

Forward By Day

Day 1

The hum of the old ceiling fan filled the probation office, its blades slicing through the stale afternoon air. Kass sat perfectly still in the hard plastic chair, his dark eyes fixed on the young parole officer across from him. Rookie Parole Officer Jonathan Lockhart leaned forward, his tone clipped and rehearsed—every word delivered like it had been memorized from a manual.

"You can't leave the city limits without permission," Lockhart said, flipping through a stack of papers. "You gotta check in every week, and you need to find a job within thirty days."

He slid a manila folder across the table. Kass took it calmly, his face unreadable. No

defiance, no gratitude—just quiet acceptance.
After years inside, he'd learned the power of
silence.

Lockhart cleared his throat. "Any problems, you
come see me. Got it?"

Before Kass could answer, the door banged
open. A tall man in a dark gray suit stepped in,
his presence filling the room like a sudden
storm. Chief Victor Miles—known simply as
Chief Vic—didn't need to raise his voice to
command attention.

"What's going on here?" the Chief demanded.
Lockhart shot up from his chair. "Chief Miles! I
was just finalizing Mr. Kass's parole
paperwork."

Vic's sharp eyes scanned the table, then the
folder in Kass's hand. He frowned. "This isn't
up to par, Officer Lockhart. I want proper
documentation—address, employment plan,
emergency contact—the works."

Lockhart stammered, fumbling with the papers.
"Yes, sir. I'll get it done immediately."

As the two men exchanged clipped words,
Kass rose to his feet. He stood quietly, his gaze

steady on the Chief. Vic met his eyes briefly—
long enough to make it clear he hadn't
forgotten who Kass was or what he'd done.
There was history there, though neither
acknowledged it.

Lockhart tried to recover, forcing a tight smile.

"You're good to go, Kass. Good luck."

Kass gave a short nod, tucked the folder under
his arm, and left without another word.

The crisp air hit him like freedom itself. For the
first time in years, the city didn't smell like
disinfectant or concrete dust—it smelled alive.

Kass blinked against the sunlight as a black
sedan pulled up to the curb. The driver's side
window rolled down, revealing a familiar grin.

"What's good, my man?" Lo called.

Kass's expression softened into something
close to a smile. "Just got out. P.O. says I got
thirty days to find a gig." He climbed into the
passenger seat. "What's poppin'?"

Lo chuckled as he pulled away. "I figured as
much. I might have a hookup for you—
barbershop over in Hampton. Mr. Moorecutte's
been lookin' for someone to cut hair."

Kass raised a brow. "You think I'm ready for real customers? I been cutting the heads of convicts, man. They don't exactly care what they look like."

Lo shrugged, grinning. "Why not? Clean slate, fresh start."

Kass looked out the window as the city rolled by—familiar streets, forgotten faces, ghosts of a life that slipped through his fingers. Freedom didn't feel real yet. But as Lo drove on, something faint stirred in his chest.

Maybe, just maybe, this time would be different.

The music thumped through the speakers—bass-heavy, vibrating more through the chest than the ears. Both men nodded to the beat. "Yo, it's been too long," Lo said. "How was you holding up?"

Kass let out a dry laugh. "Yeah, too long. Just tryin' to get back to life, you feel me?" His eyes drifted to the passing streets.

"Tell King I want my money," Kass added quietly. "One way or another."

Lo chuckled, caught between amusement and disbelief. "We wouldn't even have this if it wasn't for you, Kass. We owe you. King got you covered—trust that. But hey—" he grinned, "you're free now. Let's get you a gig, shake that P.O. shit, and maybe—just maybe—get back to it."

Kass shook his head. "Naw. I'm good. Just tryin' to get my life together. I'm not fuckin' with it no more. Tell King I'm out."

Lo shot him a sideways look. "Out, huh?"

The car eased to a stop in front of a narrow storefront. A red-and-white barber pole spun lazily near the door.

"This is it," Lo said. "Mr. Moorecutte's gonna hook you up."

Kass stepped out and took in the place. The sign was old, the paint fading, but the windows gleamed. This was a shop run with pride.

Inside, the hum of clippers filled the air, mixed with aftershave and talcum powder. Kass sat in a chair, a cape over his shoulders, while a tall, broad-shouldered man with silver in his beard looked him over.

"Listen, Kass," Mr. Moorecutte said, firm but calm. "I know you got a past. I don't care about all that. But in my shop, we do things a certain way. Keep your nose clean and stay productive. You understand me?"

Kass tilted his head. "You a Christian?"

Moorecutte paused, narrowing his eyes slightly. "This is a Christian establishment, son. We do things with integrity here."

Kass rolled his eyes, zoning out as the man kept talking. His mind drifted—bars clanging, sweat, iron, ghosts of choices he couldn't undo.

The daydream shattered when Lo's phone buzzed. He stepped outside.

"What's good, King?" Lo answered.

King's voice came low. "I need you to track down Zoe. He owes me payment."

"Aight," Lo said. "I got you."

When he returned, Kass was standing. "Yo," Lo said quietly, "we gotta roll. Business."

They cruised through the city as Lo talked. "Me and King got a few things goin' on. Everything's digital now. Different game."

Kass nodded. "I'm behind on that."

"You'll catch up."

Lo dropped him off at a modest apartment building. "First day tomorrow. Don't be late."

"I'll be there," Kass said.

Inside his apartment, silence greeted him like an old ghost. It was small—bare walls, scuffed floors, a single humming bulb. But it was his.

"Mom..." he whispered. "Why'd you have to leave?"

On the small table lay a few keepsakes—a comb, some bills, a worn postcard.

Dear Kass, it read. I'm sorry. — Mom.

His throat tightened. He blinked hard, setting the card down.

His gaze fell on his notebook. "Music... that's all I have now."

Before he reached it, a memory dragged him under—back to the robbery. He jolted awake seconds later, heart pounding.

"Get it together," he muttered.

He turned off the lights. The hum of the city seeped through the walls—sirens, laughter, bass. For the first time in a long while, Kass

drifted toward sleep.
Not peace—just something close.

Kass arrived at the barbershop Mr. Moorecutte had directed him to. The place smelled like clippers and aftershave as he stepped in, greeted by the hum of machines, chatter, and old-school R&B sliding from the speakers. Posters of sharp lineups and vintage hip-hop legends lined the walls.

This was his first real day—his first honest job in a long time.

A veteran barber named Marlon nodded with a grin. "Alright, you must be Kass." They shook hands. "Let me show you around. That corner chair's yours. Back room is where we eat and chill. Don't touch the fridge unless you brought something, and—"

The door burst open with a metallic clang. Folk, the local hobo, stumbled in—same ragged coat, same sour smell.

"Can I use the bathroom?" Folk asked, impatient.

Marlon sighed. "Folk, you know the rules. You

can't use the bathroom here."

"Why not?" Folk barked. "I gotta piss!"

The shop went quiet.

Tone stood with a tight jaw. "Folk, come on. You know what you do every time. Just leave."

Folk's face twisted. "I'll piss on the side of the building then. Watch!"

He stormed out. As he shoved the door open, he bumped shoulders with Banga, who was just arriving.

"Man," Marlon muttered as the shop chuckled, "that guy..."

Banga grinned. "Yeah, he wild. Why he do the same shit every day?"

"Routine," Tone said. "Everybody got one—even the crazy ones."

