

Warren Johnson is Standing Here



BY: ROSALIND REED

ILLUSTRATION BY: ADA EZENWA-AUTREY

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roz@rosalinddenisereed.com

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To Colin Bassett: The first person who actively encouraged me to write. Thank you.

Prologue

Late Dawg couldn't believe it. The universe had to be playing a cruel joke on him. This was his fourth kill in the past year. With each one, he felt incredible relief. As if a little piece of this unforgiving world he'd been born into had chipped and fallen off him. Still, he was astonished he was capable of doing such a thing...taking a man's life. He often sank into angry confusion when he was alone with his own thoughts, reluctant to admit, even to himself, that each kill became easier. He worried he was becoming one of the monsters inhabiting the neighborhood where he lived, where poverty reigned and nearly everyone felt the sting of doomed anonymity.

He looked around. The apartment was dirty, had no radiant light and was full of scurrying cockroaches. The air smelled of filth, stale cigarette smoke, rice, and curry, and now, death. A young man Late Dawg's age lay sprawled across the floor. His blood stained the carpet beneath him. Life slowly lifted from him, leaving his body barren and cold. Late Dawg stood in the shadows with a knife in his hand and gradually, he became aware of the young man's blood splattered on him. He angrily pitched the knife into the scarred floorboards beside the body, pushing his conscious down beneath his soul.

Suddenly, Late Dawg realized how long he'd been in the apartment and was jolted into action. He stepped over the young man's body, moving toward the only chest in the room. He searched the drawers; thankful he'd thought to bring a pair of leather gloves. The cockroaches were everywhere. He moved soundlessly throughout the room, but it wasn't until he tossed the stained mattress on the floor that he found the gun. Late Dawg quickly pocketed the weapon, looked at the young man on the floor with

some remorse, and stepped over him. He left the room as silently as he'd come thinking, perhaps, he'd already become one of the monsters.

II

The phone rang.

David put his daughter on the floor next to him and reached for his cell phone on the table beside her crib. He cautiously greeted the caller. "What's up?" he asked. The caller ID told him who was on the other end, but he couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice. This was his time with Sofia, before she fell asleep resting against his chest. It didn't happen often, but when it did, intrusions from the outside world often left him feeling disgruntled, on edge.

"I did it! Last night." Late Dawg's voice was excited and the words tumbled out of his mouth, but David sensed something darker in his tone. "I got my shit back."

"You did what!" David sat up straight on the floor, listening intently. "Late, what did you do?" He was angry now. Even though he knew what his friend had done, he needed to hear it. At the same time, he didn't want to know. It was better if he didn't know. He drew a deep breath and said, "I thought we talked about this. I thought you weren't going to do anything stupid."

"No," Late Dawg's voice was low and quiet. "I never said I wouldn't do anything. I'm tired of people taking things from me. All I did was take back what was mine."

"Dammit, Late!" David's fist hit the floor hard, startling his daughter. He was instantly contrite. When he spoke, his voice was softer. "You're going to get killed over this."

Aware of what David thought of him, Late Dawg could hear the censure in his friend's voice and he was annoyed. When David returned home a few years ago, he ignored the subtle judgments because he understood David was no longer part of the community. The young man who returned home wanted more than the neighborhood could give him.

What surprised Late Dawg were the feelings of abandonment and resentment he found himself swallowing, which only magnified as David's life and prosperity grew. David had the dream job. He married the right girl. He had children he loved. He built a life Late Dawg couldn't imagine for himself, and though he was hesitant to put a name to it, he recognized what he was feeling as jealousy. Most of the time he hid his feelings successfully, but the anger that hid in the pit of his stomach almost made him hate his best friend, his brother.

"Listen." Late Dawg didn't like where his thoughts were headed, so he pushed them down. Instead, he said, "Let's go by Brother's house tonight. We can hang out there for a couple hours."

David looked at his daughter smiling at him, her mouth open and drooling on his shirt. She laughed. She offered him the toy rainbow she held clutched in her wet hand. David took the toy and laughing, he hid it in his jeans' pocket. At seven months, Sofia was beginning to look like Granny. This house belonged to his grandmother. She did her best for him after his parents were killed in an automobile accident, but the house had fallen into grave despair. Now, it was a clean, happy place filled to the brim with his children's laughter. David often felt his grandmother's presence throughout the house,

and he knew her old soul was at peace with what he and Caryn had done with the place.

