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Drama City

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ONE

LORENZO BROWN OPENED his eyes. He stared at a cracked plaster ceiling and cleared his head.

Lorenzo was not in a cot but in a clean, full-size bed. In an apartment with doors that opened and shut when he wanted them to. A place where he could walk free.

Lorenzo swung his feet over the side of the mattress. His dog, a medium-size mix named Jasmine, rose from her square of remnant carpet, stretched, and shook herself awake. She came to him, her nails clicking on the hardwood floor, and touched her nose to his knee. He rubbed behind her ears, stroked her neck, and patted her flanks.

Jasmine's coat was cream colored, with tan and brown shotgunned across the fur. Lorenzo had saved her from the shelter on New York Avenue the night before her scheduled euthanization. He passed by scores of doomed ani-

mals every day but had never taken one home. It was her eyes, he supposed, that had caused him to stop in front of her cage. He tried not to think too hard on the ones he'd passed by. He couldn't save them all. All he knew was, this was one good dog.

"Morning," said Lorenzo. Jasmine looked at him with those beautiful coffee bean eyes. Seemed like she was smiling too. The stand-up fan in the corner of the room blew warm air across them both.

The clock radio that had woken him played on. He kept its dial set on 95.5, WPGC. Huggy Low Down, a comedian in street-fool character, was talking with Donnie Simpson, the morning deejay, who'd been on the air in D.C. since Brown was a kid. It was their morning conversation, conducted by phone.

"Donnie?"

"Yes, Huggy?"

"Donnie."

"Yes, *Huggy.*"

"You know what time it is, don't you?"

"I think so, Huggy."

"It's time to announce the Bama of the Week."

The last word, reverbed in the studio, echoed in the room. Same back-and-forth, every day. Huggy could be flat-out funny, though. And when he spun music, Simpson tended to play old school, which Lorenzo preferred. Lorenzo couldn't get behind that death romance thing anymore.

Lorenzo Brown peed and brushed his teeth. He swallowed two ibuprofens to fend off the headache he knew would come. He washed down a C and a multivitamin as well.

Still in his boxer shorts, he returned to his room,

where he did stretching exercises and crunches on a camping mat he'd laid on the floor. He then worked out with forty-pound dumbbells in front of a wall mirror, pyramid sets that left a rope of vein popping on each of his arms. He did some triceps curls as well. He finished with pull-ups on a bar he'd hung in the door frame, bending his legs at the knees to accommodate his height.

Lorenzo no longer did push-ups. They reminded him unpleasantly of the five hundred push-ups he had done for eight years, every day, in his cell.

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RACHEL LOPEZ got up on one elbow, reached for the snooze bar on her clock radio, and silenced the banter coming from the morning deejay and his provocateur partner. She let her head drop back onto the pillow. Her stomach flipped, and a dull ache came from behind her closed eyes.

This will be my morning: three aspirins, no breakfast. Coffee and a cigarette, then out the door. Today is a road day. Get up and do your job.

She opened her eyes and kicked weakly at the sheets, which smelled faintly of cheap male cologne. She got herself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed and turned the alarm off. The clock radio, a graduation gift from her father, was a Sony Dream Machine, a simple white cube that had looked ultramodern back in '92.

"To wake you up for work now, little girl. No one is going to do that for you anymore. You're going to need the alarm, the way you light the fire on both ends. But that won't last too long. Your body will reject it. Too many late nights; you can't mix them with work."

I'm still mixing them, Popi. The bad Rachel and the good.

Rachel showered, shampooing her hair and thoroughly washing her sex. In her bathrobe, at a small table set by an open window, she had her coffee and smoked the day's first cigarette. Afterward, she dressed in a loose, lightweight cotton shirt worn out over relaxed jeans and sneakers. The clothing was utilitarian gear of the Gap school of conformity, the styles chosen to hide her shape. She put on no makeup and added no shine product to her shoulder-length black hair. She was not trying to look unattractive. She was simply aiming to discourage any sexual feelings on the part of the men and women she encountered every day.

