desk and sit down, despite several pairs of jeans draped over the back, before saying, "You aren't looking so good. There anything I can do for you?"

Starsky blinked rapidly several times and turned away from the light. "No."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"No," Starsky muttered, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "Probably all over campus by now."

Hutchinson shrugged. "I don't pay attention to stories. Good cops pay attention to the facts."

Starsky studied the thin cadet through narrowed eyes. He looked sincere. "And you wanna be a good cop?"

"I was beginning to wonder if you could say anything besides 'no'." Hutchinson smiled as he shifted to hook his arm across the back of the chair. "Sure. Don't you want to be a good cop?"

“No.” Starsky weakly returned the smile when he realized he’d just repeated himself. “I plan on being better than good.”

“Well, I’ve seen you, and you can sure hold your own in combat....”

That Hutchinson had even noticed him, let alone would admit that he had impressed him, surprised Starsky. He knew he had a reputation for being difficult, but it was only because he threw his heart into whatever he cared most about. His mom often referred to him as “passionate.” Well, passion didn’t always win you friends.

“Hey, you still with us?” The concern in Hutchinson’s voice again surprised Starsky.

“Sorry. I’m feeling a little sleepy.”

“You have a concussion?”

“Nah...a headache, some bruises, contusions...I think that’s what the doc said. Oh, and a couple’a cracked ribs. That’s what hurts the most.” As if to prove his point, he started to move and a grimace spread across his face.

“Sounds painful.”

Starsky shrugged. “I’ve had worse. Couple days and I’ll be good as new.” Starsky suddenly grew concerned. “We don’t have defense training anytime soon, do we?”

Hutchinson shook his head. “No, but you’re going to have to take it easy in fitness class. You wanna tell me what happened?”

Starsky hesitated, but Hutchinson honestly seemed to care. “What the hell. If I don’t tell you, someone else will, and I guess I’d rather you hear my version.” Starsky couldn’t explain why he felt this way, but his instincts, borne on the streets of New York and Bay City, told him he could trust the man sitting in front of him.

Hutchinson relaxed into the chair, pleased that Starsky was finally going to open up. He’d observed him in the past—always on the fringes, last one out of class, purposely waiting until everyone had left. Sure, he’d been impressed by Starsky’s abilities, particularly in self-defense and marksmanship, as well as his willingness to learn and work hard, but there was more to it than that. Something he hadn’t been able to place yet. *Intensity. Yeah, that’s it.* Starsky had an intensity about everything he did, and when he was around him, Hutchinson could feel his own energy level escalate. He’d wanted to get to know Starsky better, to spend more time with him, but the brunet had always sent clear signals that he wanted to be left alone.

“I was in a black-and-white with Detective John Blair, out on patrol, when we got a call for a 2-11 and decided to check it out. We were first on the scene, and John called in for

back-up, telling me to stay in the car and wait for the back-up while he checked inside the liquor store. Said he didn't wanna have to worry about me. I was sittin' there, getting angrier. I mean...weren't we out there to learn? When all of a sudden, I see these two punks come running out from between two buildings and start running down the street. Figuring they must've come out the back and then come up the alley farther down the street, I tried to get John's attention, but couldn't. I didn't want them to get away, so I took off after them—"

"By yourself?" Hutchinson was incredulous. "They could've had guns. Are you crazy? What did that captain say when he spoke at our orientation, huh?" Sifting through his memories, Hutchinson snapped his fingers. "He was a new captain. Captain...Captain Dobey, wasn't it? Said we had to learn to be smart cops. What did he say was the single most important thing a cop needed to remember? He said, 'Lesson Number One—don't ever go in without someone covering your back.' It could mean the difference between living and dying."

"Yeah, that was it," Starsky admitted grudgingly, hoping he'd never have the opportunity to run into that captain again.

"We're only cadets, and they warned us we were only riding along; we haven't even been issued weapons yet. What were you going to do unarmed and by yourself?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about that. I just couldn't let them get away." Starsky's fingers tightened against his ribs as he leaned slightly forward, his eyes locking onto Hutchinson's. "It seemed the right thing to do at the time."

"Then what happened?"

"I followed them down a couple'a alleys and yelled at them to stop. I remembered to identify myself as a police officer, which I know isn't exactly accurate, but I didn't know what else to say and I wanted to get their attention."

Hutchinson shook his head in amazement. "And you thought they were going to listen to you? That they were just going to stop, put their hands in the air, and—?"