He glanced across the room at his wife. Caryn sat stiffly on the edge of the chair with their son asleep on her lap. She leaned forward to fold herself around the little boy. Her eyes were a mixture of suspicion and worry. She knew what his friend had just asked him to do. "Please don't go," she mouthed to him. "Please."

David loved her, but sometimes when her face was filled with disapproving resignation, he felt resentment. Then, shame and disloyalty. His life had always been filled with women. He was young, virile, and popular all through high school and college, but none of the women stayed. He hadn't miss them when they left. Now, Caryn filled his heart. He hadn't known her before he left for college...not really, but he had been aware of her throughout high school. He remembered a dark-skinned girl with hair she could never quite tame and a high IQ. A girl who went to church just a little too often. Then, he remembered her eyes: black as night, intelligent with a hint of the simmering passion he alone recognized as wild and unpredictable. He had dismissed her because Caryn, or rather her virginity, presented a challenge to her male classmates, and he wanted no part of the sideshow.

Where the boys in their high school were crude and obnoxious, the girls were downright cruel. They saw her as a threat. David never understood why until he returned home from college one summer and saw her again. The awkward girl had grown into a beautiful, confident young woman with a degree in Elementary Education and a healthy fascination for the world beyond the neighborhood. Her untamed hair now fell in soft black curls that rested on her shoulders. Her black eyes were both

shrewd and compassionate. Her mouth palpable, always ready with a gentle smile for him. David found himself kissing her often. He deeply loved and admired his wife. He was aware that, like his grandmother, it was Caryn's quiet resolve that made this house their home.

Still, he didn't respond to Caryn's plea. Instead, David turned slightly away from her, and continued talking into his cell phone. He didn't want to go out tonight, but he felt something tugging at him. He and Late Dawg had been friends since childhood, all through elementary and middle school when they were both tall, gangly boys chasing basketballs on the court. Late Dawg's house was the crack house on the block. Where Granny had been strict and watched David's every move, Late Dawg had the run of the street. They became unlikely friends, eventually growing as close as brothers. There were times when Granny brought Late Dawg into her home because the water was off at his house, or the electricity, and there was no food or heat, or the police had kicked in the front door again. Granny saw scared little boy with big eyes and a mother who didn't care. She insisted on calling him by his given name because, "Street names don't mean nothing. It's your real name that means something."

The boys grew up. David went off to Howard University on a full academic scholarship. Late Dawg had neither the grades nor the inclination to go to college. Instead, he stayed behind, hustled and worked a lot of part-time jobs. He helped Granny pay her mortgage, drove her to doctors' appointments, assured David during his weekly phone calls that she was alright and encouraged him to study hard. When Granny could no longer fight age or the cancer that ate through her body, the tears of both young men fell on either side of her when she died.

Now in his daughter's bedroom, it was his grandmother's compassion for Late Dawg that pulled David to his feet in one fluid motion. Still holding Sofia, he kissed her and put her in the crib. He held the cell phone more resolutely, but his words were ductile. "I don't want to come out this time of the night," he said. "The baby's still up, and Caryn..."

"It won't take long," Late Dawg interrupted, his voice quietly insistent. "We'll run by Brother's house long enough to hang out. You'll be back home in no time."

"Why?" David asked, suddenly suspicious. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Late Dawg replied. "Tell Caryn she can let go of the reins for a couple of hours and come on out with me."

"Okay," David finally agreed. "Just come around and pick me up. Don't blow your horn. You'll wake the kids. I'll just look out for you."

III

In a house, just a few blocks away, another young man had just gotten home from work. His sister had dinner ready for him. Then, she informed him she was going out and wouldn't be back until morning. Could he please wash the dishes? Brother watched his sister sprint out the back door, run down the driveway stopping long enough to pat his pit bull, Gina, on the head. There was a young man in a black pick-up truck waiting for her at the curb. Brother hadn't decided if he liked her new boyfriend. The young man had a work ethic he admired, educated, clean-cut, and Brother acknowledged the ambition that had already taken him out of the neighborhood. He

shrugged as he watched them drive off. He had plenty of time to decide how he felt about his sister's boyfriend.