Kass perked up. "Yo, Banga! Let me cut you today. I'm nice with these new trend cuts."

Banga laughed. "Nah, man. I'ma stick with my boy. He got that steady hand for my precise hairline."

Kass smirked. "Oh, I see. You think I ain't good enough?"

"Nah," Banga said. "You just don't know my

hair yet."

They dapped up. Kass took a quick break and crossed the street to the corner store.

Inside, the lights buzzed. He grabbed chips and water, then heard—

"Kass! What's good?"

Flux.

"Damn, Flux," Kass said. "Been a minute."

Flux grinned. "Man, it's been ions! I see you back out here."

Kass shrugged. "Tryna keep my head down."

Flux lowered his voice. "Bro, things changed since you been gone. Big Brother watching everything. Cameras everywhere. Even corner hustles ain't safe."

Kass nodded. "Different game now."

Flux shifted. "Real talk. Even the legit spots ain't clean."

He paused. "But hey—how's your mom?"

Kass softened. "She good."

"Tell her I said hey."

Kass paid and stepped outside into the sun—only for a blue-and-white squad car to slide up beside him.

Officer Marshall.

"Well, well, well," Marshall drawled. "Look who we got. Kasswell."

Kass forced a smile. "It's Kass MJ. Just out here trying to make a change."

Marshall smirked. "Officer Marshall to you. When'd you get out?"

"Not long ago."

Marshall's expression hardened. "Let me remind you—I'm watching you. One wrong move, you're right back."

He pulled off. Kass shook his head.

Same streets. Same games.

Back at the shop, Banga stepped out. "What's good, Kass? Didn't think I'd recognize you?"

Kass smirked. "So you do recognize me."

"The streets talk. Word is—Kasswell back around."

He sighed. "Hard out here, though. Snitches, cameras, snakes. Everywhere."

"You right," Kass said.

They dapped up, firm.

"Welcome home, O.G. Watch your back," Banga said as he walked away.

Kass watched him disappear.
"Ain't nothin' changed... just the eyes watchin'," he muttered.

The street buzzed with low chatter, car engines, and the occasional shout from the basketball court down the block. Kass still stood outside the barbershop where Banga had left him, lost in thought. The air felt heavy with everything unspoken—the threat from Officer Marshall, the weight of the old neighborhood, the sense that time was closing in again.

He tore open a pack of chips, staring blankly across the street. That's when he noticed her. A young woman was walking toward the shop with a little boy—maybe five or six—holding her hand. She carried herself like someone who'd learned to move carefully through the world: chin up, eyes sharp, never rushing but never still.

Kass straightened his posture without meaning to. When she reached the door, he stepped forward and pulled it open with a smile.

"Allow me," he said, voice smooth but gentle. The woman's lips curved into a small, guarded smile. "Thanks."

She led the boy inside. Kass followed.

The air inside was loud with laughter and argument. The smell of clipper oil and faded cologne hung thick. Two of the barbers were deep into a debate that sounded like it had been going on for years.

"Nas the greatest! No debate!" Barber 1 declared.

"Man, you trippin'. Jigga's where it's at!" Barber 2 shot back, waving his comb like a mic.

The room erupted with overlapping voices—music, legacy, lyrics, ego. Kass smirked, shaking his head as he turned his attention to the new customer.

The boy climbed into the chair, wide-eyed and nervous. Kass draped the cape around his neck, tightening it gently.

"So," Kass said, adjusting the clippers, "what's your son's name?"

The woman leaned on the counter, arms folded, watching closely.

"Tyler," she said. Then, after a beat, with a spark of attitude: "And I'm... not sure why I need to share my name with you right now."

Kass paused, laughing under his breath. "Fair enough. I was just trying to make small talk."

He glanced up at her. "You local?" She raised an eyebrow. "I don't know you like that. You from here?"

Kass chuckled, spinning the chair so Tyler faced the mirror.

"I don't know you like that." That earned him the faintest grin—cautious, but real.

Their eyes met in the mirror—a flicker, quick and electric. Kass looked away first, pretending to focus on the clippers.

For the first time in a long time, he felt something other than frustration or fear—just a quiet interest. Something human.

Tyler giggled softly as the clippers buzzed to life. Kass smiled.

"Don't worry, lil' man. I got you. You gon' walk outta here fresh."

The woman's voice softened.
"He better. He's got picture day tomorrow."
Kass grinned. "Oh, that's pressure. Guess I
gotta make sure he looks right for the
yearbook."

She smirked, almost laughing, and for that
small instant, the noise of the shop—the
debates, the chatter, the street outside—faded
away.

For Kass, it was the first spark of something
new. Something that didn't come with a record
or a warning. Just a woman, her son, and a
quiet moment in a loud world.

Meanwhile, the afternoon sun bled through a
haze of exhaust and tension. Officer Marshall
cruised slowly down the block, one hand on the
wheel, the other resting on the radio. Ahead, a
black sedan rolled through a stop sign.

Marshall's lips curved into a cold grin.

"Gotcha."

He hit the lights. The car eased to the curb.
Marshall stepped out, boots crunching against
gravel, posture squared with practiced

authority.

He tapped the driver's window. "License and insurance, please."

The driver—Zoe—looked up with defiance already written across his face.

"Man... what's this for?" Zoe asked.

Marshall didn't blink. "I'll tell you in a second.

License and insurance. Now."

Zoe leaned back, grinning. "Call your boss."

Marshall's jaw tightened.

"You wanna do this the hard way?" His tone sharpened. "Get out of the car. I can call a K-9 to scratch your ride up, or you can just get out for a simple traffic stop."

Zoe shrugged. "Man... whatever."

He stepped out slowly, moving with lazy indifference. Marshall followed, hand resting near his belt.

"Now," Marshall said, "open the trunk. You know how this goes."

Zoe raised an eyebrow. "I don't know what you talkin' about. Ain't nothin' in the trunk."

Still, he unlocked it.

Marshall lifted it—slow, deliberate—and

something in the trunk flickered in his eyes.

That half-second was all it took.

Zoe's fist shot forward, slamming into Marshall's gut. The officer staggered. Zoe grabbed a black duffel bag and bolted.

"Freeze!" Marshall barked, drawing his weapon. But Zoe was already gone—clearing a fence, sneakers pounding pavement.

Sirens wailed within seconds of Marshall's distress call. Helicopters buzzed overhead. Marshall cursed under his breath, clutching his stomach and calling for more backup.

The chase had begun.

Zoe tore through backstreets, duffel bag gripped tight. Sweat streaked his face, breaths sharp and ragged. The bag ripped as he ran, unnoticed. A small package tumbled out into the alley.

He slowed when the sirens faded. The street fell silent.

Zoe dropped to his knees, panting. Then he felt it—the sudden lightness of the bag.

"Damn..."

The side was torn wide open. Some of his work

was gone.
He scanned the street wildly, but it was already
too late.

Back at the barbershop, Kass spun Tyler's
chair around, brushing off the boy's
shoulders with a proud smile.

"All done, lil' man," he said.

Queen looked pleased — and maybe a
little amused by how Kass seemed to flirt
between every word.

"So," Kass said, leaning casually against
the chair, "can I get your number? Maybe
we can grab a bite to eat sometime?"

Queen laughed softly. "I'm not denying
taking your number."

