



BROTHER'S KEEPER

by Dave Zeltserman

EQMM readers know Dave Zeltserman best for his award-winning Julius Katz series, and we have more of those stories coming up. But the author also writes horror, and gritty crime tales such as this one. His latest book, *The Tenth Wish*, is a mix of fantasy and adventure.

The two men who walked into the bar worked for Ned Bishop. Both of them wore dark gray suits with jackets that were a half size too big, to hide their shoulder holsters and provide quicker access to the guns they held. Jack Tomlinson thought the one with the blockier head and cropped gray hair was named Marvin, although he wasn't sure whether it was the man's first or last name. The meaner-looking one, with a sharp, angular face and razor-thin lips, was nicknamed Nails, and Jack remembered hearing it was because of the thug's penchant for hammering nails into the hands of deadbeats.

Bishop's hired muscle wasted no time in approaching him. The one nicknamed Nails showed a sneer as he appeared to take in the tawdriness of the bar, first glancing at the middle-aged woman sitting alone with a glass of Chardonnay, then at the raggedy couple in a booth, before fixing glazed eyes on Jack. Jack, for his part, fought back the urge to slam his fist into the bar. Instead he maintained a friendly countenance, as if these men only wanted to order drinks from him. He knew that wasn't why they had come. They were there because of Mitch. The only question was how much money did Mitch owe Bishop this time.

Before Jack could say anything, Marvin put his index finger to his lips and shushed him. In a soft voice that Jack had to strain to hear, that sounded almost like a cat purring, Marvin asked about the bar's layout.

"The kitchen's to the right. Down that hallway is a storage room and an office. No basement."

"Any of the doors locked?"

Jack pulled out a key chain, slid two keys off of it, and handed them to Marvin. Marvin handed these to Nails, who headed to the kitchen. He wasn't there long, and then he was walking around the bar and down the hallway that would take him to the other two rooms. Jack had no idea what was up, but figured it was somehow related to Mitch. He smiled pleasantly at Marvin as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Several minutes later Nails



returned and tossed him the keys. Jack was mildly surprised to see that Bishop's goon had come back empty-handed and hadn't helped himself to a bottle or two of top-flight booze.

Nails told Marvin that there was no one back there. He turned his pale, half-lidded eyes toward Jack. "Not very crowded up front either, is it?" he remarked.

Jack shrugged off the comment. "It's the time of day."

"Nah, I think it's because this place is a dump. Like someone could pick up fleas here if they hung around too long." Nails leered at the woman at the end of the bar. "Or maybe a fleabag."

"The place is clean," Jack said, still maintaining a pleasant demeanor, still playing dumb. "Nothing to worry about, gents. What can I get you two?"

"You gotta admit, Tomlinson, this dive is a big step down from where you used to work," Marvin remarked. "What was the name of that establishment?"

"Stockman's," Jack said, his eyes dulling despite his efforts to show these two nothing.

"That's right," Marvin said. "A classy joint." He showed Jack a pitying smile. "Quite a fall from grace for you, huh?"

"Not really. Just too many bad memories there," Jack said under his breath. When he saw these two walk into the bar, he had promised himself he wasn't going to bail Mitch out this time, but it was a worthless promise, and he had already lost his resolve. It was odd that Nails had searched the bar for Mitch. He'd also caught a certain look in the thug's eyes that told him if he didn't fix this, they were going to do worse than just give Mitch a beating. Even if he hadn't seen that, what choice did he have? He had promised his mom on her deathbed that he'd look out for his younger brother. Besides, Mitch was the only family he had left. But dammit, the timing once again couldn't be worse. He was just beginning to dig himself out from the last mess Mitch had left him, but that's the way things always were with Mitch. Two steps forward, three steps back. He breathed in deeply and let the air out in a pained sigh. "How much does my brother owe?"

"That's cute," Nails said.

"You think he's playing dumb?" Marvin asked his partner.

"I don't know," Nails said, his sneer hardening. "It could be genetic. I'm guessing he's the genuine article, like his dumbass brother."