Brother took his time washing the dinner dishes. When the kitchen was clean, he went into the bathroom to wash his face and hands. He thought of Late Dawg, who'd been in the back of his mind all day. He knew his cousin was crazy and destructive, but why did Late Dawg have to kill him? Now, Brother had a problem, and his family expected him to take care of the problem.

Brother had no illusions about the place where he'd grown up. The neighborhood was full of dark corners. Brother had done his share of stupid things in his youth, but he managed to stay out of the crosshairs of the law. He was still here, standing in his own home with a sister who would, someday, make him proud. There was an optimism he felt embedded in his soul despite the relentless poverty that surrounded him. He thought about his cousin and Late Dawg. The two men were cut from the same cloth: imprudent, lazy, and messy. Neither had a desire to leave all this behind, and Brother found their lack of ambition offensive. Not many men or women born within these city blocks managed to rise up and leave. Even if they did, they were almost always drawn back to old habits, and Brother hated the smell of failure. His cousin and Late Dawg were babies of drug-addicted mothers. As the boys grew older, giving them the run of the street merely ensured their invisibility to the outside world. Brother shook his head. They were all one step ahead of a bullet.

Late Dawg was coming to the house tonight. Brother talked to him earlier in the day. Late Dawg thought they were going to hang out and get high. Again, Brother shrugged. It didn't matter what Late Dawg thought because there was only one

possible outcome to this problem. Brother felt the weight of his family's expectations. He was getting too old for this nonsense, he thought. He hoped Late Dawg didn't bring Miss Lottie Lynn's grandson with him. David was *good people*, and Brother respected Miss Lottie Lynn when she was alive. In fact, Brother shoveled her walkway regularly during the winter months when he lived on her block. Like most people in the neighborhood, he didn't understand the friendship between David and Late Dawg. David had gone away to college. He'd come back to the neighborhood after graduation, gotten married, and had those babies.

"That's what's up," he thought in admiration. Brother knew David's wife, Caryn, in high school. She wasn't like the other girls, and he secretly commended her success from a distance. David and Caryn were a good couple. They stayed to themselves. Again, Brother hoped David wouldn't come out tonight.

Brother took his gun from a shoebox hidden in the back of his closet and loaded it. Then, he went into the living room and sat down on the couch, the gun on the table in front of him. He clicked on the television, settling into the pillows behind him. He would watch an old episode of a crime drama while he waited for Late Dawg.

IV

It was nearly 9:30pm by the time Late Dawg arrived at the house. David was sitting in the shadows on the front porch. Waiting. Watching the street. He saw the car pull up near the curb, and he silently ran down the steps. He got into the car. The radio was on, turned down low. Peripherally, he recognized the song. Vintage hip-hop.

“I thought you were coming sooner.” David turned to look at Late Dawg. “Why do you have to be late for everything?”

Late Dawg shrugged. He let his friend’s frustration wash over him. The night suddenly felt petty and small and could possibly change the trajectory of both their lives. Why bother to explain? His explanations didn’t matter to David. In fact, his explanations sounded like excuses to his own ears. Instead, he reached over to turn the volume on the radio a little higher.

“And why are we going to Brother’s house this time of night,” David asked impatiently. He settled into his seat barely biting back his anger, realizing that anger and frustration were all he felt for his brother lately. His feelings for Late Dawg were becoming more and more complicated. David did not like complications in his life. He was grateful for the help with his grandmother while he was away, but the life Late Dawg was living was beginning to leave a mark on David’s consciousness. He had his own family to protect now.

David roused himself from his thoughts when he realized they’d driven quite a distance from the house. Late Dawg was turning the car onto Kingshighway Boulevard. On nights like this, when it was warm for the time of the year and the city seemed cocooned, David often let the memories flow. He loved his hometown. The good things, the people had brought him back when he could have taken a job anywhere after graduation. His roots were here. His grandmother was buried here. Caryn was here, and his children would grow up here. The city had always beckoned him.

