



Proudly Presents

# THE WITNESS

**WRITTEN BY SHANNON CARTWRIGHT**

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## IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ

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My childhood hero has always been my older brother, Daniel. We lived in a pretty rough area, and like many youth his age, Daniel joined a neighborhood gang by the time he was fifteen. And as is the case with younger sisters who idolize their older brothers, I found myself wanting to hang out with Daniel; however, if there were any gang members around, Daniel would yell, “Get out of here!” Naturally upset, I would retreat inside the house, go upstairs to my bedroom, and cry for hours. Daniel wasn’t one for overemoting sentimental statements. I can only assume he didn’t want to chip away the facade of his tough guy image; however, one night, Daniel came into my room and told me that when he yells, “Get out of here!” what he is really saying is “I love you.” He said it would be our special secret.

Anyone who knows anything about gangs knows that being in one has risks. You might as well have a tattoo across your forehead that says I’m looking for trouble. Daniel and his friends didn’t have tattoos across their foreheads, but trouble found them anyway. At first, it was just petty shoplifting. Then things escalated. One night, Daniel and his friends tried to rob a convenience store. The store owner had a pistol, and according to Daniel, he was going to shoot them. Daniel somehow wrestled the gun away from the store owner, and in a panic, shot and killed him. Daniel and his friends were arrested, and Daniel’s trial was set for three-and-a-half months later. During the trial, just before the guards would take him back to the county prison, Daniel would look at me sitting with our parents and say, “Get out of here.” I would look back at Daniel and mouth the words, “I love you, too.”

The trial lasted four and a half days, but it took the jury less than three hours to come back with a guilty verdict for first-degree murder. During the sentencing phase of the trial, the prosecuting attorney brought in Daniel’s accomplices, who, in exchange for a lesser sentence, testified that Daniel’s actions were premeditated. They said Daniel had boasted that if anything were to go wrong during the robbery, he would take care of it. This, coupled with the fact that protestors outside the courthouse were demanding stricter

penalties for violent crimes, somehow justified the judge sentencing Daniel to death by lethal injection.

Mother and Dad were very bitter. They felt that their lack of financial resources had helped lead to Daniel's demise through ineffective court-appointed counsel at his trial. Daniel was sent to the state penitentiary and placed in a holding cell on death row. Mother and I would visit Daniel twice a month. During one visit, Daniel asked me if I would be willing to witness his execution. He told me that at any time I could change my mind, and he would understand. I told him that this was not an option. He had chosen me to be in attendance, and I was willing to indeed be a witness at his execution. Being there for him would be the last gift I could give him.

The day of Daniel's execution, my parents and I drove three hours to a motel in the center of town, only a few blocks from the prison where the execution would be carried out. We met with Daniel's spiritual advisor, who discussed the scenario of what was going to occur prior to, during, and after Daniel's execution. He asked us several times if we were emotionally ready to see Daniel die, and our answer was always the same, "Yes, we're ready."

We drove from the motel to the prison and were escorted into a large waiting room. One male and one female prison guard came and escorted each of us to separate rooms to be searched. I was frisked by the female guard while the male guard went through my purse outside the room. We were then taken to the prison chapel. One by one we would be escorted out of the prison chapel and allowed a short, supervised visit with my brother. Mother went first. Where was Dad? Well, he was right there with us in the prison chapel; however, shortly after Daniel's sentencing, my father had a heart attack. The doctors advised him against visiting my brother on death row. Dad would witness Daniel's execution, but he felt the strain of saying goodbye to his only son would be too much for him. Mother's job was to explain this to Daniel and pass along any personal messages from Dad. Dad's a softy. Since early child-