"Seriously, guys, I don't know what's going on. I haven't heard from Mitch in months."

"You're sure about that?" Nails asked.

Jack gave him a confused look. This game-playing didn't make any sense. He also didn't like the undercurrent of menace that he was picking up from Nails—that this was something more serious than his brother piling up gambling debts.

"Look, fellas, as much as I enjoy your sterling company, how about you just tell me what I need to pay to square things for Mitch this time?"

Nails snorted derisively. A thin smile twisted Marvin's lips as a shadow darkened his eyes. "Seven hundred and twenty," he said.

Now Jack was really confused. Bishop wouldn't send these two thugs to collect a paltry sum like seven hundred and twenty dollars. He'd wait until the vig compounded the amount to at least ten grand before he'd send his muscle to shake Jack down. Maybe this was more serious, like Mitch shooting his mouth off and saying something Bishop took offense at? Could that be what was behind this?

"If you fellas take a seat at the bar, I'll pour you some drinks and get you the money."

Marvin and Nails both sat at the bar. Marvin asked for a Grey Goose vodka martini and Nails told him to leave a shot glass and the bottle of Old Forester. After Jack had them settled, he went to the office and found six hundred and forty-five dollars in the safe. He had enough cash in his wallet to bring the amount up to the required seven twenty. Later, after he dealt with Bishop's thugs, he'd make some calls and try to replenish the money he was borrowing from the bar's safe. If that didn't work, he'd report a robbery at closing time and claim that a couple of punks wearing ski masks forced him at gunpoint to open the safe.

When he got back to the bar, he handed Marvin the seven hundred and twenty dollars. Marvin thumbed through the money and stuck the wad of cash in his pocket.

"Your moron brother owes Bishop seven hundred and twenty thousand dollars," he said.

Jack flinched as if he'd been slapped. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would Bishop extend Mitch that type of credit?"

"These aren't gambling debts." Marvin used his index finger to draw Jack closer, and he lowered his voice so that the woman at the end of the bar and the couple in the booth wouldn't be able to hear him. "Your walking-dead brother ripped Bishop off and left two of his men in the hospital with fractured skulls."

"Mitch wouldn't do something like that."

"The video recording says otherwise."

"Your idiot brother was too dumb to realize there was a surveillance camera," Nails said.

"This has to be a mistake. Someone who looks like Mitch."

Marvin took out his cell phone, fiddled with it, and showed a video of a man with a big goofy grin standing outside a door. It was Mitch. There was no mistaking him. Jack watched as Mitch pulled a ski mask over his head, reached behind him for a big piece of iron, probably a .40-caliber pistol, punched in a code on a keypad, and swung the door open. Marvin turned off the video and stuck the phone back in his pocket. "I got another video of what he did inside the money room, but you don't need to see that."

"Mitch was working as a bagman for Bishop?" Jack asked, incredulous.

"You're joking, right?" Marvin waited for Jack to say something. When he didn't, the hired muscle continued. "We don't know yet how your brother got the location or the security code. He just showed up uninvited, cracked some skulls, and helped himself to Bishop's money."

Nails eyes had taken on the dead, glassy look of a snake's. He said, "Your brother's a dead man. Whether you are also remains to be seen."

Marvin raised a hand to shut up his partner. He said, "You're taking us to

your apartment so you can prove to us you don't have Mitch stashed there."

Jack understood fully what was going on. These two goons were trying to size him up and decide whether he had anything to do with the robbery or knew where Mitch was hiding. They must've had orders from Bishop to search the bar and his apartment, but what they really wanted was to get him alone so they could work him over and be convinced that he didn't know anything.

"I'm not going anywhere with you two gents."

Marvin finished what was left in his martini glass, pushed his barstool back, and got to his feet. Nails also stood, his arms held loosely at his side, his eyes hooded.

"You don't want a scene here, do you?" Marvin asked in the same soft purr he used earlier.

"I wouldn't be opposed to one."

"If you don't want to take us to your apartment," Nails said, "we can drag you to the office back there and have our private talk there."