They drove past their old elementary school, now abandoned with weeds growing through the cracks in the asphalt on the playground. David suddenly thought of

the other boys in his childhood: Lil Henry, Black Jordan, One Eye, and Jay Ray. They were just kids, and they often played basketball on the playground while confiding in each other their hopes and dreams. Most of them lived with their grandmothers, except for Black Jordan. He lived with his aunt who despised him and regularly knocked him around. Now, as an adult, David was thankful for his grandmother's patience and strict rules. She was a visionary. She tried to teach him and Late Dawg about the world outside of the neighborhood, and to want more than she was able to give them. He and Late Dawg had grown into adulthood, but the other four...all dead and buried before they were eighteen years old. "What a waste," David ruminated as he thought about his childhood friends. Not one of them had a tombstone. Their families couldn't afford one. Forever invisible, as if they were never young boys full of potential. Did anyone even remember their names? He did, and that more than anything else brought him home. Working as an ADA in the District Attorney's office, he had the opportunity to make a real difference in the neighborhood.

Late Dawg was quiet as he drove. They passed the old White Castle restaurant, just off Martin Luther King Drive. The building was dark now, but the new restaurant moved about a half mile up the road in front of the Aldi's store. Closer than even most brothers then, they remembered the many times Granny brought them here to the old building late at night because they were craving those stupid hamburgers. They knew better than to eat the burgers after midnight, but they did anyway. Then, spent most of the night taking turns in the bathroom. Both men laughed at the memory, feeling a little of their old camaraderie.

“You know,” David said, the faces of his childhood friends still clear in his mind. “It’s sad. So many of us didn’t make it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Late Dawg agreed. He understood this side of David, nostalgic for the old days. Late Dawg tried to clear his head as self-hatred threatened to overwhelm him again. Why couldn’t he save himself? Why was he filled with so much loathing for the man he’d become? He never let himself feel love or compassion for anyone except David and his grandmother, and he was grateful for that morsel of humanity inside himself. In a moment of clarity, Late Dawg realized it wasn’t David he was angry with. He was livid with himself because he’d chosen a life with little resistance.

It was now after ten o’clock, and the city was quiet. Few people were out. Tall, abandoned houses crumbling under the weight of age and neglect seemed to fall away the closer they got to the Central West End. The radio was still playing. Late Dawg turned left on Delmar Avenue, and headed east toward what used to be Gaslight Square.

Late Dawg lightly touched David’s arm, and turned his attention back to the street unfolding in front of him. “I know you’re mad at me,” he said softly. “You’ve been that way since you and Caryn got married.” He laughed. “You know I love those babies of yours?”

“I know you do,” David reluctantly acknowledged.

Late Dawg nodded and stopped at a red light. He looked around. Satisfied, he continued talking. “Do you remember Coach Warner? We played basketball under him

all through high school. Here's the thing, David. I was always the better player. Don't laugh. You know it's true, but Coach Warner never saw it. He only saw you, even when I was standing right next to him. We could've gone to State. I could've taken the team to State, but he just didn't see me. He only saw you and as it turned out, you weren't all that good. We never did win State" He burst out laughing at the look of disbelief David threw him. Late Dawg put his foot down on the pedal and sped up when the streetlight turned green. "Don't look at me like that. You know it's true."

"Late, what is all this?" David shifted in his seat so he could face his friend. "You got me out tonight so you can...do what? Talk shit?" David put his hand on Late Dawg's shoulder. "Look, I know I've been hard on you since I came back home, but dammit! I'm worried about you."

"You don't need to worry about me."

"Yeah, I do. The things you're doing in these streets are going to get you killed. You're better than this. Look, I'm sorry there's this distance between us. I feel it, too, but Late, I'm either going to bury you or see you in jail. I don't want to do either." David took a deep breath and tried to grin, "And that crap about you being a better basketball player than me is just shit, and you know it."