Kass grinned and handed her a small slip
of paper. "Ok... fair enough."

She looked down at it, almost
embarrassed.

"My cards are on the way," Kass added
with a shrug. "I ordered through Cities
Choice. They should be here in no time."

Queen's eyes lit with surprise. "Oh, that's my go-to site! They do my cover art — for my books. I write."

Kass blinked, impressed. "For real? That's dope." He smiled. "Thank you... and please, do come again."

Queen gave a playful nod, collected Tyler, and walked out.

For a moment, Kass just stood there watching her go — that spark from earlier quietly returning.

Later that day, the barbershop was emptying out. Kass swept his station clean, gathered his things, and dapped up Marlon on his way out.

"Good work today," Marlon said.

"Appreciate it," Kass replied.

He stepped out into the fading daylight. The streets hummed soft and slow — the kind of quiet that made the city feel heavy.

Kass walked down the block, shoulders loose, mind easy.

He stopped beside a trash can, splitting a blunt and dumping the guts. That's when he noticed something at his feet — a small black package, torn open at one corner. Curious, he picked it up. The plastic was thick and cold in his hand.

He ripped the corner just enough to peek inside.

A flash of white powder. Fine. Pure.

His heartbeat quickened.

"What the...?" he whispered.

He looked around — no one in sight. The street was empty, just the faint hum of a distant police siren.

Panic kicked in.

"Where in hell did this come from?"

He hesitated, then shoved the package into his waistband. His eyes darted up and down the street once more before he turned and walked off — fast.

His pace grew into a near-jog, every shadow now feeling like a cop, every sound like a step behind him.

By the time he reached his block, his pulse
hammered.

He wasn't supposed to be in this life
anymore. But fate — or something darker
— had just handed him a bag full of
trouble.

Night pressed against the windows of
Kass's apartment like a hand. He paced the
small room, the package heavy in the back
of his mind even when it wasn't in his hand.

Every shadow seemed to whisper
possibilities — some promising, most
dangerous.

"What am I gonna do with this?" he
muttered. He circled the worn sofa, rubbing
at his temples. "I could get caught, go back
to jail... No. I need the money. I'll sell it. But
how? I'll need a runner."

Fear stacked against hunger. The promise
of quick cash against the slow certainty of
prison. The voice in his head argued like
angels and devils.

"I got this," he told himself finally, jaw tight.

"I'll sell it and make some real money."

The decision landed with a thud — not easing the risk, but quieting the indecision.

He lay on the mattress, staring at the ceiling until city noise faded and sleep finally took him.

By the time sunlight cut into the shop the next morning, Kass was half-awake and moving on autopilot on his way to the shop.

Officer Marshall's cruiser rolled by — the same square-jawed man inside. He slowed, rolled down his window, and gave Kass a look that felt more like a challenge than concern.

"Just making sure you're staying out of trouble, Kass," Marshall said.

"Just working hard, Officer," Kass replied coolly entering the shop.

Marshall drove on, but the shadow of his presence lingered.

Kass began to set up his work station,

faintly hearing his co-workers small talk, he tried to focus on task at hand, but his mind kept looping back to the package. He could almost hear the cash.

Then an argument outside snapped everyone's attention.

"What's goin' on out there?" one barber laughed.

Banga was in the middle of it — loud, animated. A hulking hustler in a beat-up sedan had just discovered what Banga called "trash weed." The hustler hollered; Banga roasted him back.

"Your weed is trash and your prices are insane!" Banga shouted.

The shop erupted.

The hustler, red with ego, finally peeled out.

Tires squealed. Dust rose.

Kass watched Banga with new interest. The man carried a different energy now — not just a jokester, but someone edged. He patted the side of his jacket with a casual motion that said more than words: a gun

rested there.

"You know that guy?" Kass asked once the door shut again.

Banga shrugged. "Don't need to.

Garbage-ass trees. I carry this for situations like that." He tapped the spot where his piece sat. Just business.

Opportunity and danger sat side by side.

Kass reached into his back pocket and slid Banga a folded slip of paper. A number. A phone he hoped would ring.

"Call me later," Kass said, voice low. "I might have something that can make us some real money. 'Cause that—" he nodded toward the gun, "that's a loud problem."

Banga eyed the number, then Kass, then the room — measuring risk. His grin softened into calculation. He tucked the paper away.

"Ok. Banga got his usual cut from his barber. Saluted Kass and walked out the barbershop. Kass tried to convince himself

this new venture was temporary. He tried to convince himself he was gonna stay in control. Neither of those things was guaranteed.

The clippers hummed, the speakers rattled faintly with old-school hip-hop, and laughter drifted through the barbershop like smoke. It was one of those easy afternoons—where the cuts were clean, but the jokes were even sharper.

Barber One leaned back in his chair, waving a hand for attention.

"Shout out to Wu-Tang, but New York is in turmoil! Our hero artists are at war. Jay and Dame broke up, Dipset broke up—it's crazy up there. Meanwhile A.I., Missy, Timbaland, and them are takin' over the streets in VA!"

Barber Two grinned, firing back without hesitation.

"At least I don't have a fade that looks like a failed science experiment."

The shop erupted. A couple customers

nearly dropped their phones from laughing
so hard.

Barber Three jumped in, his voice booming
above the noise.

"And Wu-Tang got nothin' on us! We the
real kings of this block!"

More laughter. The air was alive—every
insult a badge of honor, every laugh a sign
of love. It was the heartbeat of the
neighborhood.

Then the door opened.

The laughter died instantly, as if someone
had pulled the plug. Officer Marshall
stepped inside, his uniform crisp, his
expression smug. He scanned the room like
he owned it.

"Alright," he said, smirking, "everyone
gather 'round. I want to have a word. With
all of you."

The room went still. Clippers froze mid-
buzz. The smell of alcohol spray hung in
the air.

Marshall folded his arms, his voice

dropping into that familiar tone of authority.
"Crime won't be tolerated in this area. I'll be
keeping a close eye on all of you. Consider
this a notice."

His gaze locked on Kass—longer than
necessary, sharp enough to slice. Kass
didn't flinch. His jaw tightened, but his eyes
stayed calm. He wasn't scared. Just tired of
being treated like he was.

Finally, one of the barbers cleared his
throat.

"Officer, I think you've made your point.
You're makin' our customers
uncomfortable. Maybe it's time you head
out."

Marshall's smirk vanished. He glared at the
man, then at Kass again, before turning
toward the door.

"Y'all have a good day," he muttered, tight
and bitter.

The door shut behind him. A heavy silence
settled over the shop.

Kass exhaled slowly, frustration flickering

across his face. Then his phone buzzed.
When he looked down, his expression
softened.

Queen.

"Hey," her voice came through, warm and
teasing. "Wanna grab a drink? I'm free
tonight."

Kass smiled, the tension easing from his
shoulders.

"I'd like that. Just need to clean up my
station. Give me twenty minutes."

She laughed. "Alright. See you soon."

He hung up, still smiling. For the first time
all day, he felt lighter. He wiped down his
clippers, straightened his chair, and swept
the last curls of hair into the pan.

Outside, the streets still hummed with
sirens and noise—but for now, none of it
mattered. Tonight, he had something to
look forward to.

The sun was sliding behind the buildings,
streaking the sky with gold and pink, when
Queen's car pulled up. Kass locked the

shop door behind him as she rolled down her window and smiled.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Hey," he replied, matching her tone as he climbed in.

