

# Last Act of Kindness

Angela Martone

The young NBA star stood stock still at the podium. Cameras flashed in his face. The whole room was silent, tense with anticipation like an overfilled balloon waiting to be popped. "How am I here today?" the young man said, repeating the question he had been asked. Two hundred people leaned forward in their seats waiting for his reply. This was the first press conference the unknown star had ever given.

He took a step back from the podium, a smile playing around his lips, his eyes suddenly full of sorrow. "Well," he said, taking a deep breath. For a basketball player, it was odd that he neither shied away from looking directly at the cameras nor lengthened his sentences with meaningless filler words.

"I'd like to say that I'm here because of my amazing talent or years of hard work, but that wouldn't be it. I'd like to say that my friends all encouraged me to follow my dreams, but that wouldn't be it either. The real reason that I'm here today is because of a man that I only met once when I was a kid. We only spoke for a minute, but if not for him, I probably would have quit basketball in middle school. He's the reason I am who I am today."

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"No, you can't play with us. Get outta here!"

"You the worst player I ever seen. What you think you doin' comin' round here?"

"You can't play no basketball!"

Daveon stood in the center of the court, surrounded by a dozen boys twice as tall as he was, with his face down so no one could see his eyes, which were quickly filling up with tears. He had known

they would be like this. He hadn't realized how much it would hurt.

"You wanna be a star! I bet you can't even make a foul shot!"

Daveon stumbled as someone shoved him. The boys laughed.

"Stop it!" he yelled, his voice cracking. The boys only laughed harder.

"Hey, yo!" one of the older boys called out. "How 'bout this. He can make that foul he can play. Sound good?" he asked Daveon

"Uh huh," Daveon responded. He couldn't believe they were actually offering him a chance to play. He had to make this shot. He loosened up, rolling his neck and shaking out his arms and legs. He dribbled the ball a couple of times before leaping up, releasing the ball at the peak of his jump.

Daveon watched in slow motion as the ball sailed in a perfect arc towards the net. Inches away from a perfect basket, a pair of hands appeared out of nowhere, snagging the ball from midair. Raucous laughter burst out around the court.

"Hey! You can't do that!!" Daveon yelled.

"We can do what we want. It's our game!"

"Go home!"

Fighting to keep from bursting into tears, Daveon turned and dashed away from the park, the taunts of the other boys following him until he was clear of the gate. "I quit!" he tried to scream, but the lump in his throat cracked his voice so badly that it hardly came out at all. He sat against the fence and let it all come rushing out until he was drained enough to regain his composure.

As he trudged along, his sadness and hurt slowly combined with his anger and rage into a big

ball of indeterminate emotion. He became increasingly angry when he saw a police car approaching. In a sudden outburst, he snatched up a rock and hurled it at the oncoming car, shouting insults and profanity at the officer inside, as well as crude gestures, and shouting triumphantly as the rock made a satisfying smack against the windshield. Seeing a cop had just made his day even worse. Not only were the cops continually causing trouble in his neighborhood, but several people he knew had been shot, two fatally.

As his outburst died down, so did his anger, which settled into a dull ache in his chest and a heavy weight in his step. His dragging feet caught on the uneven sidewalk and rewarded him with two skinned knees as well. He reached down to collect the coins that had fallen out of his pocket. He had forgotten, but now he remembered that he had been saving his loose change for a week to buy cookies. As he looked down at the few pitiful coins that hadn't rolled into the drain next to him, he wondered if it was enough to even buy one.

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The McDonalds was empty when Officer Henwood pulled into a parking spot. He had been relieved when one of the guys at the station had told him that the fresh crack in his windshield was small enough to be repaired. He was on the way to the mechanic shop, but was grabbing an iced coffee first. As he handed some cash to the cashier, he noticed a boy loitering off to the side. Something about him seemed familiar, so he turned towards him to get a better look. A quick glance-over confirmed without a doubt that this was the kid respon-

sible for his windshield. For a moment, Henwood thought about bringing him down to the station. He wasn't exactly sure what he could charge him with, but he could definitely stick something on his record.