Late Dawg sensed the brevity in the car. For the first time since David's return, they were really talking to each other like the brothers they had been. Late Dawg began talking. His voice was a rich baritone, his cadence sounded low and monotone. "You were the lucky one, David...of all of us. You always had Granny." Late Dawg paused, carefully choosing his words. "My mama wasn't worth shit. She was a drug addict, and the best thing she ever did for me was die. Then, I didn't have to worry about somebody

killing her.” He laughed a bitter, resigned laugh. One that sent chills through David’s body. He knew Late Dawg’s story, and it made him angry, too. “Some women just shouldn’t have kids. Mama was one of them. And you know what? I hope the devil himself sets her ass on fire.”

“Late, how do you know she’s gone to hell?” David asked, trying to lighten the mood in the car. “She might be standing next to Granny when you get to heaven.”

“Mama ain’t in heaven,” Late Dawg said quietly. “And I’m not going there either! People like us don’t get salvation. In the end, everything I’ve done in my life is on me. Don’t you think I know that?”

David looked away from Late Dawg, and noticed they were approaching the street where Brother lived. He shifted in the seat, his senses on high alert.

“Your grandmother saved my life, more than once.” Late Dawg spoke again as he fumbled around the front seat of the car. “She finally kicked Mama’s ass. Your God-fearing grandmother beat the hell out of my mother with that damn broomstick of hers because that worthless man mama let move in with us tried to shoot me. Granny called her every name in the book. And when it was over, she wore her knees out praying for forgiveness.” He paused, smiling broadly at the memory of a woman who was not blood-related, but through love and loyalty, made him family. “Granny was a beautiful woman with a voice that commanded respect, and I was grateful for her. Do you know why? She really saw me and loved me anyway.”

David turned in his seat so he could look his friend straight in his eyes. When he spoke, he was both sincere and demanding. "Late, I know you loved Granny. On her memory, why are we going to Brother's house this time of night?"

"Because it's time," Late Dawg answered simply. "I killed his cousin yesterday. You know how these things end. I'm going to Brother before he comes for me. One of us is going to die tonight." He pulled up to the curb, and abruptly stopped the car. "I just wanted some time, just you and me like we used to be. Now, get out and walk back to the house. It's a twenty-minute hike back to Caryn and the kids."

"I'm not leaving you, Late."

"Yes, you are." Late Dawg reached past David and unlocked the car door. He pushed it open with force. "I know how my life is going to end, but you... you went to the prom and college and you got married in a church. You've got babies now. Twenty minutes, David, and you'll be home."

David couldn't move. He had to think fast. Shit! He ought to just go home. He was tired of all this. He turned back to Late Dawg, and the words died on his lips. He was looking down the barrel of a gun. Jerking back in the seat, he exclaimed, "Late, what are you doing?"

"I'm standing right here, David. Now, get out of the car!" Late Dawg nudged his friend with the gun until he was out on the sidewalk. Then, he reached for the car door, and slammed it closed. He put the gun down on the seat and said, "In twenty minutes, you'll be home."

V

Caryn was furious. She alternated between being angry with her husband and worrying about him. She was anxious for him. There were times, like this, when she felt hatred for toward him and every minute he was away from the house. She paced the floor in from of the dormer windows in their bedroom, occasionally peeking through the blinds half expecting to see him running up the front steps. Here, in the home they had built together, he would be safe. But he wasn't running up the front steps. Instead, she saw only darkness, and the disappointment fueled her body into movement across the room, her steps short, jagged, and filled with fury.

She knew the anger well, was even familiar with it. Her present situation might be different, but she recognized the pain growing inside her right now, was the same pain ingrained on the faces of many of the women she knew. On the face of her own mother, she thought. It began with a son coming home with money that was desperately needed, and a parent who asked only perfunctory questions. Caryn's brother began staying out all night, and eventually dropped out of school. As her mother buried herself deeper in the church, a mixture of angry helplessness and gratitude invaded the house, quieting her mother's voice even as she worried about her son. She felt her control over him loosening. As the days and weeks went by, Caryn watched her mother's soul fill with a fury that ate at her. She blamed herself, then everyone else in the house. Still, she took the money, and the fear threatened to explode, exposing the obvious and the not so obvious. Thankfulness. The light bill was paid. Food on the table. A young man whose whereabouts she hardly knew. Gun fire penetrating the clouded air. Her mother knew how her son's life was going to play out. She just didn't know when, and the

helplessness threatened to choke her. When the fateful call finally came, Caryn remembered only her mother's deep, sorrowful moan that reverberated through the house.