"Ready to grab some food?" she asked, eyes glinting.

"Yeah. I'm starving."

They pulled off, streetlights flickering awake above them.

The restaurant was quiet—dim lighting, soft jazz, the gentle clink of silverware. It felt like another world compared to the chaos of the shop. They sat across from each other, conversation flowing with the ease of two people who didn't need to force anything.

Kass leaned forward, his voice low.

"You know, I've been through some tough times. Ended up locked up for a while. I'm just trying to get back on my feet. Do things different."

Queen listened, her face open and

unjudging.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But you're trying—that's what counts."

He nodded. "Yeah. I wanna make a change. No more old habits."

She smiled faintly, absently stirring her drink.

"I get it. I've been dealing with some stuff too. Just got out of a wild breakup. Thinking about leaving town soon. Starting fresh."

Kass frowned slightly. "Sorry to hear that.

You wanna talk about it?"

She shook her head, curls swaying.

"Nah. Not tonight. Let's keep it light."

Kass chuckled. "No pressure."

The rest of dinner passed in laughter and small confessions—stories about childhood, music, bad haircuts, the weird customers who walked into the shop. By the time their plates were empty, the world outside had faded away.

They stepped out into the cool night. The street was quiet except for the buzz of a

neon sign. Kass walked her to her car,
hands in his pockets.

"I had a great time tonight," he said softly.

"Me too," Queen replied.

A quiet moment lingered between them—
close, unspoken, warm. Kass stepped
forward. She didn't move away. Their eyes
met, and then their lips did too.

A quick kiss. Warm. Real. Something bright
in a world that had gone cold.

When they pulled apart, she unlocked her
door.

"See you soon?" she asked.

"Definitely."

She got in and drove off, her taillights
glowing red in the night. Kass watched until
she disappeared around the corner.

He didn't know what came next—or
whether any of it would last—but for the
first time in years, he felt a small piece of
peace.

Hands in his pockets, he turned and began
walking home beneath the streetlights, his

shadow stretching long behind him.

The kitchen was small, dim, and heavy with silence. A single bulb swung lazily from the ceiling, its light casting long, trembling shadows across the walls. Zoe stood by the sink, shoulders hunched, the phone pressed tight to his ear. His breath came slow and steady—like a man bracing for a hit he couldn't avoid.

The line rang once. Twice. Then a click. "Where you at?" King's voice came through cold and low, like gravel dragged across pavement. "Been lookin' for you." Zoe's throat tightened. He tried to sound calm, casual, but the crack in his tone betrayed him. "Yeah, I know, King. I was gonna call you..." King cut him off before he could finish. "When? Before somebody else gets to me first? I heard the people were on you. Let me guess—either you got my work, or you got my money, Zoe?"

The words hit hard. Zoe froze, his mind scrambling for something—anything—that

would buy him a few hours.

"I—I lost some of the work," he stammered.

"But King, uma get you your money. I just need a little time."

Silence.

Zoe stared at the wall, the sound of King's breathing faint but sharp in his ear. Then finally, King exhaled—long, slow—his calm curdling into quiet rage.

"You find my work before the cops do," he said, his voice like a blade. "Or get outta the city.

Fast. Consider that your head start."

Click.

The line went dead.

For a moment, Zoe didn't move. The hum of the old refrigerator filled the room, its low buzz swallowing the last echoes of King's voice.

Then, suddenly, Zoe slammed the phone onto the counter, the crash ringing through the tiny kitchen. His fist came down again, hard.

"Okay," he muttered to himself, breath steady now. "Time to move."

He grabbed a jacket from the hook, shoved his phone into his pocket, and walked to the door

without another word.

The hallway outside smelled like damp carpet and cigarette smoke. He didn't look back.

When he stepped onto the street, the city greeted him with its usual mix of noise and danger—the hum of engines, the whisper of distant sirens, trouble lurking around every corner.

He pulled his hood up and started walking, his shadow stretching long across the sidewalk beneath the flickering streetlights.

Whatever was coming next, he knew there was no hiding from it.

Morning crept in slowly through the blinds—thin streaks of gray sunlight crawling across the sheets. Kass stirred at the sound of his phone buzzing on the nightstand. Two missed calls. Both from Banga.

He sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes, careful not to wake Queen. She slept soundly beside him, her breathing soft and even.

"Two missed calls?" he whispered. "What's up with you?"

Sliding out of bed, he grabbed his phone and slipped into the bathroom, closing the door quietly before dialing Banga back.

"Yo," Banga answered, his voice rough with sleep. "What's good?"

Kass leaned on the sink, staring at his reflection. "We need to talk in person. Not over the phone. Meet me behind the shop in an hour."

Banga didn't hesitate. "Aight, bet. See you then."

Kass hung up and exhaled, letting the weight of that decision settle. Whatever this was, it wasn't just another favor. This was the kind of business that shifted things.

He dressed quietly, pulling on a hoodie and jeans. Before leaving, he leaned down and kissed Queen's forehead.

"I gotta step out for a bit," he whispered.

"Handle some business."

She stirred, eyes half-open. "Okay. Be safe."

"I will."

A faint smile tugged at his mouth before he slipped out the door.

The air outside was crisp, the streets still waking up. An Uber idled at the curb. Kass slid into the back seat, lost in thought as the car hummed through the city. His decisions played in his mind like scenes from a film—each one stacking on the last, leading him somewhere he never meant to go.

At his house, he moved quickly. He unlocked a drawer, grabbed a small, taped-up package, and tucked it deep into his backpack. He didn't linger.

He couldn't.

When he reached the barbershop, the **Closed** sign still hung in the window. Kass stood there for a moment, scanning the quiet block, before spotting Banga's car pull up.

Banga stepped out grinning, his gold chain catching the early morning light.

"I don't gotta shoot you, do I?" he joked, brushing off his jacket sleeve.

Kass smirked. "Relax. Let's walk around back."

Banga raised an eyebrow but followed.

Behind the shop, the alleyway was quiet—just the distant hum of traffic and the buzz of a flickering streetlight. Kass turned to face him, his expression serious.

"I got a package," he said. "I need you to help me move it. I'll make it worth your while."

Banga studied him for a moment, weighing the offer. Then he nodded.

"Aight, I'm in."

Kass stepped closer. "And no dumb shit. We keep this clean. Ill text you later with the numbers."

Banga smiled—too casually. "Got it."

They slapped hands, the sound echoing through the alley. Banga headed off down the block, his swagger loud as ever.

Kass watched him go, unease settling in his gut.

"What have I done?" he murmured, staring down the empty alley.

The wind picked up, carrying the faint smell of rain and the city's decay. Kass stood there for a long moment, caught between two worlds—

the one he was trying to build and the one he swore he'd already left behind.

Kass stood motionless, lost in thought to the sound of his own breathing.

"Hey," a voice called, breaking his daze. A man stood near the doorway, rubbing his hands together against the morning chill. "I know it's early, but can I get a cut?"

Kass blinked, as though waking from a trance.

"Yeah, sure can, brother."

He flipped open his apron, the crisp snap echoing through the quiet shop—a small, familiar sound that grounded him. With slow, practiced motions, he draped the cape around the man's shoulders and picked up his clippers.

