



MONEY OR THE BREAD

An Urban Coming-of-Age Novel

By Eddmond Mitchell

1. THE TWO PROMISES ON 103RD

The late-afternoon heat in Watts did not rise off the asphalt so much as it hung there, thick with diesel exhaust, charred grease from the corner fish joint, and the heavy metallic hum of the A Line train sliding along the concrete overpass near 103rd Street.

Malik Carter stood on the cracked sidewalk outside his apartment complex with his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his jeans. He was nineteen, lean and long-limbed, with wide, watchful brown eyes that had learned early how to take the temperature of both ends of a block without turning his neck. To his left, across Wilmington Avenue, the chain-link fences surrounding the low, pale brick buildings of Jordan Downs caught dry palm fronds and plastic grocery bags in the sluggish summer wind. To his right, past the faded stucco storefronts, the check-cashing counters, and the windowless coin laundromat, the sky stretched west toward Alameda and the industrial spine of Los Angeles, bleached bone-white by smog and four o'clock sun.

Watts, Malik had realized long before he ever held a high school diploma, never offered a young Black man a single conversation. It gave you two promises at the exact same volume, and it dared you to choose which one would swallow you whole.

The first promise was loud, immediate, and impossible to ignore. It thumped through the trunk of a faded burgundy Caprice idling at the curb, rattling the license plate frame against the bumper, throwing a sweet cloud of blunt smoke out into the dead air. That promise told you that time was a luxury invented by people who owned land. It said respect was something you could buy this afternoon at the Slauson Super Mall, strap to your wrist in polished stainless steel, or carry in the hard, unblinking tilt of your chin when you crossed from one side of 104th Street to the other. In a neighborhood where the city took four months to replace a shattered streetlamp and the MTA buses routinely blew past stops when the sun went down, that kind of respect looked an awful lot like the only shield a boy could afford.

The second promise was quiet, almost hesitant, like a handwritten envelope slipped through a mail slot that nobody in the house wanted to tear open because they were afraid of what it owed. It sounded like the tinny buzz of a wind-up alarm clock going off at five in the morning so you could catch the 55 bus up Compton Avenue before the morning rush. It smelled like damp paperback dictionaries, the alkaline chalk dust of an adult education annex, and the thin manila envelope from Los Angeles Trade-Technical College sitting flat and untouched beneath a ceramic salt shaker on the kitchen counter. It was the stubborn, fragile idea of a life where your mother didn't have to sleep on the sofa with one ear cocked toward the back alley, trying to discern whether the three sharp pops echoing off the cinder blocks were leftover Fourth of July firecrackers or copper-jacketed nine-millimeter rounds.

A dark slate-grey Honda Civic with tinted windows and an aftermarket muffler rolled up to the curb, its tires scuffing dry jacaranda leaves against the concrete. The driver's window slid

down with a smooth, electric whisper.

Dre sat behind the wheel, his left wrist draped over the top curve of the steering column. He wore a crisp white pro-club tee that smelled faintly of vanilla car freshener and laundry starch, and a thin gold rope chain that flashed against his dark collarbone every time he leaned forward. Dre had been Malik's shadow since they were seven years old. They had shared three-for-a-dollar freeze pops on the porch of the old wood-frame house on 102nd, raced rusty shopping carts through the vacant dirt alleys behind Grape Street, and thrown gravel at the rusted Union Pacific freight cars that sat dead on the spur tracks behind the scrap metal yards.

Back then, Dre's mother had worked nights at the post office terminal downtown, and Dre had spent half his childhood sitting on Malik's living room rug, sharing bowls of buttered white rice and watching syndicated cartoons on a television set that only worked if you jammed a butter knife into the channel knob. But when Dre's older brother had gone up to Pelican Bay for armed robbery four years ago, something in Dre's eyes had shut down. The soft, clumsy boy who used to drop pop flies in the dirt at 109th Street Recreation Center had hardened into someone whose pulse never seemed to climb above sixty, no matter how close the sirens came.

"You out here posing like a monument, Mook," Dre said, his mouth curling into an easy, practiced grin. His teeth were bright and straight against his dark brown skin. "Hop in. I'm sliding down toward Imperial to see a dude about some wheels."

Malik kept his hands resting on his waistband. He didn't take the two steps toward the passenger door. "I'm good, Dre. Got some things to take care of in the house."

Dre tilted his head, the easy smile slipping just enough to reveal the sharp, assessing edge underneath. "Man, you still sitting on that school nonsense? That Trade-Tech shit?"

"Orientation is Monday morning," Malik said. He tried to keep his voice flat, but there was a knot forming at the base of his ribs. "Magnolia Hall. Nine o'clock."

Dre let out a dry, hacking laugh that bounced off the Civic's door panel. "Orientation. Look at you. Talking like you about to get a swivel chair in a high-rise on Wilshire. What they teaching you over there, bro? How to wire a junction box for eighteen dollars an hour while some foreman from Orange County sits in the air conditioning and docks your pay when you take a piss?"

"They got business programs, Dre. Drafting. Real certification tracks that transfer out to Cal State."

"Transfer to where?" Dre leaned his forearm out over the window ledge, his eyes pinning Malik against the stucco wall behind him. "You think Long Beach State or Dominguez Hills is looking for niggas who caught the bus off 103rd? You think admissions counselors give a

damn that Renee's refrigerator don't keep the milk cold unless you jam a folded piece of cardboard under the front leg?"

Malik felt the blood prickle hot beneath the skin of his neck. "Leave my mama out of your mouth, Dre."

"I'm speaking on reality, Mook. I love Renee like my own, and that's why I'm saying it." Dre gestured with a loose flick of his manicured fingers toward the corner market, the peeling spray-painted memorial of a boy named Little June on the side of the laundromat, and the three fourteen-year-olds sitting on the curb outside the barbershop watching them with guarded, hungry eyes. "You know what that classroom can't give you on Monday?"

"What?"

"Money for right now." Dre reached between his thighs, pulled a banded stack of twenty-dollar bills from under the seat, and laid it casually on top of the dashboard. The green paper was thick, slightly curved from the rubber band, resting right where the sunlight hit the glass. "School gives you reading assignments. It gives you parking permits you can't afford and white professors who talk to you like you're slow. But when the gas company puts that red shutoff tag on the front doorknob next Thursday, Dr. Philosophy ain't pulling out his checkbook for your family. You know who writes checks around here?"

Dre tapped the dashboard with two fingers. The bills didn't slide.

"Think about it, little bro," Dre murmured, his tone shifting back into that quiet, brotherly cadence that had pulled Malik through a hundred playground arguments. "I ain't asking you to go kick down nobody's door. I just need somebody I know is solid. Somebody who don't panic when the block gets loud. You got my number."

The window rolled up with a hum. The Honda slid away from the curb, its low exhaust rumbling through the dry leaves on the pavement as it took the corner toward Central Avenue.

Malik stood on the concrete until the red glow of the brake lights disappeared behind the tall palm trees lining the avenue. He reached deep into the front pocket of his jeans and felt the stiff, folded edge of the acceptance letter he had been carrying around like a talisman for four straight days. The paper was worn soft at the creases from the moisture of his thumb, but the raised black lettering remained clear: *The Admissions Office of Los Angeles Trade-Technical College is pleased to inform you...*

Above him, the blue sky was already turning the color of bruised plums. South near Imperial Highway, the heavy, rhythmic chop of a police helicopter began to circle, its searchlight not yet lit, just a dark metal dragonfly cutting patient, slow rings through the summer smog.

2. THE PERMISSION TO IMAGINE

The apartment was on the second floor of a six-unit building near 102nd and Grape. The stairs were exterior concrete, supported by rusted iron railings that wobbled whenever Uncle Ray hauled his heavy toolboxes up to the landing.

When Malik pushed through the front door, the screen slapped the frame with a loose, hollow clap. The front room smelled of yellow onions browning in vegetable oil, seasoned salt, and the damp, sweet aroma of boiling collard greens that had been simmering on the back burner since two in the afternoon. A box fan sat in the living room window, whining on its highest setting, merely redistributing the stale eighty-degree air between the faded floral sofa and the imitation-wood entertainment console.

At the small laminate kitchen table, twelve-year-old Jamal sat hunched over a wide-ruled notebook. His knees were bouncing against the metal chair legs, and the collar of his faded navy middle-school polo was frayed where he had chewed on it during math class.

“Mook,” Jamal said without looking up, his pencil lead snapping with a sharp *crunch* against the paper. “What’s eight times seven again? Mr. Henderson gave us fifty of these before tomorrow morning, and if I don’t finish, he making me stay inside during fifth period.”

Malik dropped his keys into the plastic butter tub on the counter and walked over to the table. He stood behind his brother, placed a hand on the boy’s bony shoulder, and felt the tight, frantic energy running through him. “Fifty-six. And stop pressing so hard on the lead. You trying to carve it into the wood?”

“I’m trying to get it over with,” Jamal muttered, using his thumb to rub away the graphite smudge. He looked up at Malik, his dark eyes wide and full of that raw, transparent hunger younger brothers have when they study older boys. He looked down at Malik’s feet. “Dre came by? I heard that muffler from down the alley.”

“Don’t worry about Dre,” Malik said quietly. “Worry about your fractions.”

“Dre got them new Retro 4s,” Jamal said, his voice dropping into an envious whisper. “The white and navy ones with the grey cement. Trev from the eighth grade said Dre paid two-eighth for ‘em cash at the Foot Locker over by Fox Hills.”

“Dre don’t pay rent,” a voice called from the kitchen.

Renee Carter stepped out from behind the narrow dividing wall, holding a damp kitchen towel in both hands. Her hair was pulled back into a tight, practical bun held by two plastic barrettes, and the dark semicircles under her eyes looked like bruises left by ten-hour shifts on the linoleum floors of the convalescent home on Imperial Highway. She wore light blue

nursing scrubs with faded cartoon teddy bears across the chest pocket, her name tag pinned crookedly near her collarbone: *R. CARTER, CNA*.