David was out there, away from her. Caryn stopped pacing long enough to turn out the light beside their bed. She went to the window again and peeked through the white slats of the blinds. She closed her eyes, attempting to bring her husband home through sheer will. When she opened her eyes and he wasn't standing in front of her, she promised herself that when David came home, she would wrap herself around him. He would feel her love for him flow into his heart again and again, and it would be enough to keep home the next time Late Dawg called. She and the children would be enough to keep him home.

VI

Late Dawg pulled away from the curb with his foot heavy on the pedal, his emotions high. He'd almost taken David with him to Brother's house, but in the end, that would've been cowardly. He could still see David in the rearview mirror, standing on the sidewalk. He almost gave in to the temptation to go back. But he didn't. Instead, he drove off a little too fast, and by the time he saw the police car pull out from one of the side streets behind him, it was too late.

He thought about running, and he took his foot off the brake to accelerate. He took a few seconds to assess the situation. The squad car was close behind him, lights blinking urging him to stop. There was no chance of escaping the police now. All those years his mother spent trying to escape the police lit up his brain. She was always

running down the back steps and through the back door straight into the arms of a cop who threw her on the ground and treated her like dirt while cuffing her. She left her son behind. She never told him to go somewhere safe while the cops were stuffing her into the back of a police car. Forgotten, he always found his way on his own.

Late Dawg began to pull the car toward the curb and shut off the motor. He realized he didn't want to die...not tonight. He didn't want to become a victim at the hands of the police or Brother. He glanced in the rear-view mirror, but he could no longer see David. Just as well. The police were pulling him out of the car. They saw the gun still lying on the front seat.

VII

Hidden deep in the shadows, David stood watching Late Dawg and the police. With dark clothing covering his long lean body, he almost disappeared into the night. He'd stepped out of sight as soon as he saw the police trailing the car. Now, Late Dawg sat handcuffed on the curb while the policemen searched his car. They saw the gun almost immediately. David guessed it was still on the seat where Late Dawg had put it before driving off. Now, they were looking for whatever they could find. A plan was forming in the back of David's mind as he watched the police help Late Dawg into the back seat of the squad car. He saw an opportunity to help his friend one last time.

Instead of heading down the street toward home, he headed in the opposite direction. The street was still quiet. No one was about, but he stayed in the shadow of the trees. He thought of Caryn and the children asleep in their own beds, and he almost turned around. He didn't. Instead, he sometimes ran, sometimes walked toward his own fate. Brother lived two blocks away.

The house was dark, except for the glare of the television in the living room. Gina, Brother's pit bull, began barking as soon as she became aware of David approaching the house. Hurriedly, he crouched beneath the side window just as Brother flung the drapes wider and looked determinedly down the driveway. He had the gun in his hand, poised to shoot, but relaxed once he seemed satisfied no one was there. Gina had even calmed down a little. David moved forward so he could see inside the window. He saw Brother move to the sofa. He sat down, put the gun back on the table in front of him, and continued watching television.

David was only inches away from Gina's sharp teeth. When he took a step back, he circled the empty trash cans at the top of the driveway, and silently moved toward the back of the house, studying the upstairs windows. The upstairs rooms were also dark. As far as he could tell, the sister wasn't home, but she'd left her bedroom window pulled up.

The back deck contained a second-floor porch. David climbed up on the side banister of the lower deck, caught the railing of the upper porch, and with the prowess of a lifelong athlete, he easily pulled himself upward. He could still hear Gina barking in the drive, and he wondered if Brother had grown suspicious, yet. "It doesn't matter if he has," David muttered as he climbed the second floor balustrade and hooked his arm around the porch post closest to the back wall of the house. He shifted his weight as he leaned toward the open window, caught the ledge, and pulled himself into the room. He sat on the floor for just a moment to catch his breath, and to breathe a sigh of relief the sister really wasn't home. Then he got to his feet and moved silently down the carpeted hallway toward the stairs. Just as he got halfway down the steps, Brother suddenly

leaned forward to grab the gun from the coffee table, turned and began shooting in David's direction.