As he worked, the steady buzz filled the silence. Fade, line, blend. The motions were muscle memory, each sweep of the clippers calming his thoughts, each snip a brief moment of peace from the storm gathering outside his life.

When the man looked up in the mirror, his face

lit with satisfaction.

"I love it, man! You're a genius!"

Kass smiled faintly, brushing stray hairs from the man's neck.

"Glad you like it."

By the time the other barbers started trickling in, the shop had come alive again—music low, conversations overlapping, clippers buzzing from every corner. Kass found comfort in the routine. The air smelled of talc and cologne, and for a while, life almost felt normal.

At the next chair, two customers whispered over something they'd seen in the news.

"Yo, you hear about them UFO sightings?" one asked, leaning forward.

His friend grinned. "Man, that's all connected to Trump's new conspiracy, I'm tellin' you."

Kass smirked as he faded another customer's neckline.

"You ever read up on Billy Carson? Dude's got some wild theories about forbidden knowledge—aliens, ancient civilizations, all that."

Another barber laughed across the shop.

"Man, you sound like you tryna open your third eye or somethin'."

"I'm just sayin'," Kass replied, smiling, "the truth out there—you just gotta dig a little deeper."

Laughter rolled through the room, blending with gossip, music, and the whir of clippers—the heartbeat of the shop.

For the first time in days, Kass felt almost at peace.

But peace never lasted long in his world.

That night, city lights flickered outside King's window as he sat in the dark, phone pressed to his ear. His tone was flat, deadly calm.

"Yo, Lo. Got a situation," he said. "Package is MIA. Think it's on the streets."

Lo's voice came steady but cautious.

"Word? You think it's local?"

"Don't know yet," King replied. "Keep an ear out. Any sudden ballers, any overnight moves—check that. Keep it tight."

"Got it."

The call ended, and the night seemed to hold

its breath.

The next day, Lo pushed open the barbershop door. The bell jingled overhead as his eyes swept the room. Kass was mid-cut, laughing lightly with a customer. When he noticed Lo, his smile tightened.

"Lo," Kass said with a nod. "What's good, man?"

Lo leaned against the counter, his easy smile failing to mask the sharpness in his eyes.

"What's good, Kass? Heard anything about them boys jumpin' out on people last night?"

Kass shook his head, keeping his tone even.

"Nah, man. Ain't heard nothing'. Usual stuff around here—just cuttin' hair, stayin' out the way."

Lo nodded, but his gaze didn't leave Kass's face. A beat of silence passed before Kass's phone began to ring.

He glanced at the screen—his stomach dropped.

Banga.

Trying to steady his voice, Kass said quickly,

"Hold up. Gotta take this."

"Yeah, yeah," Lo muttered, pretending to check his own phone.

Kass turned slightly away.

"Yo, what's good?" he said quietly. "Yeah, I'm good—just cuttin'. What's up?"

Banga's voice came through loud, careless.

"I'm comin' to the shop. We need to talk about that re-up."

Kass froze.

"Nah, not right now—this ain't a good time."

He hung up fast, nerves crawling under his skin.

Lo's eyes narrowed.

"Everything good?"

"Yeah," Kass answered too quickly. "Just a friend tryna get a cut."

"Mm-hmm." Doubt clung to Lo's voice like smoke. "Aight then. Whatever you say."

Kass scrambled for small talk—basketball, customers, anything to shift the energy. Lo wasn't fooled. After a moment, he pushed off the counter.

"Alright, Kass," he said slowly. "I'll catch you

later."

He walked out, calm and casual—but didn't leave. Instead, he parked across the street, truck idling quietly as he watched from behind tinted glass.

Minutes later, Banga pulled up—fresh clothes, chain glinting, money flashing.

Kass stepped outside, frustration etched across his face.

"I told you not right now," he hissed, pulling Banga around the side of the building. "I was in a meeting."

Banga shrugged, grinning.

"Man, chill. I'm good."

Kass reached into his backpack and handed him another small bag. Quick. Discreet.

But not quick enough.

Across the street, Lo raised his phone.

Click.

Then again.

Click.

"Gotcha," he muttered, smiling.

He started his engine, but didn't notice the unmarked sedan half a block away. Inside sat

Flux—watchful, steady, taking notes.

Flux lifted his phone.

"Looks like we've got a situation," he murmured, eyes locked on Kass and Banga.

Moments later, Lo's voice came through another line—this time to King.

"Yo, King. It's Lo. I got eyes on Kass. He's in deep."

King's tone turned dark.

"What happened?"

"He servin' Banga," Lo said. "Kass is dirty. He's been playin' us. I think he got the missing work."

Silence. Then the cold, measured voice of a man sealing another man's fate.

"Kass has to go," King said. "Handle it."

A slow grin spread across Lo's face.

"Consider it done."

He pulled into traffic, headlights slicing through the growing dusk.

Across the street, Flux followed from a distance—engine low, eyes hard.

The game had changed.

And Kass had no idea his time was running

out.

Flux sat behind the wheel of his car with the engine idling, the morning light laying itself thin across the dashboard. He kept one hand on the phone and the other tapping a rhythm against his knee—a nervous energy that felt like momentum. When Vick answered, Flux didn't waste words.

"Vick, it's Flux. I got something on Kass. He's dirty."

Vick's voice on the line was flat and hard. "We need evidence, Flux. The moment we get it, we inform his parole officer and have him locked up."

Flux nodded to himself, even though Vick couldn't see him. "I'll get it."

He thumbed out a short text to Marshall—
Press Kass every day. We need results.—and hit send before he could second-guess it.

Kass walked the sidewalk toward the shop, shoulders drawn in against the cool air, trying to keep his head down. He had enough on his

plate without giving anyone reason to look twice. He never saw the patrol cruiser until it rolled up beside him. The door swung open, and Officer Marshall stepped out, a permanent crease of authority etched between his brows. "Kass," Marshall said, voice flat as pavement.

"We've had reports of high activity around here. You're being detained."

"For what?" Kass asked, hands going instinctively toward his pockets.

Marshall didn't bother with an answer. He advanced, hand at his side. "Put your hands up, joker."

The metal of the world felt colder than usual. Marshall's search was brisk and rough—too rough for a casual check—and his tone carried a warning as much as an order.

"The heat is on, Kass. You'd do well to remember that."

Marshall stepped back and let him go, but Kass felt the burn of the moment in his chest.

"You're not always going to be behind a badge," he muttered over his shoulder as he walked away, the insult and the warning

braided together.

Inside the shop, the clatter and laughter tried to drown the tension. Kass called Queen while he wiped down his station.

"I think we should get out of here," he said, low and urgent. "Before things get out of hand."

Queen's voice came soft through the phone. "I saw a dream house, Kass. It costs a fortune."

"We'll make it work," he said, though the certainty in his voice felt thinner than he wanted. "I need the money fast. I'll call you back. I gotta make a call."

He dialed Banga. Banga answered immediately "sup?". "I need a fast return ... tonight!", grinning through the line. "You just gave me the work, fam. But—fuck it—yeah, I'll make it happen tonight."

Across town, Zoe sat on a crate in his kitchen, his face lit by a single swinging bulb. King's threat still sat heavy in his gut. He pulled a cheap mask over his face—a Joker smile printed across the front—and felt the old adrenaline come alive. He pushed into the night like a man with nothing to lose.