She looked at Malik, her eyes sweeping over him from his hairline to his scuffed sneakers, reading every line of his shoulders the way only a mother who had buried two brothers before their twenty-fifth birthdays could read a boy.

“You talk to that boy today?” she asked.

“Just said what's up at the curb, Ma,” Malik said, keeping his eyes on Jamal’s notebook. “He was heading down toward Imperial.”

Renee walked over to the stove, took the lid off the greens, and stirred them with a wooden spoon that had one edge scorched black from twenty years of pots. The steam rose into the warm air, making her squint. “I don't want that car sitting outside this building, Malik. I mean it. The landlord already gave Mrs. Jackson a three-day notice because her nephew was out there working on carburetors in the driveway. The city is just waiting for an excuse to red-tag these buildings and push everybody past Long Beach.”

She put the lid down with a heavy, deliberate clatter and turned back to him. Her hands went to her hips. “You go by the station and get your TAP card loaded for Monday?”

Malik felt the pocket where the acceptance letter lay pressed against his thigh. “I got enough on the card for three days. Uncle Ray said he might have some yard work out in Carson this weekend to cover the rest of the month.”

Renee’s face softened, but the tightness around her mouth remained. She reached onto the counter, picked up the thin manila envelope from Trade-Tech, and laid her palm flat against it. The paper crinkled beneath her calloused fingers.

“Your daddy had two years of community college down in Louisiana before he came out here,” she said, her voice dropping into a low, even cadence that always made the apartment feel very quiet. “He used to keep his drafting pencils in an old cigar box under the bed. He thought because he had a certificate from a junior college, the union was gonna let him hold a clipboard on the construction sites downtown. But when he went down to the local, they put a shovel in his hand and told him the apprenticeship list was full for five years.”

Malik looked up. “Why you telling me that now?”

“Because I don't want you thinking school is some kind of magic trick,” Renee said, looking directly into his eyes. “It ain't magic. It's work. It's sitting on that train for forty minutes while people look at you sideways, and it's walking into a room where everybody else went to schools with new books and computers that actually turn on. But it's a door, Malik. It's a door that don't end with some police officer dumping your pockets out on the hood of a patrol car while the neighbors watch from the porch.”

She stepped closer and touched Malik's cheek with fingers that smelled of antibacterial soap and bleach. "Dre's mama was my friend before she passed, God rest her soul. But that boy is living on borrowed minutes. He thinks because he got two thousand dollars in a shoebox, he's a grown man. That ain't a life, Malik. That's a countdown."

Jamal kept his head down, but the pencil had stopped moving. The small room felt crowded with the weight of things none of them could afford to name out loud: the past-due notice from Southern California Edison resting behind the ceramic salt shaker, the worn treads on Malik's only pair of dress shoes, and the sound of the evening police helicopter swinging back around from the south, its low, rhythmic thumping rattling the loose pane in the living room window.

3. THE A LINE TO GRAND

Monday morning broke beneath a heavy, grey ceiling of coastal fog that blanketed South Los Angeles in a cool, damp stillness.

Malik stood on the elevated platform at the Watts Towers station on 103rd Street at 7:45 AM. Around him, the platform was crowded with the early morning working class of the neighborhood: women in white nursing clogs holding insulated lunch bags, construction laborers in dusty work boots and high-visibility vests checking their wristwatches, and high school kids from King/Drew Magnet with oversized backpacks resting against their shins.

Below the platform, the iconic open-work steel spirals of the Watts Towers rose against the pale sky, their mosaic surfaces of broken sea glass, ceramic tiles, and 7-Up bottle fragments catching the early grey light. Simon Rodia had spent thirty-three years bending scrap rebar and mortar by hand in his backyard, building monuments out of discarded trash that the city had tried three separate times to tear down with bulldozers. Malik had walked past those towers every day of his life, but standing on the platform this morning, wearing a clean, pressed button-down shirt that had belonged to his uncle, the spires looked different—less like neighborhood scenery and more like a quiet, stubborn refusal to disappear.

The two-car train slid into the station with a high-pitched pneumatic hiss. The doors parted, and Malik stepped into the crowded interior, finding a space near the center pole between a man reading *La Opinión* and a young woman with a hospital badge clipped to her lanyard.

As the train accelerated north, tracking the old Pacific Electric right-of-way past Firestone, Florence, and Slauson, Malik watched the landscape shift outside the scratched polycarbonate window. The low-slung, burglar-barred storefronts and tire shops of South Central gave way to industrial scrap yards, metal fabricators, and freight forwarding warehouses. At Washington Boulevard, the train curved west, rising above the streets before descending into the concrete corridor toward downtown.

When Malik stepped off at the Grand/LATTC station, the scale of the city suddenly felt massive. Los Angeles Trade-Technical College spread out along Grand Avenue, its mid-century brick halls and modern steel-and-glass instructional buildings bustling with thousands of students carrying drafting boards, culinary knife kits, tool rolls, and stacks of heavy textbooks.

Malik found Magnolia Hall on the campus map near the quad. Room 214 smelled of fresh floor wax, dry-erase markers, and the chilled, mechanical air of an industrial HVAC system. Thirty students sat at laminate desks arranged in neat semi-circles, the diversity of the room reflecting the vast geography of the county: young Latino men in Dickies work shirts from East LA, older Black women returning to school after raising children, and recent high school graduates from Inglewood, Hawthorne, and South Gate.

At the front of the room stood Dr. Harris. He was a compact, dark-skinned man in his late fifties with close-cropped grey hair, wire-rimmed spectacles, and a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches worn soft by decades of chalk dust. He didn't use a microphone. When he spoke, his voice was clear, resonant, and entirely without hurry.

"Welcome to English 101: College Composition and Critical Thinking," Dr. Harris said, setting a stack of syllabi onto the podium with a single, sharp tap. "Let us dispense with the pleasantries immediately. Most of you were told by your high school guidance counselors that community college is the place you go when you don't know what else to do. You were told this is thirteenth grade. They lied to you."

The room went completely silent. A young man sitting near the back stopped tapping his pen.

"This institution," Dr. Harris continued, walking slowly along the front row of desks, "is not a holding pen. It is an arena. The state of California will give you twelve weeks to prove whether you are capable of organizing your thoughts into coherent, undeniable arguments, or whether you prefer to remain at the mercy of people who use language to exploit you. In this classroom, you will not write about what you *feel*. You will write about what is *true*, and you will provide evidence to sustain your claims."

He stopped directly in front of Malik's desk, handing him a thin sheaf of paper. Dr. Harris's eyes met his for a fraction of a second—not hostile, but intensely observant, taking in the clean, slightly oversized collar of Malik's shirt and the tension in his wrists.

"Our first text will be James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*," Dr. Harris announced, turning back to the whiteboard. "Baldwin understood that the world does not see young Black and Brown people as individuals until they force the world to reckon with the clarity of their minds. If you do not know how to name your own condition, someone else will name it for you, and they will price you accordingly."

Malik stared down at the crisp white paper of the syllabus. The words *Thesis Statement*, *Textual Evidence*, and *Rhetorical Analysis* were printed in sharp, dark ink.

Beneath the desk, his phone vibrated against his thigh. Three short pulses, then a pause, then another three.

He reached into his pocket and shielded the screen with his palm.

DRE (8:14 AM): *Need you on Central by 3. Easy two bills. Don't be late.*

Malik slipped the phone back into his pocket, his thumb pressing against the cold metal edge of the casing. On the whiteboard, Dr. Harris was already writing the date of their first mandatory essay, the squeak of the marker against the smooth porcelain sounding like a razor slicing through paper.

4. THE SHADOW OF CENTRAL AVENUE

The heat had returned with a vengeance by the time Malik caught the A Line back south to 103rd Street.

The liquor store on the corner of Central Avenue and 108th sat behind a high wrought-iron fence topped with razor wire. The asphalt parking lot was littered with crushed aluminum cans, lottery scratchers, and the sticky, dark residue of spilled malt liquor that had dried in the afternoon sun. Outside the entrance, an old payphone hung off its hook, its metal cord stripped bare to the copper core.

Dre's Honda was parked in the narrow alley beside the dumpster, its engine idling with that low, rhythmic rumble that Malik could recognize from two blocks away.

Malik walked through the side gate, his canvas backpack slung over one shoulder, his English syllabus folded carefully inside his folder. As he approached the passenger side, the door unlocked with a heavy *clack*.

"You taking your sweet time, scholar," Dre said as Malik slid into the passenger seat. Dre was wearing dark sunglasses, his left hand tapping the steering wheel in time with a bass-heavy instrumental playing low through the speakers. On the console between them sat a brown paper bag, rolled tight at the neck.

"Train got held up at Firestone," Malik said, dropping his bag onto the floorboard between his feet. "Police had somebody on the tracks."

Dre didn't look at him. He put the car in reverse, backed smoothly out of the alley, and turned south onto Central Avenue. "That's why I don't ride with the public. You put your schedule in another man's hands, you already lost."

"Where we going?" Malik asked.

"Down to Rosecrans. Just gotta drop an envelope off with a dude at the transmission shop behind the car wash." Dre reached into the cup holder, picked up a small, heavy brass key, and tossed it into Malik's lap. "Take this. If I tell you to get out and open the glove box, you open it. If I don't say nothing, you sit here, look straight ahead, and don't touch your phone."

Malik looked down at the brass key. It felt warm from the sun. "What's in the glove box, Dre?"

Dre glanced at him sideways, his jaw muscle working beneath his skin. "Don't start acting like a stranger, Mook. We been doing this since we was skipping fifth period at 99th Street

Elementary. You know what we doing. We handling business so we don't have to eat government cheese out of Renee's icebox for the rest of our lives."

"My mama don't eat government cheese," Malik said, his voice rising slightly.