"Not really. But I didn't know what else to do. Well, as you already guessed, they didn't stop right away, but about halfway down the alley, they suddenly stopped and turned. Then, out of the shadows, a couple other fellas came up from behind and jumped me. I never saw 'em coming."

"A set-up."

Starsky nodded, trying to resist the urge to get defensive. The guy sitting in front of him was listening and didn't seem skeptical. "They were part of a larger gang, I guess. I was handling myself pretty well, but I couldn't hold my own against four."

“Not exactly fair odds.”

A grin spread across Starsky’s face. “I do remember punching one guy’s lights out. Then...” As he continued, the smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and anger replaced the proud tone. “Two of them jumped me, and while one held my arms behind my back, the other started punching me. Next thing I know, I hear people running toward us, and then John’s voice. I knew the perps had taken off. John was kneeling next to me, swearing, and yelling that I didn’t know how to follow orders or procedures, and that I’d be a dead cop before I ever graduated from the Academy. Every officer there heard him treating me like I was some kind of stupid little kid. Said he was gonna have to write me up for disobeying orders.”

“Sounds to me like he was pretty worried about you.”

“Yeah, probably...but now I’m the laughing stock of the Academy.”

“Not everyone’s laughing.” Hutchinson caught Starsky’s eyes, holding them briefly. “Besides, you might be the butt of their jokes for a few days, but I’ll bet they’re secretly jealous.”

“Jealous? Why?”

“You had the nerve to do something they wouldn’t. Perps ever get apprehended?”

Starsky’s crooked smile was back. “On the way back from the hospital, John checked with Dispatch and all four were in Booking, even the one I knocked out.”

Hutchinson was impressed. “So...because of you, they’re behind bars. Nice going. I wish I could’ve been in on the action. On my ride today, all I got to do was assist with a purse snatching.” Noticing Starsky run his tongue across his bruised lower lip, he asked, “You want a drink of water or something?”

“Yeah, but it’d hurt too much to get up and get it.”

Hutchinson rose. “I’ll get it. You missed dinner. You have anything to eat in here?” He looked around the small but orderly room.

“I think there’s a can of chicken noodle soup on the top shelf of the closet. If you can get it down for me, I’ll make it later.”

“I can do it. Got a pot?”

“There’s a small one next to the soup on the shelf. Can opener’s in the top drawer of the desk. ’Preciate it.”

Hutchinson moved around the room following Starsky's directions. He emptied the can into the pot, got water from the bathroom, and stirred the mixture as he set it on the hot plate located on the back right corner of the desk. Handing Starsky a glass of water, he couldn't resist asking, "So, how did it feel?"

"What?"

"Being a cop?"

This time, there was no stopping Starsky's smile as he leaned forward despite the obvious distress it caused him. "I was scared, but my adrenaline was flowing and...and I loved it. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. I know it's what I wanna do with the rest of my life." The smile disappeared as he added, "I just better be sure someone's covering my back, next time."

"Good idea." Hutchinson stirred the soup, eyes searching the room for something to put the soup in when it was done.

"Yeah, I learned my lesson." Sensing what he was looking for, Starsky pointed toward the window. "There're some clean mugs on the windowsill behind the curtain. I set them there to dry."

Hutchinson headed over to the window and pulled back the curtain. He picked up one of the brown coffee mugs, obviously procured from the Academy's cafeteria, and glanced inside.

"I think there's two clean, if you want some." Starsky's offer was followed by a yawn he tried to stifle.

Hutchinson filled one mug to the rim, the other halfway. He stuck a spoon in the full one and stirred it a little. After waiting for Starsky to shift upwards on the bed, he handed it to him. "Careful, it's hot."

Starsky gratefully took it. "Thanks, smells good. I guess I *am* hungry."

They sat silently for a few minutes, each sipping the soup, lost in their own thoughts. When they'd finished, Hutchinson took the cup from Starsky and headed into the bathroom to wash out the mugs, having spotted a small bottle of dish soap stored underneath the sink. He returned the clean mugs to the windowsill, and the pot to the closet shelf before flipping off the bathroom light. Then he noticed Starsky's eyes were closed and he was snoring softly.

Hutchinson walked over to the desk and turned off the lamp, pausing to glance at the sleeping Starsky. *I'll stop by in the morning and see how you're doing. Maybe we'll head down to breakfast together. You won't need anyone covering your back, but maybe you'll need someone by your side.*

He softly walked to the door and quietly closed it behind him.



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