The first job was quick, sloppy, and loud—jamming his hand into a pocket and grabbing what he could. The next target blurred into the next: a store corner where the guys hung out gambling, and anywhere else he could think to hit. With every run, Zoe ran faster, the music in his headphones pushing him along like an accomplice. He hit another lick moving slick and silent. Sirens threaded the air like distant, inevitable punctuation.

When the city went black around him—when the night folded into the speeding heartbeat of his successes—Zoe kept moving. He wasn't thinking about consequences. Only money. Only survival. Only the promise King had given him, the one that left no room for failure.

Banga's car rolled up to a local spot louder than the rest of the block, neon letters humming over the doorway. He hopped out, head swiveling, a man used to taking measure of his territory. He had no idea Zoe's territory was the very same, or that the night's small, fast crimes would rearrange where the lines were drawn. Zoe was back home in his kitchen

counter counting the night's take, cursing at the pile because it wasn't enough. King's warning had sunk like a weight. He'd grabbed his mask again and slipped back into the dark.

On the wet curb nearby, Folk dragged a cigarette between his fingers, eyes clouded but quick. Zoe rolled down his window and, just to make a connection, leaned his head out. Folk nodded toward the street like he was giving out weather reports.

"You hang around? Somebody gonna pull up sooner or later."

Zoe nodded and cut his engine. He needed eyes and ears; Folk could be both. The city rewarded the alert.

Meanwhile, Lo's phone lay warm in his hand.

He made a call to Switch—his hitter. There were no smaller men with smaller voices here, only blunt, efficient exchanges.

"Yo, it's Lo. Go see about Kass," Lo said.

"No problem. Send a location," Switch replied, his voice devoid of curiosity, all business.

Back at the corner store, Banga slid from the shop with a foil pack in his hand. On the sidewalk, he spotted Folk and sauntered over with a swagger that said he'd handled worse.

"Sup?" Banga said, keeping it light.

Folk blinked slow, then gestured with a crooked nod. Banga's grin widened. "I'll be posted," he said, and walked off with measured steps.

Folk ducked back into the store. A few minutes later he returned and went up to Zoe, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Somebody around the corner got work.

Zoe's eyes lit. Opportunity is a small animal—it shows up when you least expect it, and it doesn't come twice.

"Oh yeah?" Zoe said, the plan sharpening in his mind. "I'ma get 'em. Stay here."

He crept to a better vantage point, angling himself where he could see Banga without being obvious. The air tasted like rain and gasoline; the night smelled like survival.

Whoever moved first would have the advantage.

Unseen, Lo watched from a truck across the street. He'd already called King, and King's decision had been delivered like a verdict: Kass had to go.

As the night tightened around the block, Flux sat in his car half a block away, engine quiet, eyes fixed on the shop. He watched the choreography unfold—the meet-ups, the silent glances, the casual pass of the timepiece that meant nothing—until he saw Banga move.

Everything was aligning the way the men upstairs wanted. Kass, who'd thought he could thread himself through the needle of danger and safe passage, had become a small, bright target. And in the dark, where loyalties were thin and the cost of a mistake was measured in blood, the players positioned themselves like predators.

Zoe leaned forward, breath shallow, from his hiding place, he watched Banga—and waited for the moment his world would tilt.

The night was too still. Even the wind seemed

to wait.

Banga leaned against the side of his car, his breath slow, a cigarette burning between his fingers. Across the street, Zoe stepped from the shadows like a ghost made of streetlight and anger. Their eyes met—one heartbeat, two—and the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then hell broke loose.

Banga's hand went for the grip of his Glock before he even thought about it. The first shot cracked through the air, a violent punctuation.

Another followed. The smell of gunpowder rolled into the night as the echo of clappers bounced between brick walls.

Zoe spun, clutching his side, the shock of it written across his face. He stumbled backward, his knees buckling. The sound of his body hitting the ground lingered longer than the gunshots.

Banga stood frozen for a moment, the pistol still hot in his palm. Then instinct kicked in. He ran to his car, slammed the door, and peeled off into the dark. The dashboard lights painted his face a pale blue—his eyes wild, his mind a

mess of noise.

He fumbled with his phone, hands shaking.

"Kass," he said when the line clicked. "It's Banga. I...I.....I....!". "I think I just—" he swallowed hard, "—I think I just killed somebody trying to rob me."

For a second, all he could hear was his own breathing. Then the silence from the other end made him realize Kass was just as stunned as he was.

Banga's words tumbled out, half to the phone, half to himself. "That feen nigga... he must've had something to do with it. That was a setup.

Somebody set me up."

His voice cracked with anger, confusion, and the dawning realization that he was in too deep to walk it back. He slammed his fist into the steering wheel, the sound blending with the roar of the engine as he disappeared into the night.

Flux's phone buzzed, vibrating against the cup holder. He picked it up with a weary sigh.

"What do you mean there's another shooting?" he barked into the receiver, his face hard in the

glow of the dashboard.

A pause. The voice on the other end murmured something too low to make out. Flux rubbed his forehead, the muscles in his jaw twitching. "No, no. We can't afford another body on the street.

Not right now."

He hung up and immediately dialed Marshall. "We need to get to the bottom of this shit," Flux snapped. "Now. I said I want results."

Across town, King's phone buzzed on his desk.

He picked it up, listening as an anonymous voice delivered the news—Zoe, one of his runners, was down. King's face darkened, the muscles in his neck tightening.

"What do you mean?" he growled. The answer only deepened his fury. He slammed his fist against the desk, the sound sharp and final.

"Handle it," he hissed. "All of it."

Meanwhile, Banga was still driving, the world outside his windshield a blur of lights and panic. He called Kass again, his words rushing out.

"It was a setup, Kass. The hobo set us up!" Kass's voice came through calm but clipped.

"Look, just bring me the money and the work. I'm gonna make some moves. I'm going to handle this."

Before Kass could say more, the line went dead. Banga had hung up.

Kass leaned back in the backseat of his Uber, head spinning. He could feel the tension tightening around him like a noose. His phone buzzed again—Banga's number flashing across the screen—but before he could answer, he caught sight of headlights behind them. The car had been following him since he left the shop.

He looked closer.

Marshall.

Kass's pulse jumped. He told the driver to make a turn, then another, trying to lose the tail. The patrol car kept its distance but didn't disappear.

"What's going on?" Kass muttered under his breath. "Damn."

Finally, he had the driver pull up a block from his house. He paid, stepped out, and scanned the dark street before heading for his door.

Inside, the silence felt heavy. He dialed Banga again, anger sharpening his voice. "I need that money tonight, Banga. There's no lateness unless I say so."

On the other end, Banga laughed—a hollow, taunting sound. "Better late than never, homie."

The line went dead again.

Kass stared at the phone, his reflection flickering in the black screen. The anger hardened into resolve. "Alright," he said quietly.

"You wanna play? I'll play."

He grabbed his jacket, slipped his piece into his waistband, and stepped back out into the night. He knew exactly where to find Banga—and this time, he wasn't leaving without what was his.

Outside, somewhere in the dark, engines idled and men waited.

Every one of them had their own orders, their own debts, their own reasons.

But by the time the night was over, none of them would be the same.

The streets were done keeping secrets.

The room smelled like gun oil and quiet danger.