"She working fifty hours a week wiping old folks' asses in a rest home on Imperial," Dre snapped, his knuckles whitening on the wheel as he swung the Honda past a city bus. "She got varicose veins on her calves the size of garden hoses, Malik! Don't sit here and play high-and-mighty with me because you sat in a room with some old man talking about books this morning! That old man ain't paying her light bill!"

The silence inside the car became thick, hot, and suffocating.

Dre pulled the Honda into the gravel lot of an auto repair shop near Rosecrans and Avalon. The yard was filled with stripped car frames, rusted engine blocks sitting on wooden pallets, and two large pit bulls chained to an old shipping container, barking furiously against their heavy links.

Dre turned the ignition off. "Stay here. Keep the doors locked. If anybody comes out that side door with a clipboard, tell 'em I'm inside talking to Hector."

He grabbed the brown paper bag from the console and stepped out of the car, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Malik sat alone in the passenger seat. His heart was beating with a hard, uneven rhythm that thumped against his collarbone. Through the tinted side window, he watched Dre walk toward the corrugated metal garage bay. Dre moved with that deliberate, unhurried swagger that young men in the neighborhood used to mask their fear—shoulders back, chin slightly up, hands out of his pockets to show they were empty, but eyes scanning every doorway, every parked truck, every shadow cast by the afternoon sun.

Two minutes passed. Then five.

A Los Angeles County Sheriff's cruiser cruised slowly down Rosecrans, its tires crunching on the gravel shoulder as it passed the front of the auto shop. Malik froze. He instinctively slid down in the seat, pulling his knees up, his eyes fixed on the rearview mirror. The cruiser slowed almost to a complete stop, its spotlight casing glinting in the sun, before the driver accelerated and continued west toward the 110 freeway.

Malik let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. His shirt was damp with sweat against the synthetic upholstery.

The side door of the garage banged open, and Dre walked back out, his face expressionless. He opened the driver's door, sat down, and tossed a thin stack of bills into Malik's lap.

"Two hundred," Dre said, turning the key. The engine roared to life. "Just like I told you. Easiest money you ever made in your life."

Malik stared down at the cash. The bills were crisp, smelling faintly of motor oil and paper dust.

“What was in that bag, Dre?” Malik whispered.

Dre put the car in drive and pulled out onto Rosecrans, his sunglasses hiding his eyes. “Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to, Mook. Just take Jamal to get some real food tonight.”

5. THE FORMICA TABLE

The apartment was quiet when Malik returned just before seven.

The sun was dropping below the roofline of the apartment buildings across Grape Street, casting long, orange shadows through the front blinds that striped the faded carpet like prison bars.

Jamal was in the bedroom, the muffled sounds of a video game soundtrack leaking through the hollow-core door.

Renee was standing at the stove, reheating the pot of pinto beans from the night before. She had changed out of her scrubs into a worn cotton housecoat, her bare feet resting on a thin rubber mat placed in front of the sink to ease the ache in her heels.

Malik walked in, took his backpack off, and set it on the floor near the entryway. He stood at the edge of the kitchen, his hand buried in the pocket of his jeans, his fingers wrapped around the two crisp one-hundred-dollar bills Dre had given him.

“You eat?” Renee asked without turning around.

“Not yet, Ma.”

“There’s cornbread in the oven. It’s dry, but you can put some butter on it.” She turned the gas burner down to a low simmer and wiped her hands on her apron. “Your uncle called. Said he need you out in Carson Saturday morning at six-thirty. Some lady wants her backyard cleared out before the rainy season starts.”

“How much he paying?” Malik asked.

“Eighty dollars for the day,” Renee said. She turned around and leaned against the counter, crossing her arms. “It ain’t much, but it’ll cover your train pass and Jamal’s school pictures next week.”

Malik stood there for a long moment. He looked at his mother’s face—the deep lines around her mouth, the grey hairs sprouting at her temples that she hadn’t had the time or money to dye in six months, the way she shifted her weight from one foot to the other to keep the pressure off her swollen ankles.

He pulled his hand from his pocket and laid the two one-hundred-dollar bills flat on the yellow laminate kitchen table, right beside the ceramic salt shaker.

The green paper looked blindingly bright against the scratched, yellowed surface.

Renee looked down at the table. She didn’t move. She didn’t pick the money up. She didn’t smile.

“What’s that?” she asked, her voice dropping into a tone that was lower and colder than Malik had ever heard.

“It’s for the gas bill, Ma,” Malik said, trying to keep his voice steady. “And to get Jamal them shoes he need for gym. You don’t have to worry about the shutoff notice.”

Renee walked slowly over to the table. She looked at the money, then raised her eyes to Malik’s face. There was no gratitude in her expression—only a deep, crushing sorrow that made Malik feel smaller than he had ever felt in his life.

“Where did you get two hundred dollars on a Monday afternoon, Malik?”

“I helped a dude move some parts down off Rosecrans,” he lied, the words tasting like lead on his tongue. “Just labor, Ma. Moving boxes out a garage.”

“What dude?”

“Just somebody Dre know.”

As soon as the name left his mouth, Renee’s hand came across the table with a speed that shocked him. Her open palm struck his left cheek with a sharp, stinging *crack* that echoed through the small apartment.

Malik staggered back half a step, his hand coming up to touch his burning face. His eyes went wide.

From the hallway, the bedroom door clicked open. Jamal stood in the opening, his eyes huge with terror, clutching a plastic game controller against his chest.

“Mama—” Jamal whimpered.

“Go back in that room and close that door, Jamal!” Renee shouted, her voice shaking with a fury that brought tears to the corners of her eyes.

Jamal ducked back inside, the latch clicking shut immediately.

Renee turned back to Malik, her chest heaving beneath her housecoat. She pointed a trembling finger at the two bills on the table. “You think I’m stupid, Malik? You think because I work in a nursing home and clean bedpans for eleven hours a day that I don’t know what two hundred dollars in twenties and hundreds looks like when it comes out of an alley?”

“Ma, I was just trying to help!” Malik yelled, the shame and confusion boiling over in his chest. “We sitting here counting pennies for the bus while everybody else got what they need! I’m nineteen years old! I’m supposed to be helping you!”

“Not with blood money!” she screamed, her voice cracking. “Not with money that’s gonna put my firstborn boy in a box at Greater New Bethel before he ever turns twenty-one! I buried your uncle Marcus when he was twenty-two! I stood over that ditch at Inglewood Park

Cemetery and watched them drop his coffin into the dirt while his little friends stood around in matching t-shirts crying about how real he was! You think that made him real? You think that bought him a tomorrow?"

She grabbed the two bills off the table, crumpled them into a tight ball in her fist, and threw them straight at Malik's chest. The paper bounced off his shirt and fell onto the linoleum between them.

"Take that garbage out of my house," Renee whispered, her voice dropping to a ragged, broken rasp. "Take it out of my house, Malik. Because if you bringing that through my front door, you might as well go down to the mortuary on Manchester right now and pick out your suit."

She turned her back to him, gripped the edge of the kitchen sink with both hands, and let her head drop. Her shoulders shook with silent, heavy sobs.

Malik stood frozen on the linoleum. The cheek she had slapped throbbed with a dull, rhythmic heat. He looked down at the crumpled paper ball sitting between his shoes, then looked at his mother's trembling back.

Without a word, he bent down, picked up the money, and walked out the front door into the darkening Watts evening.

6. THE TWO CALENDARS

By the third week of the fall semester, Malik Carter was living inside two completely different bodies.

The first body belonged to *Malik*, the student. Malik woke up at 5:45 AM, showered in the lukewarm water of the apartment's failing water heater, and dressed in plain, clean jeans and polo shirts from the clearance rack at Target. Malik carried a black three-ring binder filled with lecture notes on Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, and introductory macroeconomics. In Dr. Harris's classroom on Grand Avenue, Malik sat in the second row, his jaw set, listening intently as the professor dissected the mechanics of persuasive rhetoric.

"Observe the structure of Baldwin's sentences," Dr. Harris said one Wednesday morning, pacing before the whiteboard with a piece of chalk between his fingers. "He does not begin with outrage. Outrage is cheap. Anyone with a grievance can produce outrage. Baldwin begins with precision. He describes the funeral of his father with the cold, unsparing accuracy of an anatomist. Why? Because when you present the truth with surgical clarity, the reader has nowhere left to hide."

Malik wrote every word into his notebook, his handwriting neat, small, and tight.

The second body belonged to *Mook*.

Mook appeared after four o'clock in the afternoon, when the A Line dropped him back at Watts Station. Mook wore dark hoodies with the drawstrings pulled tight around his face, scuffed black Air Force 1s, and a pair of sunglasses even when the marine layer rolled in from the coast. Mook didn't carry books. Mook carried a burner phone that vibrated every twenty minutes with cryptic text messages from Dre: *Pick up at 104th. Wait on Grape. Drop off behind the car wash.*

For Mook, the money came fast, silent, and greasy. Fifty dollars to sit in the passenger seat of the Civic while Dre went into an apartment on 105th Street. One hundred dollars to take an envelope from a man in a tinted Yukon at the Shell station on Imperial and drop it through the mail slot of a tire shop on Alameda.

Mook used the money to secretly buy groceries—leaving sacks of chicken breasts, fresh milk, and boxes of cereal on the kitchen counter late at night while his mother slept, telling her Uncle Ray had given him cash for hauling gravel.

On a Thursday afternoon, Malik was sitting on a concrete bench in the small park behind the Watts Towers Arts Center, waiting for a call from Dre. The sun was low, throwing long, intricate shadows of the steel towers across the dusty grass.

"You look like you waiting on a verdict," a voice said from behind him.

Malik turned. Tasha stood on the walkway, holding a plastic binder against her chest and an iced tea from the bakery on 103rd. Tasha had lived down the hall from Malik since they were eight years old. She was twenty, sharp-tongued, with wide, intelligent eyes and braids that fell past her shoulders, decorated with small wooden beads. She was in her second year of the dental hygiene program at Southwest College, catching two buses every morning at six to make her clinical rotations.