Jumping over the railing, David landed deftly on his feet and managed to dodge the barrage of bullets. He took off in a full run toward Brother. He reached for Brother's arm, the one holding the gun and pulled it upward. A shot was fired into the ceiling. Brother fought back, catching David on the side of the head with his fist. David knocked the gun out of Brother's hand, and flung the man, who was only slightly bigger than himself, onto the floor. David lunged for the gun. Two shots were fired, and Brother lay on the floor, his eyes bloody and almost lifeless.

VIII

He needed her. In a few minutes, David would head home to Caryn, but for now, he sat with the young man sprawled on the floor until Brother's eyes glazed over as he dragged and coughed his last breath. He felt compassion for the dead man, but no remorse. Late Dawg was *his* brother, and he just saved his brother's life. He felt the room grow cold with Brother's death. David promised himself he would never forget the pungent odor of fresh human blood.

He looked onto Brother's face, saw that his eyes were lifeless. He could hear the dog barking insistently. He knew he only had a few minutes more. Methodically, he wiped down the room with his own handkerchief, including the gun. He put it on the floor beside Brother's body. He was careful, aware that his own DNA and fingerprints were in the state's computer system, entered when he passed the Missouri Bar and

went to work in the city's District Attorney's office. He wiped everything he touched as he left the house the same way he entered, through an open window upstairs.

Once outside, he walked in the shadows of the houses behind Brother's house. He kept his pace deliberate and normal, but he saw no one. Someone had called the police. He could hear sirens in the distance. In twenty minutes, he'd be home. He wanted Caryn.

David let himself in the back door, and his nerves were immediately soothed by the smells in the house. The sugar dough cookies Caryn baked earlier in the day. The dill and lavender plants growing on the kitchen windowsill. The crystal jars filled with Caryn's favorite potpourri scattered throughout the living and dining rooms. The lingering fruity smell of the shampoo he'd used to wash the kids' hair before bedtime were all smells that told him he was home. He took the back steps two at a time, and found his wife sitting by the window in their bedroom with tears in her eyes. He started toward her, but was stopped by her simple words, spoken so softly he hardly heard them.

"What did you do?"

"What?" He stumbled a little, thrown by her intuitiveness. He couldn't hide what he'd done from her. She knew him.

"What did you do?" She seemed to scream the words at him, though her voice was never raised. She was shaking uncontrollably.

He hesitated only a moment. Then, he went to her. He sank to the floor at her feet as he took her hands in his. He was unable to look at her for just a moment, long

enough for Caryn to wonder if he would tell her the truth. The hands clasped in his were trembling, begging him for answers...the right answers. He heard her silent call to him, leading him from the dark place Late Dawg and Brother had taken him tonight. He didn't blame the two men for his actions. He knew what he was doing. When he lifted his head, the eyes that found hers were forthright and honest. He answered her question with a simple statement of fact. "I killed a man tonight."

"Oh, David," was all she said. She felt anger swell up inside her. Caryn's tears became jerking, sobbing noises as she cried harder for her husband. The neighborhood had him now. Despite all he accomplished, his job and family, this horrible thing he'd done tonight would always be between him and absolute freedom. He'd left home a free man this evening and come back enslaved.

"You've got to let him go," she whispered through her tears, her voice barely audible.

David pulled back from her so she could see his face. They both knew she was talking about Late Dawg. "I know," he nodded in agreement. "Come to bed, Caryn. I need to hold you."

He led her across the room to their old wrought iron bed. Caryn turned in his arms, put her hands on both sides of his face, and kissed him softly on the mouth. The kiss deepened as his tongue found hers. He took what she offered without hesitation. He drew in the smell of her, but abruptly, he pulled back. Not like this. They could conceive a child tonight, and David did not want Brother's blood on his children. He recognized the kiss for what it was: a pact between them...her way of assuring him that she would stand beside him.