"You're betting that I don't have a sawed-off shotgun within reach. Or that you can get to your guns before I blow a hole through one of you."

Jack was bluffing, but he was a good poker player. Better than Mitch, anyway. Nails again showed a hard sneer, but Jack caught a glint of indecision in his eyes. The thug had to know that if there was a shotgun behind the bar, he'd be the one taking its blast.

"It looks like we have a standoff," Marvin said. "Any suggestions?"

"I can promise you you're not finding Mitch without my help."

"We'll make you help us, then," Nails said.

"That's not going to happen unless I do so willingly."

"Yeah, well, I think you're bluffing about having a shotgun," Nails offered with disgust.

Marvin ignored his partner. "How much do we have to pay you for your help?" he asked.

"That's not what I want," Jack said. "If I get you back Bishop's money, you let Mitch live."

"That's not an option."

"It's the only way I help. Call your boss. Ask him."

Marvin frowned at the suggestion, but he worked his cell phone out of his pocket and made a call. Jack listened as the hired muscle explained the situation to his boss in a hushed tone. At the conclusion of the call, Marvin's lips pressed into a bewildered smile as if he couldn't quite believe what he had just been told.

"You've got one hour to find your dumbass brother," he told Jack. "He'll still have to pay a price for what he did. Some broken bones, a few busted teeth, but he won't lose any limbs and we'll leave him alive. If you jerk us around with this to buy him time, you'll pay a price also. This acceptable to you?"

Jack shrugged. "I'd rather visit him in the hospital than the morgue."

Marvin checked his watch. "One hour, starting now. And you got to deliver what he stole from Bishop or you'll still be burying what's left of him. Even if it's a dollar short. First, though, you take us to your apartment."

"I don't think so." Jack worked his apartment key off the chain and tossed it to Nails. "Your charming associate can search my place and catch up with us later. If you're only giving me an hour, I'm not wasting a minute of it."

Nails gave Marvin a questioning look. Marvin responded with a nod, and Nails left with the apartment key. Jack waited until the thug was out of sight before using the bar phone to make a call.

“Steve, this is Jack Tomlinson. Yeah, Mitch’s brother. You hear from him the last couple of days? . . . That’s too bad. You know where Carl Weeks likes to hang out? . . . Donleavy’s, huh? Okay, thanks. How about Al McCluskey, any idea where I can find him? . . . Hell, that would be great. I’ll owe you one. If you get ahold of him, send him to Donleavy’s, okay? Tell him I should be there in twenty minutes. That it’s a life-and-death matter. Thanks, man.”

Jack got off the phone and told Marvin they needed to get over to Donleavy’s in Bushwick.

“Who’s Carl Weeks?”

Jack made a shrugging motion mostly with his eyebrows. “A lowlife Mitch has been hanging around with. What I’ve heard is, the two of them have been pulling off short cons at different Brooklyn bars. Small-time stuff. McCluskey is Mitch’s sponsor.”

“Your brother’s in the program?”

“Court ordered. It’s not something he takes seriously. How about giving me back that seven hundred and twenty dollars?”

“I don’t think so. Your price for me calling Bishop. And if you don’t find your idiot brother, you’ll have more serious problems than that money to worry about.”

Jack let it go. Marvin was right. That money was the least of his problems. He was wearing jeans and a white long-sleeved shirt tucked in at the waist. There was no place he could’ve been hiding a gun, and Marvin could see that. When he reached for his weather-beaten leather bomber jacket, Marvin snapped his fingers for Jack to hand it over. After Marvin made sure there were no weapons hidden inside any of the pockets, he handed it back. By this time, the couple in the booth had cleared out, and Jack informed the woman still nursing a glass of Chardonnay that he was closing the bar early due to a family emergency, but if she came back the next day the first two drinks would be on him.

