

Before the Brass Went Quiet

A Second Line for the Living prequel

Some sentences begin long before the judge says a word.

At nineteen, Amos “Deuce” Toussaint can make a sousaphone carry three blocks down Josephine Street. He can fix a stalled Buick with borrowed tools, talk his way into a paid second-line, and drive Marielle “Mars” Prejean around the river for an hour because neither of them wants to go home yet.

What he cannot do is say what he wants before someone else says it first.

Deuce’s older brother, Cutter, has always been the one who moves fast: faster money, faster promises, faster exits whenever the consequences arrive. When Cutter gets tangled in a robbery tied to a Crescent Line contractor, he comes to Deuce with a story that is almost believable and a favor that sounds temporary.

One night, one car, one bag placed in the wrong hands.

Deuce knows enough to walk away. But love for a brother is not the same as trust, and fear does not always announce itself as fear. As the city closes in—through police reports, unpaid bills, a missing witness, and the silence of people who need Cutter’s money—Deuce has to decide whether protecting his family means taking the fall or finally telling the truth that could tear them apart.

Before the Brass Went Quiet is a story of brotherhood, first love, and the moment a young man mistakes sacrifice for loyalty.

Preview

The first time Cutter asks me to lie for him, he does it while I am holding a sousaphone.

That matters.

Not morally. Not in the way the court will later care about. But the bell is pressed against my left shoulder, cool brass digging through my Saints shirt, and my mouthpiece is still wet from the set we just played for Miss Corinne’s repast. I am standing behind St. Augustine’s with twelve dollars in tips folded into my pocket and the late-afternoon sun lowering gold through the live oaks.

For three whole minutes, I have been happy.

Then Cutter pulls his Tahoe into the alley.

It is not his Tahoe yet. At nineteen, Cutter drives a black Chevrolet with one rim that does not match the others and a crack across the windshield shaped like a lightning bolt. He calls it temporary. Cutter calls everything temporary when it is already becoming permanent.

He gets out smiling.

That is the first bad sign.

My brother smiles when he has good news, sure. Everybody does. But Cutter also smiles when he is about to ask you for something you will not know how to refuse until it is too late.

“You sounded good,” he says.

“You didn’t come inside.”

“I was parked around back.”

“That is not inside.”

He spreads his hands. “I got here for the last one.”

“The last one was ‘Just a Closer Walk.’ You don’t know that song.”

“I know the title.”

“That is not the same thing.”

He laughs, and I hate that I laugh too. That is the old machinery between us. Cutter reaches, I meet him halfway. He is three years older than me, which at nineteen still means he knows the route and I am supposed to ride quiet.

Behind us, Uncle Rooster is packing the drum kit into his van. The trumpet players are arguing about whether the Saints have a quarterback this year. Somebody has opened the church kitchen window, and the smell of red beans rolls out into the alley. The ordinary world is right there. I remember that later. I remember how close I was to ordinary.

Cutter nods toward the horn.

“You done?”

“Almost.”

“Put it in the van. I need you to ride with me real quick.”

I look at him. “For what?”

“Nothing.”

Nothing is another Cutter word. It means the opposite of what it says.

“I got rehearsal tonight.”

“You got time.”

“I got to bring the horn home, shower, get to Canal by seven.”

His smile changes shape. Smaller now. Less like a joke.

“Mars working?”

The question catches me wrong because he says her name too easily.

“Why?”

“Just asking.”

“You don’t ask about Mars.”

Cutter looks past me toward the street. A motorcycle goes by loud enough to shake the chain-link fence. He waits until it is gone.

“Man, I need a favor.”

There it is.

I set the sousaphone case down beside the church wall. I do not open it. I do not put it away. I keep one hand on the handle like I might need to leave fast, though I have never left Cutter fast in my life.

“What kind?”

“Just a ride.”

“You got a car.”

“Not in that car.”

My stomach goes tight.

Cutter sees it happen. He has always been able to read me too well. That is the part nobody talks about when they say family. They make it sound like love alone. They do not tell you love is also somebody knowing exactly where your fear lives and knocking on its door.

“It is not like that,” he says.

“What is it like?”

He looks tired suddenly. Truly tired. Not performing it. Sweat has darkened the collar of his white T-shirt, and there is a small cut under his jaw he has shaved around twice without noticing.

“I got somebody needs a pickup,” he says. “I need you to drive them from one place to another. That is it. No package. No money. You do not have to talk to nobody.”

“Who?”

“A friend.”

“What friend?”

“Deuce.”

When Cutter says my name like that, quiet and flat, I know he has already spent the answer.

I look toward the church door. Uncle Rooster is coming out now, carrying a cymbal stand under one arm. If I called his name, he would come over. He would ask questions. He would make Cutter explain himself in daylight, in front of people who had known us since our knees were dirty all summer.

I do not call him.

That is not because I am brave.

It is because I am nineteen, and my brother is standing in front of me looking like somebody has reached into his chest and grabbed hold, and I still believe being a good brother means helping before you understand the price.

“How long?” I ask.

Cutter lets out a breath.

“Twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes.

That is how every bad thing begins: small enough to fit inside an ordinary promise.

I pick up the horn case.

“Let me put this away first,” I say.

Cutter nods. Too quickly.

And over his shoulder, beyond the alley and the cracked windshield and the yellowing church wall, I can see Mars crossing the street toward the bus stop in her work clothes. She has her hair tied up, her bag over one shoulder, and when she sees me, she lifts her hand.

I almost lift mine back.

Then Cutter says, “Come on, man.”

So I turn away from her.

I do not know yet that it will become the shape of the next eight years: a door open behind me, somebody calling my name, and me walking toward the wrong car because I thought I owed my brother more than I owed myself.