They lay close to each other on the bed. Caryn's body was wrapped protectively around her husband's. David was propped against the pillows, one arm curled casually across his wife's back and the other arm rested behind his head. It was only when his body sought to uncoil that he realized he had been holding his breath since he walked into the house nearly an hour ago. Slowly he exhaled, feeling his body return to normal. Tomorrow, he would deal with Late Dawg.

Epilogue

Nearly ten days passed when Late Dawg knocked on their front door. Caryn watched him through the blinds, his face turned toward the sun. He appeared peaceful, but then, when he turned toward the door waiting for one of them to appear, the mask was back on. Caryn opened the door and stood back as Late Dawg came into the house, managing to dodge him when he tried to kiss her cheek. She wanted to rip her son out of his arms when the little boy ran up to him screaming, "Uncle Warren!" She waved him toward the back of the house without saying a word.

"Caryn doesn't like me," Late Dawg said when he saw David in the kitchen, standing over the sink peeling an apple.

"Can you blame her?"

Late Dawg chuckled and said, "I guess not."

David watched his friend hungrily eat the grapes out of the fruit bowl on the counter. "Where have you been?"

"Man, I got locked up," Late Dawg replied. "Because of the gun..." His voice trailed off. "Hey, I'm sorry about what happened the other night."

David motioned for Late Dawg to follow him to the back porch. He closed the door behind him and stood by the railing.

Late Dawg continued, "Did you hear? Somebody killed Brother...shot him in the head. His family thought it was me," He began to laugh.

Looking at the back door to make sure no one was there, David pounced on Late Dawg, easily picking him up and slamming him against the back wall of the house. "What the hell..." Late Dawg started to say, caught off guard, but David hissed at him to be quiet and listen.

"You are no longer welcome in my home," David said forcefully, his face hard and cold. "I don't want to see you on this block, or anywhere near my family. You're broken, maybe beyond fixing. We've all made excuses for you, but it's over! I want you to stay away from me, my wife, and my kids. Do I make myself clear?"

Late Dawg pushed David off him and stepped around him. At first, he didn't think his friend was serious, but as the sun caught David's facial features, Late Dawg began to understand he was serious. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do, Late." David came toward him, but Late Dawg stood his ground. "You're bringing your shit into my home, to me and my family. Look, I'm not entirely blaming you. I know what your childhood was like, but do something with your life, Late. Until then, you cannot come back here."

Late Dawg started to say something, then realized there wasn't much he could say. He backed down the porch steps and started to walk away when he turned back to face David. He asked, "Did you kill Brother?"

“I don’t know who killed Brother,” David replied. “What I do know is that we’d be burying you if not for the police and whoever did kill him. It’s over. Let’s see what you do with this chance you’ve been given.”

Late Dawg stood looking at his friend when enlightenment invaded his thoughts. He backed down the walkway, headed toward the alleyway.

David suddenly remembered his grandmother in her casket. As the lid was closed, her minister, who’d known the old woman for most of her life, prayed, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Late Dawg and David had held each other up, their deep baritone voices blending harmoniously as they recited Granny’s favorite verse together. David longed for his grandmother’s arms around him more than any time since her death. He felt tears well in his eyes, and he called out, “Warren.”

“Yeah,” Late Dawg turned toward David, his hand on the gate at the end of the fence that surrounded the backyard.

“We’ve always had each other’s back,” David said. “When you can honestly stand in Granny’s faith in you, come find me.”

Late Dawg stood looking at his friend. A second chance he’d been given, and he smiled to himself. Backing down the rest of the walkway, Late Dawg disappeared in the alleyway.

David watched his friend walk away. He went through the back door into the kitchen. Caryn was there with the children. Sofia sat quietly, pushing graham cracker

crumbs from one end of the tray on her highchair to the other, and Warren teased his mother with a smile that was meant to charm. David sat down at the kitchen table, pulling Caryn to sit on his lap. He needed her closeness, to smell her skin next to his. She dropped her arms around his neck. The television was on, but the volume was turned down low. David didn't see or hear the newscaster leading the evening news with a story about the "143rd murder on the north side of the city last night," and Brother's picture appeared on the screen. The newscaster continued, "...so far, there are no suspects, but police did find a toy rainbow at the scene. They've sent the toy to the police lab for DNA testing."

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