At that moment, the boy, sensing Henwood's glance, turned his head and met his eyes. Instantly, all thoughts of charging the boy for anything flew from Henwood's mind. Henwood was more than the average cop. He had just come back from a year long tour in Afghanistan and he had seen the same look on the faces of many of his fellow Marines. Yes, there was deep pain, but there was also a strong determination hiding there, too, even though it was often unrecognizable by that person. From experience, Henwood knew that all that a Marine in this state usually needed was for someone to understand and encourage him. So he made a snap decision.

"What do you want, kid?" he asked.

The boy looked at Henwood in surprise. "A dime," he blurted out. He opened his hand and pushed around a few pitiful coins.

"I mean, what do you want?" He pointed to the menu.

The kid stared at him like he had never spoken to a cop before. "Well..." he said hesitantly. "I was gonna get some cookies, but..."

"Don't worry about it, kid," Henwood said as he added the cookies to his order. The boy slowly slid the coins back into his pocket. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Uh, Daveon Tinsley...sir."

"How old are you, Daveon?"

"Thirteen."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Well, I, uh...I -" he hesitated. Henwood gave him a minute and

he soon continued. "I wanna play basketball."

In a moment, Henwood knew that Daveon's despair had something to do with this. "Daveon, let me tell you something," he said. "People are always going to try to run your life for you. Don't let them tell you what you can and can't do. Chase your goals. Always keep going after them, even if the going gets tough. You do that for yourself." He handed Daveon his cookies. "You won't regret a goal that you chased because you wanted to and not because someone else told you to. I don't." And giving Daveon a wink, he walked back out into the San Diego sunshine.

After placing his coffee in the cup holder and starting the patrol car, Henwood looked up to see Daveon standing by his window, looking anxious to say something. He quickly rolled it down.

"Thanks, sir," Daveon grinned, taking a huge bite from his cookie.

"No problem kid," Henwood smiled. "Oh, and do me a favor," he said pointing to his windshield. "Don't attack any more cop cars. I might just have to charge you next time."

Daveon instantly sobered up. "Sorry, sir," he replied guiltily.

"That's right. You'd better be," said Henwood, waving to him as he pulled away. Daveon grinned and waved back.

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Dejon White wrote the last words and signed his name. He didn't bother to check his two page letter for mistakes. Everything felt final now. He looked around his apartment which he had set in order two hours before. Giving the room a last glance, Dejon picked up his car keys and his loaded shotgun. He wouldn't need more than two shots.

Dejon drove rather aimlessly

around the streets of San Diego. After about an hour, he saw the perfect target; an occupied cop car sitting on the side of the road. Hesitating for only a fraction of a second, Dejon cocked his shotgun and pulled up beside the police car, window rolled down. In the fraction of the instant before he pulled the trigger, the officer's eyes locked with his. But by then it was too late for him.

The crack shattered the lazy summer day atmosphere. Dejon sped away, leaving the officer gasping out his last breaths, his blood spattered on the cracked front windshield.

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The room was uncharacteristically silent for being filled with a bunch of newspaper reporters. Not a single one could find it in their hearts to defile the moment of respect for that great man. Daveon still stood at the podium, but he was unable to speak as he tried to swallow the ache in his throat. A whole minute passed. Every reporter in the room wanted him to continue, but were too stunned to ask him any questions. Eventually, he cleared his throat.

"I am who I am because of that man. I busted up his car and cursed him out, but he bought me cookies. He knew me for less than five minutes, but he had more faith in me than any other person I've ever met. I've never respected anyone like I respect this man." He paused. "Who knows," he continued with a slight smile. "When I'm done with basketball, maybe I'll become a cop."

And with that final declaration, he walked out of the room, oblivious to the sudden clamor of the reporters behind him, focusing only on the memory of the man who had given him everything with a couple of cookies and a word of encouragement.