"Just catching some air before I head home," Malik said, shifting on the bench to give her room.

Tasha didn't sit down. She looked down at him, her eyes narrowing with that uncanny, penetrating insight that had always made Malik uncomfortable. She looked at his dark hoodie, his tense posture, and the burner phone sitting on the concrete beside his leg.

"You riding with Dre again," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I'm helping him out with some deliveries, Tasha. That's all."

"Deliveries." Tasha let out a sharp, mocking laugh that sounded like dry leaves scraping pavement. "What you delivering, Malik? Toothpaste? Textbooks?"

"It ain't your business what it is," Malik said defensively, looking away toward the spires of the Towers. "I'm taking care of my house. You know what Renee's check looks like after they take out taxes and health insurance? She got sixty dollars left over every two weeks. Sixty dollars don't even cover Jamal's asthma inhalers."

Tasha stepped closer, her expression shifting from anger to a fierce, protective urgency. "And what happens to Renee when you get caught in that car with whatever Dre got under the seat? What happens to Jamal when he has to come visit you through the glass at Men's Central on Bauchet Street?"

"Dre knows what he's doing," Malik muttered.

"Dre is nineteen years old and terrified!" Tasha hissed, leaning down so her voice wouldn't carry across the park. "Dre thinks because his brother went to prison, that's his only inheritance! But you had a choice, Malik! You got that acceptance letter! I saw your mama showing it to Mrs. Jackson on the porch like it was a holy relic!"

She reached out and tapped Malik's forehead with two fingernails, hard enough to sting.

"You got a brain in there," she said, her voice dropping to a fierce whisper. "You can actually write. You can actually do something with your life that don't involve ducking down every time an LAPD cruiser makes a U-turn on 103rd. But you out here playing driver for a boy who's gonna get you killed just so you can have fifty dollars in your pocket for some fast food."

“You don't know how hard it is, Tasha,” Malik said, his voice cracking with sudden, raw exhaustion. “You don't know what it feels like to sit in that classroom with them people downtown and know that if one thing goes wrong at home—one flat tire, one late bill, one sick day—the whole thing falls apart.”

Tasha looked at him, her eyes softening with a deep, painful empathy that hurt worse than her anger.

“I do know,” she said quietly. “I catch the 120 bus at five-thirty in the morning every single day, Malik. I study microbiology at the kitchen table while my uncle drinks himself to sleep on the sofa. It's supposed to be hard. But at least when I finish, the paper they give me has my real name on it. What kind of paper is Dre gonna give you?”

Before Malik could answer, the burner phone on the bench vibrated violently against the concrete.

Tasha looked down at the glowing screen, then looked back at Malik's face. She shook her head slowly, stepped back onto the walkway, and turned toward 103rd Street.

“Don't let him kill you, Malik,” she said over her shoulder. “Because if you die out here, the block ain't gonna stop for five seconds. They gonna pour out four ounces of liquor on the curb, put your picture on a t-shirt, and forget you by next summer.”

7. THE MIRROR ON 102ND STREET

The trouble with Jamal happened on a Tuesday afternoon at Markham Middle School.

Malik had just gotten off the train at Watts Station when his phone rang. It wasn't Dre. It was the main office at Markham, asking for Mrs. Carter. When the receptionist learned Renee was on shift at the convalescent home, she demanded that an adult representative come to the administrative office immediately.

Malik walked the five blocks down 104th Street to Grandee Avenue, his stomach tight with dread.

The front office of Markham smelled of old floor wax, paper dust, and industrial disinfectant. Jamal sat on a wooden bench outside the principal's office, his knees pulled up to his chest, his head buried in his arms. His school polo was torn at the collar, and there was a dark red scrape across his left cheekbone.

On the floor beside his sneakers sat a brand-new, oversized pair of dark designer sunglasses with gold trim—an exact replica of the pair Dre wore when he drove the Honda.

Malik stopped in front of the bench. "Jamal."

The boy flinched, then slowly raised his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen from crying, but when he saw Malik, his mouth tightened into a stubborn, defensive pout.

"What happened to your face?" Malik demanded, his voice low and sharp.

"Nothing," Jamal muttered.

The door to the inner office opened, and Mr. Henderson, the vice principal, stepped out holding a manila folder. He was a tall, tired-looking Black man in a short-sleeved dress shirt and tie who had worked in the Watts school district for twenty-five years.

"Mr. Carter," Henderson said, gesturing for Malik to step inside. "Have a seat."

Malik sat in the metal folding chair across from the desk. Jamal remained on the bench outside, visible through the reinforced glass window.

"Your brother was involved in an altercation during eighth-period physical education," Henderson said, opening the folder. "He got into a physical fight with an eighth-grader named Marcus behind the equipment shed."

"Over what?"

Henderson reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a small, clear plastic sandwich bag containing three twenty-dollar bills and a silver chain with a heavy imitation-gold medallion.

He dropped it onto the desk.

“Jamal was running a dice game in the boy’s bathroom during lunch,” Henderson said, looking directly into Malik’s eyes. “When Marcus accused him of using weighted dice, Jamal told him that if he had a problem with it, his older brother and Dre would come down to 104th Street and handle it.”

The room felt suddenly airless. Malik felt the blood drain from his face, leaving him cold and nauseous.

“He said what?” Malik whispered.

“You heard me, Malik,” Henderson said quietly. Henderson leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “I’ve been in this neighborhood a long time. I taught your uncle Marcus before he was killed. I taught Dre’s older brother before he went to state prison. I know the language. Jamal is twelve years old. He’s in the seventh grade. But he’s walking around this school with a chip on his shoulder, wearing dark glasses he bought off some corner boy, and using your name and Dre’s name like an insurance policy.”

Henderson tapped the plastic bag with his pen.

“Your mother works too hard for this, Malik. Jamal idolizes you. Every time you step out of that house with cash you didn’t work for, every time you let him see you get into that grey Honda with Dre, you are writing a lesson for that boy. And right now, he is learning that being feared on 104th Street is better than being educated.”

Malik looked through the glass window at his little brother. Jamal was sitting on the bench, his thin shoulders trembling, his small sneakers barely touching the floor. He looked so young, so small, and so utterly vulnerable.

“He suspended?” Malik asked, his voice barely audible.

“Three days,” Henderson said. “I’m not calling the district security, and I’m not filing a police report. But if I see him running games in that bathroom again, I won’t have a choice. Take him home, Malik. And fix this before the streets fix it for you.”

Malik stood up, took the plastic bag off the desk, and walked out into the waiting area.

“Get your bag,” Malik said to Jamal.

Jamal grabbed his backpack from the floor and followed Malik out of the building. They walked in absolute silence down Grandee Avenue toward 102nd Street. The afternoon heat was brutal, the sun reflecting off the chain-link fences and the cracked concrete sidewalks.

When they reached the dirt alley behind their apartment building, Malik grabbed Jamal by the strap of his backpack, swung him around, and shoved him against the wooden fence.

“What were you doing, Jamal?” Malik yelled, his voice shaking with a terrifying mix of anger and panic. “You shooting dice in a middle school bathroom? You telling eighth-graders I’m gonna come fight for you?”

Jamal looked up at him, tears suddenly spilling over his scraped cheek. “You do it!” he shouted back, his twelve-year-old voice cracking with defiance. “You ride around with Dre all day! You got money in your pockets! You got them clean shoes! Everybody on the block knows who you are! Why can’t I be like you?”

Malik felt the words hit him like a physical blow to the solar plexus. He couldn’t breathe.

“You don’t want to be like me!” Malik screamed, grabbing the silver chain from the plastic bag and ripping it in half with his bare hands, throwing the broken links into the dirt. “You think this is cool? You think riding around in a hot car ducking the police is cool? Look at me, Jamal!”

He grabbed his brother by the shoulders, shaking him gently.

“I am scared every single second of my life! Every time a car slows down behind me, I think I’m about to die! Every time the phone rings, I think Mama is calling from a hospital! Is that what you want? You want to be twelve years old and waiting on a bullet?”

Jamal stared at him, his defiance suddenly crumbling into sheer, childish terror. He dropped his head against Malik’s chest and began to sob, his small hands clutching the fabric of Malik’s hoodie.

Malik wrapped his arms around his little brother, pulling him tight against his chest in the dusty Watts alley. Above them, the spires of the Watts Towers peeked over the rooftops, silent and immovable, while Malik buried his face in his brother’s hair and felt the cold, undeniable truth settling into his bones:

He was running out of time. If he didn’t stop now, he wasn’t just going to destroy himself—he was going to drag Jamal straight into the grave behind him.

8. THE COLLISION AT THE PARTY

The house party was in a single-story stucco ranch house on 112th Street, just north of Imperial Highway.

By eleven o'clock on Friday night, the front yard was packed with nearly a hundred people. Red plastic cups littered the dry lawn, the bass from two massive Cerwin-Vega speakers rattling the front windows so hard they vibrated in their aluminum frames. The air smelled of sweet blunt smoke, cheap tequila, and barbecue smoke from a drum grill cooking chicken wings on the sidewalk.

Malik stood near the chain-link fence on the edge of the lawn, holding a plastic cup of warm soda he hadn't touched in an hour.

He didn't want to be there. He had an eight-page paper on James Baldwin due to Dr. Harris by midnight on Sunday, and he had only written two paragraphs. But Dre had insisted. Dre had told him that Hector—the man from the Rosecrans auto shop—was going to be at the party, and Dre needed Malik there to hold an envelope while the conversation happened.

“Just stand by the gate,” Dre had whispered when they parked down the street. “Keep your eyes on the corner of 112th and Central. If you see a white Crown Victoria or an unmarked Explorer roll by twice, you walk over and tap me on the shoulder. That’s all you gotta do.”

Malik watched Dre holding court near the front porch. Dre was wearing a new black leather bomber jacket, a diamond stud glinting in his earlobe, laughing loudly with three older men from the Nickerson Gardens housing projects. Dre looked confident, untouchable, the center of the yard’s gravity.