Switch stood in front of the cracked mirror, hoodie half-zipped, a pistol laid out on the table beside him. The soft hum of a beat thumped from a nearby speaker—something dark, heavy, and hypnotic.

He moved methodically, sliding a magazine into the gun, checking the chamber, tucking the weapon into his waistband. No hesitation.

No second thoughts.

The phone on the table lit up—*LO: Handle it*. Switch's jaw flexed. "Say less," he muttered. He pulled his gloves tight, zipped up his jacket, and stepped out into the night.

The music swelled as he disappeared down the stairs, every footstep echoing with purpose.

It was time to earn his reputation.

Kass sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like it held all the answers. The weight of the past few days pressed down on him — the heat from the cops, the paranoia of being followed, the

feeling that the city itself was closing in.
He dragged a hand over his face. He couldn't
sit still any longer.

Pulling on his hoodie, he slipped into his
sneakers and stepped out into the night.
The streets were hushed — the kind of quiet
that felt unnatural, like something was waiting
to happen. Kass kept his hands in his pockets,
head down, but his mind stayed alert.

Half a block down, a black sedan rolled to a
slow stop. Its engine shut off with a low growl.
Inside, Switch watched. His eyes were cold,
focused — a hunter studying his prey.
He took a breath, opened the door, and
stepped out.

The door shut with a dull *clack*. The sound
seemed to travel for miles.
Kass caught movement in his peripheral — a
figure shadowing him. He didn't panic or break
stride. He'd been around too long to spook
easily.

The Switch attempted to close the distance.
Switch's pace quickened. Kass's shoulders
tensed. The streetlight flickered overhead —

the world narrowing to footsteps, breath, and
the pulse in their ears.

Then, in one violent instant, Switch lunged.
Kass pivoted — fast. His hand snapped up,
blocking the grab and counter punching
Switch. Switch stumbled back, surprised by the
resistance. Kass pressed forward with his
weapon drawn he had stashed on his person
before leaving home. For a split second, they
locked eyes — two men with too much to lose.

Switch saw an opening realizing his mistake
and needing to recoup . He turned and sprinted
down the street, the slap of his sneakers fading
into the night.

Kass cursed, fists tight, then darted the
opposite direction. Minutes later, Switch sat in
his car, chest rising and falling. He slammed his
fist against the steering wheel.

"Shit."

He yanked out his phone and dialed.
"Yo, Lo..." he said, voice low. "I messed up. He
got away."

Silence. Then — *click*.

Lo hung up.

Switch stared at the phone, jaw tightening. The quiet inside the car grew suffocating. Regret hung in the air like gun smoke. He knew what that click meant — failure had a price.

Morning light bled weakly through the blinds, throwing thin lines across Kass's face. He sat at the table, exhausted but wired, a cup of cold coffee untouched in front of him.

He grabbed his phone and called Mr. Moorecutte.

"Mr. Moorecutte, it's Kass," he said quietly. "I won't be able to work in the shop no more."

A pause. "Kass, is everything alright? You sound off, son. Is there anything I can do?"

Kass sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Not right now," he said. "I'll let you know."

When he hung up, the silence pressed down again. The weight of everything — the police heat, the ambush, the missing money — it all started to align.

He leaned back, staring into space. "Who's trying to take me out?" he whispered.

Then it hit him — the only thing that made

sense. Someone had put a price on his head.
He picked up the phone again and called
Queen.

"Baby," he said, voice low but steady, "get
ready. We're leaving tonight."

She didn't argue. "Where we going?"

"Anywhere but here."

Kass hung up and paced the room. He needed
Banga. He needed that money. He called twice
— no answer.

"Come on, man," he muttered. "Pick up."
Nothing.

Across town, Flux sat behind his desk when the
call came in.

"Yeah?" he said, already bracing for bad news.
A voice came through, grim and direct.

"There's been another incident."

Flux straightened, eyes narrowing. "Where?"

Static crackled. Then came the words that
made his stomach drop.

He grabbed his coat, muttering as he headed
out the door. "This city's gonna burn before it's
over."

And he wasn't wrong.

By nightfall, every man — every crew, every badge, every hustler — would find themselves caught in a storm none of them could stop.

By late afternoon, the streets around the barbershop held that uneasy quiet — the kind that felt like the city was holding its breath. The hum of traffic was distant, the air thick with tension.

Marshall cruised slowly down the block, his cruiser gliding past the familiar storefronts. The barbershop — Kass's usual spot — sat half-empty, blinds drawn halfway down. He glanced inside as he passed. No Kass. No laughter. No noise. Just silence.

He pressed his phone to his ear, voice smooth and casual, masking the edge beneath it.

"Yeah," he said, chuckling to whoever was on the other end. "I was born and raised in the city... went to school here, got in trouble, same old story."

A soft giggle floated back through the receiver. "Yeah, yeah," Marshall continued, eyes flicking

from the sidewalk to the mirrors. "Then I joined the force. Thought I could make a difference, clean the streets, you know?"

But his attention wasn't on the woman. It was on the city — on movement, on faces, on any sign of Kass.

He turned down another block, slower this time. The streets felt different today. Charged. The kind of different that came before something bad.

Across town, Kass sat in a dim room, blinds drawn tight. His phone vibrated again, and he answered instantly.

"Banga," he said flatly.

On the other end, Banga's tone carried that same cocky smirk he always had when he thought he held the cards.

"You know, Kass," he said, "I'm my own boss now. I'm tired of taking losses."

Kass's jaw tightened. His voice came out low and sharp. "I need the money or the product. You got a choice — cut ties and walk away clean, or make this ugly."

A long silence — two men testing each other's
nerve.

Then Banga's voice dropped, cold and final. "I
ain't got your money, Kass. Do what you gotta
do."

Click.

The line went dead.

Kass stared at the phone, jaw set, the quiet in
the room turning heavy and dangerous. His
pulse thumped in his ears.

"Okay..." he muttered. He stood, slinging his
bag over his shoulder. "Bet."

He didn't slam the door — he just shut it. Quiet.

Controlled. Deadly calm.

The war had started.

The city's pulse quickened as dusk settled in.

Kass stepped out, eyes cutting across every
corner of the block. His instincts were alive —
that sixth sense that whispered whenever
danger crept too close.

He started down the sidewalk, stride steady,
though every sound echoed louder than it
should have. A bottle clinked in the gutter.

Somewhere, a dog barked once, then fell silent.
Then — a faint snap. A branch. Behind him.
Kass turned, eyes narrowing. Nothing but
shadows.

He picked up his pace, tension crawling up his
spine. The air felt thick, like it was waiting for
something to break. He turned down a narrow
side street, then cut through a yard. His feet
pounded across wet grass, lungs burning as he
vaulted a fence and dropped into the next alley.

And then — *BAM!*

He slammed into the hood of a parked car,
staggering back.

When he looked up, his stomach dropped.
Behind the wheel sat Officer Marshall, a smirk
curling across his face.

"Well, well," Marshall said, stepping out and
closing the car door behind him. "Just the man
I've been looking for."

Kass's chest heaved. "Looking for me? For
what — walking home?"

"Don't play smart," Marshall shot back,
stepping closer. "You know what you've been
into. You're lucky I caught you first."

"Lucky?" Kass scoffed, eyes narrowing. "Man, you been harassing me for months. I'm done playin' with you."