At the front door of her functional apartment, she stopped and gathered her tools: several manila files, a clipboard holding forms called "pinks," field sheets used for notations, a couple of pens, her cell phone, her badge, and the keys to her car. She glanced at the mirror hung above the table and looked into her dark eyes.

Not bad, she thought. Even without the war paint, and with what I did to myself last night, I still look pretty good.

* * *

LORENZO BROWN ate a bowl of Cheerios while standing in his Pullman kitchen, then showered and changed into his uniform. Walking to the front door, he passed a worn sofa and armchair, and stopped to adjust his grandmother's hope chest, centered behind the sofa's back. The hope chest sat on an old oval throw rug; beneath the throw rug was a rectangle that Lorenzo had cut out and replaced snugly in the hardwood floor.

At the apartment's entrance, Lorenzo picked up a chain leash with a looped leather strap that hung on a nail

he had driven into the wall. Jasmine heard the clatter of the chain and joined him at the door.

Lorenzo's landlord, a man named Robie who lived on the second and third floors of the row house where Lorenzo stayed, had left him a long plastic bag, the one the *Post* got delivered in, on the porch. As he always did, Robie had put the bag under half a brick so that it would not blow away. Lorenzo slipped the bag into his pocket and went down concrete steps to the street. He and Jasmine walked east on Otis Place, up a grade into the sun, along brick row houses with wooden porches fronted by columns, some of the homes painted and kept up nice, others in disrepair. Sturdy oak trees grew on the government strip along the curb.

Lorenzo went up the block, stopping at the short, run-down stretch of 6th Street that was the cut-through from Otis to Newton as Jasmine peed beside a tree. Down there at the corner of Newton and 6th, where Nigel Johnson's mother still stayed, Lorenzo could see a cluster of parked cars, new and late-model Lexus and BMW coupes and sedans, with a black Escalade, tricked with spinners, in the mix. A couple of young men leaned against their rides. The Lexus, a black GS430 with dual pipes and aftermarket rims, belonged to Nigel.

Lorenzo assumed that Nigel was in there behind that tinted glass, sitting under the wheel, talking on his Nextel. Few in Nigel's profession had their troops up and on the street at this early hour, but that was Nigel through and through. He'd had that kind of ambition, and an almost blinding work ethic, since he was a kid. The two of them had run these Park View streets together, going back almost twenty-five years.

As Jasmine finished her business, Lorenzo pulled

gently on her leash. They passed the home of Joe Carver, another of Lorenzo's old neighborhood running boys, now living with his aunt. Joe's pickup, a red-and-white F-150 of midnineties vintage, was not along the curb, which meant he was already gone for the day. Joe had been getting steady work as a bricklayer, a trade he had learned in the federal facility in Kentucky, since he'd come out. He'd been on a construction site on North Capitol, south of New York Avenue, for the past six months.

Lorenzo walked along Park View Elementary, where he had attended grade school. The summer-school kids had just begun to arrive, some holding the hands of their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts. He passed the mural painting of successful black folks, Frederick Douglass and George Washington Carver and the like, that covered an entire wall. They'd had pictures up of folks like them in just about every classroom Lorenzo had ever been in, but the pictures hadn't stopped him or anyone he knew from going down to the corner. Lorenzo realized that people meant well, but still.

At Warder, the wide north-south street that paralleled Georgia Avenue, Lorenzo cut left, then hung another left on the east side of the school and went down Princeton Place, where his grandmother still lived in the house in which he'd been raised.

A little girl he recognized, a six-year-old name of Lakeisha, came toward him on the sidewalk, swinging a clear book bag by its strap. Right behind her was her mom, a pretty young hairdresser named Rayne. Rayne was a single mother who undoubtedly led a stressful life but seemed devoted to Lakeisha and always kept herself looking good. She and her daughter lived beside his grandmother, in the next row house to the south.

Lorenzo stopped to let Lakeisha bend down and pet his dog. She had a pretty smile, like her mother's but near toothless, and cornrows with tiny seashells fitted on the ends of her braids.