* * *

What Jack had told Marvin about too many bad memories about his former place of work was a lie. The real problem was, he had too many regrets to stay there. He had worked at the upscale Midtown bar for twelve years, and when the owner decided to retire, he worked out a deal with Jack to buy the place. Even with all of Mitch’s screwups and Jack always having to bail him out, he’d been able to save up the down payment for the bar. He’d be carrying a hefty loan, but that would be okay—he and Lila had worked out the numbers, and even with the steep monthly bank payments he would still do well. Not enough for them to move to Manhattan, but still enough for him and Lila to have a nice life. Three days before he was set to close on the purchase, Marvin and another of Bishop’s goons came to visit him. Mitch had lost twenty grand betting on football, and with the vig compounding for two months, the amount had grown to almost forty grand. They had Mitch stashed away in one of Bishop’s properties, and unless Jack made good on his brother’s debt, they’d be cutting Mitch up for fish bait. What else could he do? He paid off the debt. Not only did he lose the bar, he also lost Lila.

“You’ll always put him ahead of us,” she had told Jack. Her anger and frustration had died down, and her face at that moment was heavy only with resignation. “He’s an anchor, Jack. Dead weight. He’ll drag you down with him. He can’t help himself, and you can’t help letting him do it. But I’m not going down with you two.”

They’d been together six years, and were planning to get married in the spring, but he couldn’t blame her for leaving him. He knew she was right, but as she said, he couldn’t help himself. It wasn’t just that he had promised his mom, but that his bond with his brother was too strong. Jack was four years older than Mitch, and almost from the day Mitch was able to walk he was causing Jack problems. As a six-year-old, he’d go up to the biggest kid nearby, tell him that Jack could beat him up, and then kick the kid in the shins. Some fights Jack would win, others he’d have the snot beat out of him. When he would demand to know why Mitch was doing this, his brother would giggle as if it was the funniest thing in the world. When they got older, not much changed. Mitch kept dragging Jack into his messes, whether it was him owing money to Bishop, fooling around with the wrong woman, getting caught in one of his schemes, or just plain dumb stuff, like getting Jack sucked into a barroom brawl. Afterwards it would always be the same. Mitch would show his shit-eating grin and apologize in a way that showed he wasn’t sorry one bit—that he’d do it all over again if given the chance. If there was ever anyone who exemplified the line “*Who feel that life is but a joke*,” from the old Jimi Hendrix song, it was Mitch. But after Jack lost the bar and his fiancée paying off Mitch’s debt, his brother seemed genuinely contrite for maybe the first time, and even sounded sincere when he promised that he’d find a way to make it up to him. That was one of the two reasons Jack was convinced Mitch was still in the city—he wouldn’t leave without giving Jack some of the money. The other reason was because of Mitch being a screwup. He would assume that he was safe because he had put on a ski mask before raiding Bishop’s money room, and instead of going on the run like he should’ve, he’d hide out for a few days and listen to the grapevine to see who Bishop suspected for the robbery. Bishop must’ve assumed the same, but still would’ve had men watching the airports and train stations.

When they got to Donleavy’s, which was a hole-in-the-wall bar in what was once a blue-collar neighborhood turning more upscale every day, Marvin checked his watch and informed Jack that he only had forty-one minutes left.

“You can’t squeeze blood from a stone,” Jack muttered under his breath, not letting Marvin slow him down. There were maybe a dozen people in the bar, and Jack shook his head, letting Marvin know none of them was the man he was looking for. He took an empty bar seat, ordered a beer, and got on his phone. After each call, he grimaced as if he’d been punched in the gut.

“Twenty-eight minutes left,” Marvin warned.

“This stress is doing a number on me,” Jack moaned. He grabbed his stomach with both hands. “I need to hit the john.”