The space between them tightened — heat rising, tension coiling. Marshall's hand hovered near his holster. Kass's fists clenched.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, a shadow moved.

A dark sedan rolled slowly through the intersection — tinted windows, engine purring. Switch.

He saw it all: Kass cornered, Marshall pinning him in place, the threat thick in the air. Switch didn't stop. He just watched, taking everything in. Then he kept driving, disappearing around the curve of the block.

Inside Marshall's cruiser, the police radio crackled to life.

DISPATCH: "All units respond — Code 3, East 45th and Main. Repeat, Code 3."

Marshall's jaw tensed. His eyes flicked from the radio to Kass.

"Damn it," he muttered.

He hesitated — long enough to make it clear

this wasn't over.

"This ain't done," he growled, shoving Kass hard before storming back to his car. The tires screeched as he sped down the street, red and blue lights flashing.

Kass stumbled back, catching himself on the wall, chest still heaving.

He rubbed his shoulder, muttering, "One day, I swear, that badge won't save you."

Then he took off again, slipping through a narrow passage between houses, disappearing into the city's dark veins.

A few blocks away, Switch's car crept through the same neighborhood, headlights dimmed, engine a whisper.

He turned down the alley Kass had vanished into, eyes scanning the shadows.

The hunter was still hunting — but this time, both men were prey.

And as the night swallowed them whole, the war that had been simmering in the dark finally began to burn.

Detective Flux sat alone in his office, a half-empty cup of coffee cooling beside a stack of unsolved case files. The phone rang. He answered before the second ring.

"Yeah?" His voice was clipped — a man who didn't waste time.

"Zoe's in critical condition," the voice on the other end said. "ICU at Riverside. But he's alive."

Flux straightened, every nerve on alert. "He's alive?"

"Barely. They've got him sedated."

"Good." Flux leaned forward, "You call me the moment he wakes up. I've got questions for him."

He hung up slowly, staring at the receiver before setting it down. The weight of the city pressed against him. Everyone had their hands in something — cops, hustlers, politicians — the lines had blurred long ago.

Sunlight bounced off his office window, but it did nothing to warm the air. He rubbed his jaw and exhaled through his nose.

Something big was about to break.

Across town, in a half-empty parking lot, two cars pulled in nose-to-nose. LO stepped out first, dressed clean but coiled tight, like a man living under too many promises. King emerged from the other car, slow and deliberate, his presence enough to silence the air.

"With the mayoral election coming up," King said, folding his arms, "this is big business. No room for error."

He scanned the lot before looking back at LO.

"We got a deal going down in Buckroe. We need the city quiet."

LO nodded, confidence carefully measured. "I got somebody on it, King. Everything's under control."

King tilted his head — not convinced. "You sure? I don't need noise right now. Not with the press sniffing around."

"Don't worry," LO said, a slow grin forming.

"My guy's solid. He knows what's at stake."

King studied him a moment longer, then nodded. "I hope so."

His phone rang, slicing through the tension. He

answered without breaking eye contact.

"Yeah?"

"How's business?" a voice asked.

King's lips curled. "We're on schedule."

"Good. Keep it that way."

King hung up and slid his phone into his pocket. "Keep it tight," he told LO.

They clasped hands — a silent pact — then disappeared into their cars, leaving the lot empty except for the echo of wheels on cracked pavement.

The night was humid, the kind that clung to your skin. Kass stepped out of the shadows, hood up, eyes scanning the block. The streetlight above him flickered. Sweat ran down his temple.

"Just a quick grab," he muttered. "In and out." He pushed open the corner-store door. The bell over the frame dinged, sharper than it should have.

Inside, the cashier barely looked up from his magazine.

"That it?" he asked.

"Yeah," Kass muttered. "Ring that up."
He grabbed the cigar and stepped back out into the heat. His body moved easy, but his eyes never stopped scanning.
A car engine purred somewhere behind him — steady, deliberate. He glanced back as a dark sedan slid by with its headlights dimmed.

Switch.

Across the neighborhood, Banga drove alone, Kass's name popping across his phone. He smirked.

"Now you wanna talk," he muttered, hitting *ignore*. "Too late for that."

Kass tried again. No answer. He cursed and kicked a trash can, the clang echoing down the block.

"Man... forget him!"

Fate lined the pieces up perfectly.

Banga rolled to a stop at a red light — just as Switch eased in beside him. Neither looked at the other, but both felt the tension in the air.

Then Kass stepped off the curb. Switch's eyes snapped toward him. "There you go," he growled, gunning the engine.

The tires screeched. He swung the door open
before the car even stopped.

Switch lunged. "What's up now, boy?!"

Kass ducked. The punch flew past his ear,
shattering the glass behind him. He didn't wait
for another. He ran — cutting through backlots
like his life depended on it.

Because it did.

He hit the church backlot, vaulted a fence, and
crouched behind the brick wall, breathing hard.

Footsteps followed — slow, confident.

"You can't hide forever, lil' bro," Switch called,
voice echoing.

Kass's jaw tightened. Then he moved.

He burst out from behind the wall and
slammed into Switch. They hit the ground hard
— a struggle, a grunt, a thud.

Then silence.

Switch didn't get up.

Kass staggered away, holding his ribs.
Banga was only a block away when he heard
the scream. He swung his car around and
spotted Kass limping, Switch's body barely
visible behind him. He pulled up fast, cutting

Kass off.

"Don't move!" Banga shouted, stepping out,
gun drawn. "Either you or me."

Kass stopped, breath ragged. "Do what you
gotta do."

They stared — years of tension between them.

"I still got the work," Banga said, voice low but
shaking. "And the money. Lost some of the
product. Got into it with somebody. That's the
truth."

Before Kass could answer, the world cracked
open with gunfire.

Three shots — sharp, echoing.

Banga jerked, red blooming across his hoodie.

Kass spun as a bullet grazed his shoulder. He
dropped to one knee.

From the shadows, a figure stepped forward —

LO, pistol steady, eyes cold.

Kass crawled toward Banga, but it was too late.

His boy was gone.

He forced himself up, running as LO followed.

He ducked into an alley, heart pounding,
grabbed a loose board from a broken fence,
and crouched low.

Footsteps approached.

LO rounded the corner, weapon raised.
Kass struck first — swinging hard. The board
cracked against LO's arm. The gun fell,
clattering on the concrete. They fought — raw,
furious, desperate. The gun slid between them.

Both dove for it.

A single shot tore through the alley.

Then silence.

Suddenly the scene changes and Kass awakes
Inside Mr. Moorcutte's barbershop, the hum of
clippers filled the room. Kass sat across from
the old man, eyes tired but clearer than they'd
been in months.

"It's all about moving forward," Mr. Moorcutte
said, setting the clippers down. "One day at a
time, son. You understand? You'll be alright.

You'll be just fine."

He leaned forward, meeting Kass's eyes. "Now
tell me, Kass... I ain't gonna have no problems
outta you, am I?"

Kass managed a faint smile and shook his
head. "No, sir. Not at all."

"Good," Mr. Moorcutte said, satisfied. "Then
you start tomorrow."

As Kass stood to leave, his eyes caught a small
wooden sign hanging on the wall — simple,
carved deep, painted by hand:

ONE DAY AT A TIME

He exhaled, the faintest smile on his lips, and
walked toward the door.

Outside, the morning light broke over the city
— cold, clean, and new.

The End