"Jazz Man's her name?" said Lakeisha.

"Jasmine," said Lorenzo, looking at her fondly, barely knowing her but loving her, as she reminded him of his baby girl.

"Is she good?"

"Most of the time."

Lakeisha touched a finger to her chest. "Does she love people in her heart?"

"Yeah, she loves people. 'Specially little princesses like you."

"Bye, Jazz Man," said Lakeisha, abruptly standing and going up the hill toward her school.

"Thank you, Lorenzo," said Rayne, smiling shyly.

"For what?"

"For being so nice to my baby."

"Ain't no thing," said Lorenzo, smiling back, puffing his chest up a little and laughing at himself for doing so. Wondering how she knew his name, remembering that he had made it a point to find out hers from his grandmother. Maybe she had done the same.

"I better catch up to her," said Rayne.

"See you around," said Lorenzo.

Down the street a bit, Lorenzo entered a pedestrian passageway between the school playground and a neighborhood park surrounded by a fence but accessible through an always open gate, and walked onto a field covered in high grass. This was the usual morning route for Lorenzo and his dog. Jasmine stopped in the middle of the field, put herself back on her hindquarters, and defecated in the grass.

Lorenzo looked around, slightly embarrassed, as he always would be, at what he was about to do. He retrieved the plastic bag from his pocket, slipped his hand inside it, formed a glove, then reached down and picked up Jasmine's feces. He turned the bag inside out and tied it off. He and Jasmine left the park, exiting by the south-side steps, and went back down Otis the way they'd come.

Passing 6th again, he could see Nigel, now standing outside his car, talking to the ones on his payroll. Nigel had on a nice powder blue Sean John warm-up suit, with a simple gold chain hung outside the jacket. One of the young men, wearing an Oakland Raiders cap sectioned like a pizza pie in alternating black and white, turned and looked at Lorenzo, made a comment to the tall boy next to him, and laughed. Lorenzo could only imagine what had been said as they looked at him, a square in a uniform, working for rent money and nothing more, holding a bag of shit in one hand and the leash of a dog, and not even a fighting dog at that, in the other. Time was, Lorenzo Brown would have laughed at the sight of his self too.

Nigel Johnson said something to the young man who had made the comment, and the young man's smile vanished. Nigel nodded at Lorenzo with an uptick of his chin. Even from this distance, Lorenzo could still see the boy in Nigel's eyes. He nodded back and went on his way.

LORENZO LEFT FOOD and water for Jasmine, turned the stand-up fan so that it blew directly on her carpet bed, and exited the house. He got into his Pontiac and went down to Georgia, where he drove north, toward the office. There he

would clock in, check his messages, and take one of the white trucks out for his calls.

Up around 9th and Upshur, in Petworth, he stopped to pay Rodel, the man who cut his hair in the shop set in that commercial strip that ran along the avenue. He'd been light at the time of his last shape-up, and Rodel had let him slide. Coming out of the barbershop, he saw a big man with a dog, a muscular tan boxer, out on the sidewalk. The man, broad of shoulder and back, his hair lightly salted with gray, was turning the key to his business, had that sign with the magnifying glass over its front window. That sign was always lit up at night. Man had been in business there Lorenzo's whole life. You'd be driving down Georgia at night, from a party or a club, or from laying up with a girl, and you'd see that sign? You *knew* you were close to home. Lorenzo had heard the man coached kids' football too, held practices on the field of Roosevelt High. Joe Carver's boy was in the program. Joe had told him this man was all right.

"Pretty animal," said Lorenzo to the man's back as he passed.

"First time anyone called Greco pretty," said the man, turning his head, checking out Lorenzo in his uniform. The man pushed on the door of his business. "Well, let me get on in here and do some work."

"I heard that," said Lorenzo. "I got to be off to work my own self."

"Have a good one," said the man, the boxer following him inside.

Off to work, thought Lorenzo as he got behind the wheel of his car. Feeling a kind of pride as he turned the key.