Then Malik saw her.

Pushing through the crowded front walkway, holding a red cup and laughing with two other girls, was Keisha.

Keisha was in Malik’s English 101 class at Trade-Tech. She was a serious, sharp-witted twenty-one-year-old from Inglewood who sat two seats to his left in Room 214 and had helped him understand Baldwin’s concept of “the double consciousness” during a group study session in the library only three days ago.

Malik’s stomach dropped through the floor. He instinctively pulled his hoodie down over his forehead and turned his back toward the walkway, trying to blend into the shadows near the fence.

“Malik?”

The voice was clear, surprised, and unmistakable.

Malik froze. He slowly turned around.

Keisha was standing three feet away, looking at him with wide, curious eyes. She wore a denim jacket and clean white sneakers, her textbook tote bag noticeably absent, replaced by a small leather purse.

"It is you," she said, smiling. "What are you doing all the way over here on 112th? I thought you lived up by 103rd."

"Hey, Keisha," Malik mumbled, his voice tight and unnatural. He kept his hands buried deep in his pockets, his fingers nervously curling around the burner phone. "Just... hanging out with some people from the neighborhood."

Keisha looked past his shoulder, her eyes taking in the scene: the men drinking Hennessy out of brown paper bags, the two lookouts stationed at the end of the driveway with their hands tucked under their waistbands, and Dre, who was currently taking a thick roll of hundred-dollar bills out of his pocket to hand to a man with gang tattoos creeping up his neck.

The smile slowly faded from Keisha's face. Her expression shifted from friendly surprise to an awkward, guarded confusion.

"Oh," she said quietly. "You know\... those guys?"

"I grew up with Dre," Malik said, feeling the heat rising into his ears like a fever. "We just... we known each other since we were kids."

Keisha looked at Malik's face, then down at his posture—the tense, guarded way he was standing by the fence, watching the street instead of enjoying the music.

"Dr. Harris said in class today that you had the best thesis outline for the Baldwin paper," she said, her voice dropping so the people around them wouldn't hear. "He told the whole room that if we wanted to see how to structure an argument about systemic entrapment, we should read your draft."

Malik felt like he had been slapped in the mouth. Systemic entrapment. The academic words sounded ridiculous, hollow, and utterly humiliating while standing in a yard on 112th Street holding look-out for a street deal.

"Yeah," Malik whispered. "I gotta finish that tonight."

"The portal closes at midnight on Sunday, Malik," Keisha said gently, her eyes full of an uncomfortable, pitying clarity that cut him deeper than any insult Dre had ever thrown. "Don't miss it. You're too smart to be standing by a fence waiting on somebody else's trouble."

She stepped back into the crowd, disappearing toward the front door of the house.

Malik stood alone by the chain-link fence. The bass from the speakers thumped against his ribs, but inside his head, there was only a high, ringing silence.

Across the lawn, Dre caught his eye. Dre gave him a thumbs-up and gestured toward the Honda parked down the street, signaling that the meeting was over and it was time to move.

Malik pulled his phone from his pocket. The screen lit up in the dark.

There was an automated notification from the Los Angeles Trade-Technical College Canvas app:

ENGLISH 101: ESSAY #1 DUE IN 48 HOURS. NO LATE SUBMISSIONS ACCEPTED WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL.

Malik looked from the glowing screen to Dre, who was walking toward the sidewalk with that easy, predatory swagger, completely unaware that the world they were standing in was a cage with the door wide open.

9. THE EXPIRATION DATE IN ROOM 214

Monday morning arrived with a cold, grey drizzle that turned the gutters along Grand Avenue into swirling rivers of brown water and discarded coffee cups.

Malik sat in the last row of Room 214, his head resting in his hands.

He hadn't turned the paper in.

On Sunday night at eleven o'clock, as he sat at the kitchen table trying to write his final three pages, Dre's car had pulled up into the alley with a shattered passenger-side window. Dre had gotten into an argument with two men outside a car wash on El Segundo Boulevard, and Malik had spent four hours helping Dre pull broken tempered glass out of the upholstery with a shop vacuum in an abandoned garage on 108th Street, terrified that the LAPD would trace the license plate before sunrise.

By the time Malik got home at four in the morning, his hands were trembling, his eyes were bloodshot, and the Canvas portal had closed.

At the front of the classroom, Dr. Harris was returning the graded essays. He walked between the rows with a thick stack of papers, handing them back face-down with brief, pointed comments.

"Excellent transition in paragraph four, Miss Johnson."

"Your evidence lacks specificity, Mr. Davis. See me during office hours."

When Dr. Harris reached Malik's desk, he stopped. His hands were empty.

He looked down at Malik through his wire-rimmed spectacles, his expression entirely devoid of anger. There was only a profound, heavy disappointment that made Malik want to sink straight through the linoleum floor.

"Stay after class, Mr. Carter," Dr. Harris said softly, and moved to the next desk.

For the remaining forty minutes of the lecture, Malik stared at the wooden grain of his desk. He didn't hear a word about rhetorical analysis or Baldwin's syntax. He just watched the second hand on the wall clock crawl through its sixty-second circles, each tick sounding like a hammer striking an anvil.

When the final bell rang, the other students packed their bags, chatter and laughter filling the hallway as they headed toward the cafeteria. Keisha walked past Malik's desk, paused for a fraction of a second, gave him a sad, sympathetic look, and walked out the door.

Malik picked up his backpack, walked down the aisle, and stood before Dr. Harris's podium.

The older man was carefully packing his leather briefcase, snapping the brass buckles shut with deliberate precision. He didn't look up immediately.

"I don't have the paper, Dr. Harris," Malik said, his voice flat with defeat.

Dr. Harris sat down in his swivel chair, took off his spectacles, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know you don't, Malik. The portal informs me of every missing file with absolute digital certainty."

"I had some... stuff come up at home," Malik said, the excuse sounding pathetic even to his own ears. "My family had an emergency."

Dr. Harris looked up. His dark eyes were sharp, piercing through the lie like a spotlight through fog.

"Do you know what the mortality rate was for young men in my neighborhood in North Philadelphia in 1974, Malik?"

Malik blinked. "No, sir."

"Neither did we," Dr. Harris said, leaning back in his chair. "We didn't have statistics back then. We just had empty desks in homeroom. I had a brother named Charles. Charles was faster than me, handsomer than me, and could take apart an automobile engine and put it back together in three hours flat. Charles had a gift."

The professor paused, looking out the rain-streaked window toward Grand Avenue.

"When Charles was twenty, a man on our block offered him two hundred dollars a week to sit in the passenger seat of an Oldsmobile and hold a paper bag while they made rounds through South Philly. Charles told my mother the exact same thing you are telling yourself right now: *I'm just helping out. It's temporary. I'm taking care of the house.*"

"What happened to him?" Malik asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Charles was shot twice in the spine in an alley behind a butcher shop when he was twenty-two," Dr. Harris said, his voice dropping into a flat, factual monotone that hit Malik like an icy wave. "He spent the next thirty-four years in a motorized wheelchair in a state-run facility in Norristown before he died of pneumonia. The man who owned the Oldsmobile did four years in state prison, got out, and opened a dry cleaners in Atlantic City. He didn't attend Charles's funeral. He didn't even send a card."

Dr. Harris stood up, walked around the desk, and stood directly in front of Malik.

"Street money has an expiration date, Malik," the professor said, pointing a finger at Malik's chest. "And the tragedy is not that the money runs out. The tragedy is that it tricks you into

believing your mind is worth nothing. It convinces you that your only value in this city is your willingness to absorb a bullet for somebody else's profit."

Dr. Harris reached into his briefcase, pulled out a clean, printed copy of the essay assignment, and laid it on the podium.

"I am giving you until eight o'clock tomorrow morning," Dr. Harris said. "You will write this paper. You will sit in the computer lab on the second floor of the library until every paragraph meets my standards. If it is not in my physical hands by eight-zero-zero, you will fail this course, and you will lose your financial aid eligibility."

Malik looked down at the paper. "Why you giving me a second chance, Dr. Harris?"

"Because," Dr. Harris said, picking up his briefcase and heading toward the door, "I cannot save my brother Charles. But I can demand that you decide whether you want to be a thinker or a casualty. The choice, as always, is entirely yours."

10. THE WISDOM OF BIG TONE

That afternoon, Malik didn't take the train straight home.

He got off at 103rd Street and walked south along Grape Street, past the low brick buildings of Jordan Downs, until he reached a small, single-story house on 105th Street with a dusty dirt front yard enclosed by a rusted chain-link fence.

In the driveway sat a 1978 Chevrolet El Camino propped up on heavy wooden blocks. Beneath the open hood, two massive, dark legs protruded from under the chassis, the sound of a ratchet wrench *clicking* rhythmically against a rusted bolt.

"Tone," Malik called out, standing at the fence gate.

The ratcheting stopped. There was a low, guttural groan, and a massive man slid out from under the car on a worn wooden mechanic's creeper.

Big Tone was fifty-two years old, with skin the color of dark walnut, a thick grey beard, and shoulders that looked like they had been carved out of railroad ties. He had spent fourteen years in Corcoran State Prison during the 1990s before coming home, opening an unlicensed mobile mechanic service in his front yard, and becoming the unofficial elder statesman of 105th Street. Tone was the only man on the block whom neither the police nor the young corner boys ever messed with.

Tone wiped his greasy hands on an old red shop rag and sat up on the edge of the creeper, his bad right knee popping with a loud *crack*.

"Mook," Tone grunted, his voice sounding like gravel churning in a cement mixer. "What you doing walking around looking like you just got sentenced?"

Malik pushed the gate open, walked over to an overturned plastic milk crate near the porch, and sat down. He put his elbows on his knees and stared down at the dirt.

"Tone, how did you know when it was over?" Malik asked quietly.

Tone tossed the shop rag onto the hood of the El Camino, walked over to a faded green porch glider, and lowered his massive frame into it with a sigh that shook the metal frame. He reached into a cooler beside the chair, pulled out a cold can of ginger ale, popped the tab, and took a long swallow.

"When what was over, boy?"

"The street," Malik said. "The fast money. Running around thinking you got everything figured out."

Tone looked at Malik for a long time. The late-afternoon sun hit the older man's face, highlighting the jagged, three-inch scar running from behind his left ear down into his collar—a souvenir from a prison yard riot twenty years ago.

"You don't never know when it's over, Mook," Tone said slowly. "That's the trick of it. The street don't come up to you and tap you on the shoulder and say, '*Hey, Big Tone, your time is up, go get a job at the post office.*' The street just keeps taking a little piece of you every single day until there ain't nothing left to take."

Tone pointed with his ginger ale can toward the El Camino.

"You see that engine block?" Tone asked. "That's a 350 small block. I built that from scrap parts I pulled out of the junk yard on Alameda. Took me six months. But when I was your age, I thought building something was for fools. I thought why spend six months building an engine when I can go down to Long Beach and take a car in six minutes?"

He leaned forward, his heavy eyes locking onto Malik's face.

"I had three hundred thousand dollars in cash buried in five-gallon paint buckets under my mama's garage in 1994, Malik. Three hundred thousand. You know what I bought with it?"

"What?"

"Fourteen years of grey walls, cold oatmeal, and watching my mama get old through a sheet of scratched plexiglass," Tone said, his voice dropping into a harsh, unsparing whisper. "When she died in '98, the state wouldn't even let me come to the church. They let me stand in the cemetery in handcuffs for ten minutes after everybody else left while two guards with shotguns watched me throw a dirt clod on her box."

Tone took another sip of his ginger ale, his jaw set hard.

"Dre thinks he's slick," Tone continued, nodding toward 103rd Street. "Dre thinks because he got a little Honda and two thousand dollars in his sock that he beat the system. But Dre is already in a cell, Mook. He just don't have the bars on the window yet. And if you keep sitting in that passenger seat, you gonna be in the bunk right above him."

Malik looked down at his scuffed sneakers. "My mama needs help, Tone. Jamal needs things."

"Your mama needs you alive!" Tone snapped, slamming the can onto the armrest so hard the soda sloshed over the rim. "Renee Carter didn't sweat through twenty years of night shifts so her boy could end up on a mural on the side of the laundromat! You got a brain, Malik! I seen you reading them big books on the porch when you was ten years old! Don't you dare sit here in my yard and tell me that riding shotgun for a two-bit dope runner is the best you can do!"

Tone stood up, his heavy knees groaning, and walked back over to the El Camino. He picked up his ratchet wrench and pointed it straight at Malik's face.

“Go home, boy,” Tone said, his tone softening just enough to reveal the deep, grandfatherly love beneath the gravel. “Go home, write that paper for that school downtown, and tell Dre to find his own driver. And if he got a problem with that, tell him to come talk to Big Tone on 105th.”

11. THE OPERATION ON ROSECRANS

Malik didn't tell Dre no.

That was the fatal error that nearly cost him his life.

Instead of going home to write the paper, Malik allowed himself to believe one final lie: *Just one more time. One more run to get five hundred dollars, pay the electric bill, buy Jamal's winter jacket, and then I'm done forever.*

At 11:30 PM on Friday night, the slate-grey Honda Civic sat parked in the pitch-black alley behind an abandoned commercial warehouse off Rosecrans Avenue, just west of the 710 freeway.

The night was freezing, the marine layer rolling in heavy and wet, coating the windshield in a greasy sheen of moisture.

Malik sat in the passenger seat, his teeth chattering from a combination of cold and sheer, gut-wrenching terror. He wore a black ski mask rolled up into a beanie on top of his head, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his hoodie to hide their violent trembling.

Beside him, Dre sat with his headlights off, the engine idling in absolute silence. Dre's face was pale, his eyes darting incessantly between the side mirrors and the rear window.

"Why we waiting here, Dre?" Malik whispered, his breath pluming white in the car's interior. "You said this was just a pick-up."

"Shut up, Mook," Dre hissed, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "Hector said the delivery truck was coming off the freeway at eleven-fifteen. They late."

"Dre, let's go," Malik pleaded, a cold, heavy premonition settling into his chest like lead. "This don't feel right. There ain't no lights on in that building. There ain't no cars."

"I'm waiting on three thousand dollars, Malik!" Dre snapped, turning his head, his eyes wild with a frantic, desperate greed. "You know who I owe? I owe Hector four racks from that bad batch last month! If I don't hand him this package tonight, he coming to my auntie's house on 102nd! You want that? You want them rolling up on our block?"

Before Malik could answer, a set of high-beam headlights swung around the corner of the alley, blinding them in a sudden, brutal glare of white light.

A dark, lifted Ford F-250 truck roared down the narrow alleyway, stopping nose-to-nose with the Honda, its massive chrome bumper blocking their only exit.

The driver's door of the truck flew open.

Two men in dark tactical jackets stepped out into the glare of the headlights. Neither of them had an envelope. Neither of them had boxes.

One of them was holding a short-barreled shotgun at his hip.

"Oh, shit," Dre whispered, his voice cracking into a high, childish squeak. "Oh, God, no."

"Dre, back up!" Malik screamed, throwing his hands against the dashboard. "Back up! Back up!"

BOOM.

The first shotgun blast shattered the Honda's front windshield, spraying safety glass into the cabin like a hail of frozen diamonds. A chunk of lead tore through the dashboard three inches from Malik's left knee, filling the car with the choking, sulfuric stench of burnt gunpowder and shredded plastic.

Dre slammed the transmission into reverse, mashing the gas pedal to the floor.

The Honda's rear tires spun wildly on the wet asphalt, smoking and screeching before catching traction. The car rocketed backward down the dark alley, the rear bumper smashing into a row of galvanized metal trash cans with a deafening *CRASH*.

POP. POP. POP.

Three sharp handgun rounds struck the driver's side door panel, the metal groaning as the slugs tore through the outer sheet metal.

Dre was screaming incoherently, tears streaming down his face as he spun the steering wheel with one hand, ducking his head below the dashboard.

Malik threw himself onto the floorboard, curling into a tight ball with his hands clasped over the back of his neck. His face was pressed against the rubber floor mat, smelling the dirt, the stale french fries, and the sharp, alkaline copper of his own absolute terror.

Please God, Malik prayed silently, his whole body shaking so violently his teeth clicked together. Please God, let me see my mama again. Let me see Jamal. I'll never touch this again. Please God. Please.

The Honda burst out of the alley onto Rosecrans Avenue, its rear tires jumping the concrete curb with a bone-jarring *SLAM* that threw Malik against the underside of the glove box.

Dre slammed the shifter into drive, tires howling as the car fishtailed across four lanes of empty pavement, accelerating west toward the distant, glowing orange lights of the 110 freeway.

Behind them, the high beams of the truck did not follow.

For five miles, neither of them spoke. The wind roared through the shattered windshield, freezing their faces, blowing glass dust through the dark cabin like snow.

Dre was weeping openly, his chest heaving, his left hand clutching his shoulder where a stray piece of glass had sliced through his leather jacket.

Malik slowly raised his head from the floorboard. He looked at the dashboard—the gaping, jagged hole where the shotgun slug had ripped through the plastic, inches from where his leg had been resting.

He looked at Dre.

Dre wasn't a kingpin. Dre wasn't a boss. Dre was a terrified nineteen-year-old boy with snot running down his upper lip, driving a wrecked Honda through the dark streets of South LA, waiting for a grave that was already dug for him.

“Take me home, Dre,” Malik said. His voice was completely flat, empty of anger, empty of fear, empty of everything except a cold, terrifying clarity.

“Mook, we gotta stash the car—” Dre sobbed.

“Take me home,” Malik repeated, looking straight through the broken windshield into the night. “Right now.”

12. THE CANDLES ON CENTRAL

The killing happened twelve hours later, on Saturday afternoon at 3:15 PM.

Malik was standing in the living room of their apartment, ironing a white dress shirt on the portable board, when he heard the sirens.

It wasn't the usual single, distant siren that drifted over from Wilmington Avenue. It was five, six, seven distinct sirens, their high-low European wails and deep air-horn blasts converging on Central Avenue like a swarm of angry hornets.

Then came the helicopter. The LAPD Air Support chopper dropped low over Grape Street, its searchlight beam visible even in the bright afternoon sun, its loudspeaker barking garbled, metallic instructions to the units on the ground.

Malik set the iron upright, unplugged the cord, and walked to the front window.

Down on the street, people were running. Mrs. Jackson was on her porch in her slippers, shouting across the driveway to Uncle Ray. Young boys on bicycles were pedaling furiously toward 104th, their heads turned back over their shoulders.

Malik walked out onto the concrete landing.

"What happened, Ray?" Malik called down over the railing.

Uncle Ray was standing by his pickup truck, his face grey, his heavy hands trembling as he gripped the side of the truck bed. He looked up at Malik, his eyes hollow.

"It's Trev," Ray said, his voice barely carrying over the helicopter blades. "And Dre."

Malik's heart stopped.

He didn't take the stairs. He jumped the last four steps to the dirt, hitting the ground running. He ran down 102nd Street, his unbuttoned shirt flying behind him in the hot wind, his sneakers pounding the cracked asphalt.

When he turned the corner onto Central Avenue near 104th, the street was already blocked by yellow police tape.

Four LAPD cruisers were parked diagonally across the lanes, their light bars flashing red and blue against the storefronts. A crowd of nearly fifty neighborhood residents stood behind the tape, women crying, men standing in grim, stony silence, their arms crossed over their chests.

In the middle of the parking lot outside the corner fish market sat a faded blue Buick Regal, its driver's side door riddled with bullet holes.

On the pavement beside the open door lay a white sheet. Beneath the sheet, the unmistakable outline of a small human body lay flat against the asphalt. A pair of brand-new, white-and-navy Retro 4 sneakers protruded from the bottom edge of the cloth.

Trev. Jamal's fourteen-year-old classmate from Markham Middle School.

Thirty feet away, sitting on the curb with his hands cuffed tightly behind his back, was Dre.

Dre was alive, but his face was unrecognizable. He had a deep, bloody gash across his forehead, his white shirt was soaked in crimson, and he was rocking back and forth on the concrete, staring at the white sheet with eyes that were completely dead to the world.

Two LAPD detectives in plainclothes and tactical vests were standing over Dre, taking photographs of the car, marking spent nine-millimeter shell casings with small yellow plastic cones.

Malik pushed his way to the front of the crowd, his hands gripping the yellow tape.

"Dre!" Malik screamed.

Dre slowly raised his head. His eyes drifted across the crowd of faces until they locked onto Malik.

There was no swagger left in Dre's face. No easy smile. No gold chain. There was only a bottomless, terrifying emptiness—the look of a man who had finally realized that the bill he had been running from had arrived, and someone else had paid it with their life.

A heavy hand grabbed Malik's shoulder and pulled him back from the tape.

Malik turned. Tasha was standing behind him, her face streaked with tears, her fingers digging into his arm with bruising force.

"Look at it, Malik," Tasha whispered, her voice shaking with rage and grief. "Look at what you wanted to be part of! Look at him!"

Malik couldn't speak. He looked from Dre sitting in handcuffs on the curb to the white sheet covering fourteen-year-old Trev, then down at his own trembling hands.

That could have been Jamal. That could have been him.

By nightfall, the corner of 104th and Central had become a shrine.

Fifty glass prayer candles with images of the Virgin Mary and the Sacred Heart flickered on the sidewalk, their small flames dancing in the evening breeze. Flowers, handwritten notes on notebook paper, and half-empty bottles of Hennessy were arranged around a large poster board with Trev's middle-school picture taped to the center: *REST IN HEAVEN, LITTLE TREV. 2010-2024.*

Jamal stood at the edge of the candlelight, holding his mother's hand. The twelve-year-old boy was weeping silently, his body shaking, his eyes fixed on the wax melting onto the asphalt where his friend had died.

Renee had her arm wrapped tightly around Jamal's shoulders, her face set in a hard, grim mask of grief that Malik knew would never fully leave her eyes.

Malik stood ten feet back in the shadows, his hands shoved deep into his empty pockets.

Above them, the Watts Towers rose against the dark night sky, their open-work spires catching the distant amber glow of the streetlamps—monuments built out of broken glass and discarded steel, standing tall in a neighborhood that was constantly being asked to bury its children.

13. THE REBUILDING OF TRUST

On Monday morning, the sanctuary of Greater New Bethel Baptist Church was cold and empty.

The church was an old, wood-frame building on 103rd Street with peeling white paint, stained-glass windows depicting a dark-skinned Christ, and rows of worn oak pews that had held three generations of Watts families through funerals, weddings, and Sunday morning revivals.

Malik sat in the third row from the back, his hands clasped between his knees.

Beside him sat Renee. She had taken a four-hour unpaid leave from her shift at the convalescent home, her nursing scrubs clean and starched, her bible resting in her lap.

At the front of the altar stood Dr. Harris.

The professor had taken the A Line down from Trade-Tech at Renee's request, wearing a dark wool overcoat and holding his leather briefcase in both hands. Beside him stood Pastor Avery, an elderly, silver-haired man who had baptized Malik when he was six years old.

The room smelled of lemon furniture polish, old hymnals, and the damp chill of the morning fog.

"I received a visit from two detectives from the Southeast Division on Saturday night, Mr. Carter," Dr. Harris said, his voice echoing softly off the wooden ceiling beams. "They were asking about students who might have been associated with DeAndre Washington."

Malik closed his eyes. A cold wave of nausea washed over him.

"Did you tell them about me?" Malik whispered.

"I told them," Dr. Harris said, stepping down from the altar into the center aisle, "that Malik Carter is a student in my English composition course who has demonstrated exceptional analytical capability, and that on Friday night at midnight, he was submitting an essay on James Baldwin to my academic portal."

Malik opened his eyes, his head snapping up.

Dr. Harris reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of white paper.

"Your essay was received at eleven-fifty-eight PM, Malik," Dr. Harris said, looking at him with an expression that was both severely demanding and profoundly merciful. "It was raw. It was disorganized in the fourth section. But the argument regarding the necessity of moral clarity in the face of economic desperation was the most compelling piece of writing I have received from an undergraduate in five years."

He walked down the aisle and handed the paper to Renee.

Across the top of the title page, written in sharp red ink, was a single letter: **A-**.

Beneath the grade, Dr. Harris had written two sentences:

You have named your condition with precision. Now you must decide if you have the discipline to survive it.

Renee looked down at the red letter. Her hands began to tremble. A single tear rolled down her cheek, landing on the paper with a soft, dark smudge.

She turned to Malik, her eyes full of a love that was heavier than any punishment she could have ever devised.

"You almost died Friday night, didn't you?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Malik looked at his mother. He didn't look down at the floor. He didn't make an excuse. For the first time in his nineteen years, he looked directly into the eyes of the woman who had sacrificed her youth to keep him breathing.

"Yes, Ma," Malik choked out, the tears finally breaking through his defenses, hot and violent.

"Yes, ma'am. I almost didn't come home."

Renee reached out, grabbed the lapels of his jacket, and pulled him down into her chest. She held him with a crushing, desperate strength, rocking him back and forth on the hard oak pew as Malik wept like a child in the quiet sanctuary.

"No more, Malik," she whispered into his hair, her own voice breaking. "No more fast money. No more cars. No more lies. If we have to eat dry toast and drink water for the next four years, we do it together. But you are going to finish that school."

"I'm gonna finish, Ma," Malik sobbed, clutching the fabric of her scrub top. "I promise you. I'm gonna finish."

Dr. Harris stood in the aisle, watching them with quiet dignity. He reached into his briefcase, pulled out an official Los Angeles Trade-Technical College Work-Study Application, and laid it on the pew beside Renee's bible.

"The college library has an opening for a student research assistant starting next Monday," Dr. Harris said. "Fifteen hours a week at fifteen dollars and fifty cents an hour. It is not three thousand dollars in an envelope, Malik. But it is clean, it is honest, and the state of California will never send two detectives to your mother's door to ask where it came from."

14. THE VISITING ROOM AT MEN'S CENTRAL

Dre was held at the Men's Central Jail on Bauchet Street, just east of Chinatown and the downtown rail yards.

Two weeks after the shooting on Central Avenue, Malik took the A Line north to 7th Street/Metro Center, transferred to the B Line to Union Station, and walked the three blocks through the grey, industrial perimeter of the jail complex.

The visiting facility was a brutalist concrete fortress surrounded by twelve-foot chain-link fences topped with coils of razor wire. The air smelled of vehicle exhaust, industrial laundry chemicals, and the stale, damp despair of three thousand caged men.

Malik sat at Visitor Station 14 in the second-floor visiting booth.

The partition between them was a two-inch-thick sheet of scratched, yellowing polycarbonate, framed in heavy steel rivets. On his side hung a black plastic telephone receiver, its armored metal cord bolted to the stainless steel counter.

A heavy steel door buzzed open on the inmate side.

Dre walked in, flanked by a sheriff's deputy. He was wearing an oversized blue jail-issue jumpsuit with *LA COUNTY JAIL* stenciled in faded black ink across the back. His hair had been shaved down to the scalp, his gold chain was gone, and the gash on his forehead had healed into a jagged, angry purple line.

He looked ten years older. The skin over his cheekbones was tight, his shoulders slumped with an exhaustion that went straight down to his bones.

Dre sat down on the metal stool, picked up his receiver, and held it to his ear.

Malik picked up his receiver.

For nearly thirty seconds, neither of them said a word. The only sound was the low, electric hum of the intercom wire and the distant, metallic slamming of cell doors echoing through the vents.

"You look like shit, Mook," Dre said finally, his voice thin and raspy through the plastic earpiece. A faint, sad imitation of his old smile touched the corners of his mouth, then disappeared.

"You don't look too good yourself, Dre," Malik said quietly.

Dre looked down at his cuffed wrists resting on the steel counter. "Hector's people was waiting for us that night on Rosecrans. It was a setup from the jump. They wanted the car, and they wanted the package."

"Why was Trev in that Buick on Saturday, Dre?" Malik asked, the question hanging between them like a blade.

Dre closed his eyes. His breath caught in his throat.

"He wanted some shoes, Malik," Dre whispered, his voice cracking with a sudden, devastating shame. "The boy wanted two hundred dollars for some Retro 4s so he could look like us on 104th. I told him to sit in the front seat while I ran inside to get the money from Hector's boy. They drove by in a Regal... they wasn't even aiming for him. They was aiming for me."

Dre pressed his forehead against the cold polycarbonate partition, a single sob racking his frame.

"I killed that boy, Mook. I killed him just as sure as if I pulled the trigger myself."

Malik looked through the scratched glass at his childhood friend. He remembered Dre at eight years old, laughing on the porch of the house on 102nd, sharing freeze pops in the summer heat, throwing gravel at the freight trains on Grape Street.

That boy was gone. In his place was an inmate facing fifteen years to life for second-degree murder and conspiracy.

"What the lawyer say?" Malik asked softly.

"Public defender says if I take the plea, they give me twelve years at Wasco or Ironwood," Dre said, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jumpsuit. "Twelve years, Malik. I'm gonna be thirty-two years old when I see 103rd Street again."

He looked up, his eyes locking onto Malik's with a raw, desperate intensity.

"You still going to that school downtown?" Dre asked.

"Yeah," Malik said. "I'm working in the library. Taking fifteen units."

Dre nodded slowly, his chin trembling. "Good. Don't you ever come back out here, Mook. Don't you ever look at a dollar from this block again. You get your paper. You take Renee and Jamal, and you buy a house somewhere with trees and grass that don't smell like diesel."

The deputy behind Dre tapped his wristwatch. "Time's up, Washington."

Dre stood up from the stool. He pressed his open palm against the scratched plastic partition.

Malik stood up, raised his own hand, and pressed his palm flat against the other side of the glass, his fingers aligning with Dre's through two inches of bulletproof polymer.

"I love you, bro," Dre whispered into the receiver.

"I love you too, Dre," Malik said.

Dre hung the receiver up on its hook, turned around, and walked through the heavy steel door into the grey belly of the jail.

Malik stood alone in the visiting booth until the line went dead, the flat mechanical hum of the dial tone buzzing in his ear like a final, unanswerable period at the end of a sentence.

15. THE CLEAN WAGE AND UNCLE RAY

Winter in Watts was not cold by eastern standards, but the December rain came down in long, grey sheets that turned the vacant dirt lots along Alameda into thick mud and filled the gutters with sodden cardboard and fallen palm fronds.

On a Friday afternoon two weeks before final exams, Malik walked through the front door of the apartment carrying two heavy grocery bags from the Food 4 Less on Imperial Highway.

The kitchen smelled of clean pine cleaner and warm cornbread.

Malik set the bags on the yellow laminate table, unpacking fresh gallon jugs of whole milk, four pounds of chicken thighs, fresh broccoli, oranges, and two boxes of whole-grain cereal for Jamal.

From his pocket, he pulled a thin, blue paper voucher: his bi-weekly direct-deposit stub from the Los Angeles Community College District.

EMPLOYEE: CARTER, MALIK J.

POSITION: STUDENT LIBRARY ASST I

NET PAY: \ \$412.38

It wasn't two thousand dollars in a brown paper bag. It wouldn't buy a pair of designer sunglasses or a gold rope chain.

But when Malik laid the blue slip on the table beside the salt shaker, his hands didn't shake. His pulse was steady.

Renee walked in from the hallway, wiping her hands on a dry towel. She looked at the groceries, then picked up the pay stub.

She looked at the official state seal printed in the corner, the line showing deductions for state disability and federal income tax, and Malik's name printed in clear, machine-stamped block letters.

She looked up at Malik, her eyes bright with a quiet, triumphant pride.

"This is clean money," she said softly.

"Clean money, Ma," Malik smiled. "Paid for the milk, paid for Jamal's asthma medicine, and I got sixty dollars left over to put into the savings account at the credit union on Compton."

That Saturday morning, Malik went down to Carson to help Uncle Ray.

They spent six hours in the cold drizzle, clearing out twenty years of overgrown bougainvillea, broken concrete pavers, and rusted engine parts from the backyard of a retired postal worker's home. Malik's hands were blistered through his leather work gloves, his lower back aching with a deep, muscular burn from hauling wheelbarrows of wet dirt up a steep wooden ramp into the bed of Ray's pickup truck.

At four o'clock, they sat on the lowered tailgate of the truck, drinking hot coffee from a thermos and eating ham sandwiches Renee had packed in foil.

Ray took off his greasy baseball cap and ran a calloused hand through his thick grey hair. He looked at Malik's hands—the dirt ground into the cuticles, the raw skin on his knuckles.

"Hurts, don't it?" Ray asked with a low chuckle.

"Hurts like hell, Uncle Ray," Malik admitted, rubbing his palms together.

Ray took a swallow of his coffee, looking out over the quiet residential street in Carson—a neighborhood of neat, single-story stucco homes with manicured lawns, two-car garages, and American flags hanging from the porch beams.

"My daddy brought us out here from Shreveport in 1965, Malik," Ray said, his voice deep and deliberate. "Right after the riots. The whole city was on fire. People said Watts was finished. Said there wasn't gonna be nothing left but ashes and police stations."

Ray pointed with his sandwich toward the clean street.

"My daddy worked thirty-two years for the Department of Water and Power. Digging ditches in the street with a pneumatic jackhammer in ninety-degree heat. His knees was ruined by the time he was forty-five. But he bought his house on 108th Street. He paid off the thirty-year mortgage with a union check every single month. And when he died, nobody could take that roof from over his children's heads."

Ray reached out and tapped Malik's knee with a heavy, affectionate fist.

"Building something real is slow, nephew. It's ugly. It makes your back ache, and it don't give you no shiny chains to show off on the corner on Friday night. But when you build it with honest sweat, nobody can take it from you with a search warrant. You remember that when you sitting in that classroom downtown?"

"I will, Uncle Ray," Malik said. "I promise."

16. THE RESUME HUSTLE

By the spring of his second year at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, Malik had discovered a different kind of hustle.

It started in the computer lab on the second floor of the campus library.

A classmate named Marcus—a twenty-two-year-old former gang member trying to get into the college’s certified welding program—was staring at a blank Microsoft Word document, his forehead resting on the edge of the keyboard in total frustration.

“They want a professional summary, Mook,” Marcus muttered. “What the hell am I supposed to write? ‘*Good at standing on the corner of 105th and not getting shot*’?”

Malik sat down at the adjacent computer. “What did you do when you was working at that scrap metal yard on Alameda last year?”

“Just moved steel,” Marcus said. “Loaded flatbeds with the forklift.”

Malik pulled the keyboard toward him. His fingers moved across the keys with rapid, practiced efficiency:

Demonstrated expertise in heavy industrial material handling, inventory logistics, and OSHA-compliant equipment operation. Certified forklift operator with a two-year record of zero workplace incidents.

Marcus stared at the glowing screen, his mouth open. “Damn, bro. That make me sound like I run the whole damn yard.”

“You did run it,” Malik said, looking at him. “You just didn’t know how to name it.”

Word spread quickly.

Within two months, Malik had set up an informal resume and application clinic on Saturday mornings in the basement annex of Greater New Bethel Baptist Church.

He brought his refurbished Dell laptop—purchased with funds from his second academic scholarship—a portable Canon printer, and two reams of heavy, off-white linen paper.

For ten dollars—or for a plate of homemade peach cobbler, or an hour of car repair from Big Tone—Malik helped young men from Jordan Downs translate their informal street labor into professional qualifications:

The boy who had spent three years managing cash flow for an unlicensed dice game became an *Experienced Cash Handling and Risk Assessment Specialist*.

The young woman who had coordinated childcare for four families in her apartment complex while working night shifts became an *Early Childhood Operations and Logistics Coordinator*.

One Saturday morning, Pastor Avery walked into the basement annex, watching as six young men in clean, pressed shirts sat at folding tables, practicing mock job interviews with Malik using lists of common behavioral questions provided by Dr. Harris.

The pastor stood in the doorway for a long time, his hands clasped behind his back, a broad smile spreading across his weathered face.

“You doing the Lord’s work down here, Malik,” Pastor Avery said, stepping up to the table and laying a heavy hand on Malik’s shoulder.

“Just helping people name their work, Pastor,” Malik smiled, handing a freshly printed, linen-paper resume to an eighteen-year-old boy named Darrell who was applying for an apprenticeship with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works.

“That’s what ministry is, son,” the old pastor said softly. “Giving people back their names so the world can't steal their future.”

17. THE BREAD OF TOMORROW

Three years later, the late-afternoon sun was setting behind the spires of the Watts Towers, casting long, golden shadows across 103rd Street.

Outside the single-story stucco house on 102nd Street that Malik and Renee had purchased with a joint FHA loan two years earlier, a 2018 Toyota Camry sat parked in the clean concrete driveway.

The yard was green, enclosed by a new, white wooden fence Uncle Ray had built with his own hands.

Malik stood on the front porch, wearing a crisp charcoal suit, a white dress shirt, and a silk burgundy tie. He was twenty-three years old now, his shoulders broader, his eyes calm, steady, and clear. In his leather briefcase rested his newly minted Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from California State University, Dominguez Hills, along with an offer letter for an associate project manager position with a commercial construction firm in downtown Los Angeles.

Beside him on the porch stood Jamal.

Jamal was sixteen now, nearly as tall as Malik, wearing a clean blue polo shirt and khaki slacks. He was holding a cardboard box filled with textbooks, notebooks, and a new scientific calculator, ready for his first day of summer enrichment classes at UCLA's High School Scholars Program.

Down at the curb, the dark slate-grey Honda Civic was gone.

In its place, an A Line train slid smoothly along the concrete overpass at 103rd Street, its metallic hum sounding like the steady, unstoppable pulse of a city moving forward.

Jamal looked up at his older brother, his eyes full of that same deep admiration he had held as a twelve-year-old boy, but without the fear, without the desperation.

"Mook," Jamal asked, setting the box onto the porch railing. "Why did you stop? Back when we was on Grape Street. Why didn't you just keep riding with Dre?"

Malik looked down the street toward Central Avenue—past the church, past the library, past the corner where the candles had long since melted into the cracked asphalt.

"Because," Malik said, placing his hand firmly on his brother's shoulder, "money is what you spend today, Jamal. Money is what you use to buy shoes you outgrow in six months, or to pay for a lawyer when the street catches up to you."

He pointed toward the university textbooks in Jamal's box, then toward the solid roof above their heads that had been paid for with honest, documented labor.

“Bread is what you build so tomorrow can eat,” Malik said softly. “Bread is what keeps your family from ever having to beg for permission to live in their own city.”

The front screen door opened with a gentle *creak*.

Renee stepped out onto the porch, wearing a beautiful floral dress, holding a plate of warm buttermilk biscuits wrapped in a clean linen cloth. She looked at her two sons standing tall in the golden California light, her face radiant with a joy that had been paid for in faith, sweat, and unyielding discipline.

“Come inside, boys,” she called with a smile that chased every shadow from the yard.

“Breakfast is on the table.”

Malik looked at his brother, nodded toward the open door, and turned toward the warm, bright light of the kitchen.

He was home.