He got off the barstool and moved toward the men’s room as if he were a condemned man heading to the gallows. It was an act for Marvin’s benefit. He hadn’t called anyone named Steve earlier. Instead he had called his buddy Dennis Maloney. The name Carl Weeks wouldn’t have meant anything to Dennis, neither would Al McCluskey. But Jack had bet that *Captain McCluskey*

would. Dennis was a huge fan of *The Godfather* who could do a pitch-perfect Brando impersonation and would argue, whenever the subject came up, that the film was one of the best ever made. He was also someone to call if you needed a piece that couldn't be traced. In *The Godfather*, a gun is planted in the men's room at a restaurant so that Al Pacino's Michael Corleone character could use it to kill McCluskey, and Jack had to hope that Dennis would figure out that he needed a gun planted in the men's room at Donleavy's, which was only a block from where Dennis lived and less than four miles from Jack's apartment in Crown Heights.

Dennis had been sitting at a table when Jack walked in, and he waited until Jack was drinking a beer before walking out of the place without acknowledging him, but Jack caught Dennis's glance toward the men's room. The facilities inside Donleavy's hadn't been updated since the place opened in the sixties, and when Jack examined the near-antique toilet in the lone stall, he found a nine-millimeter wrapped in plastic and duct-taped inside the tank right above the water line. The magazine was fully loaded, and he said a silent prayer of thanks, chambered a round, and secured the gun in his waistband by the small of his back, his leather jacket hiding the pistol from view.

Nails must've made a quick search of Jack's apartment, because he had joined Marvin at the bar. He showed Jack a particularly nasty grin and said, "Time's running out for both you and your dumbass brother."

"He's right," Marvin agreed. Another glance at his watch. "You've only got twenty-one minutes left."

Jack finished what was left of his beer, then asked Nails for his apartment key. "You didn't rob me blind, did you?"

"Would it matter if I did? It doesn't look like you'll be going back there."

Jack gave Marvin a questioning look. "I thought if I didn't find Mitch for you, I'd be taking a beating? You're upping the ante on me?"

"I said you'd be paying a price, and that price will be a steep one if you're only wasting our time. Looks to me like that's all you've been doing."

Jack dropped a ten-dollar bill on the bar to cover his beer. "Looks can be deceiving. I've still got a few ideas," he said.

He turned to leave, but Nails moved quickly to step in front of him so he'd be sandwiched between Bishop's two hired thugs, and wouldn't be able to make a run for it in case that was what he had in mind. Nails couldn't have been more wrong regarding Jack's intentions.

* * *

Four years earlier, after Tom Goldsmith, the owner of Stockman's, brought up the subject of retiring and selling Jack the bar, Jack got himself an early-morning shift at a warehouse in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn so he'd be able to save up for the down payment. The way Tom had talked about it, this was at least a few years off, and as long as Jack could save sixty grand by then, Tom would help him secure the rest of the financing. Owning a place like Stockman's was his dream, and he would've worked three jobs if needed to see that dream come true. Still, he expected only grief and condescension from his brother when Mitch found out that he was now working eighteen-hour days; after all, the only "legitimate" jobs Mitch ever took were day-labor gigs moving furniture, and that was only so he could scout locations to later rob. Mostly Mitch and his buddies made their money boosting whatever they could off the

back of delivery trucks, working their penny-ante schemes, gambling, and, in Mitch's case, borrowing heavily from Jack whenever Bishop or another loan shark was out to break his legs. Because of that, it was a surprise when Mitch took an interest in his warehouse job.

"This isn't a gag?" Jack asked.

"No, bro, I'm dead serious about this," Mitch assured him, and for the first time that Jack could remember, his brother appeared serious about something. "It's about time I grow up and get a real job. What do you say, big brother, think you can help me out?"

Jack should've known better.

He brought Mitch in to show him around and introduce him to his supervisor. There were no openings right then, but Jack's supervisor promised to put Mitch's name on the top of the list, and he expected to be able to hire Mitch in no more than a month's time. Eight days later, the warehouse burned down. According to the police, the arsonist broke into the warehouse at three in the morning and set the fire using several cans of gasoline. It didn't surprise Jack when he heard whispers in the neighborhood that his brother was selling out of the back of a van the same brand of microwave ovens that the warehouse had had. When he confronted his brother about it, Mitch showed him that same screw-you grin Jack knew so well.

"Not bad, huh?" Mitch boasted, actually proud of himself. "I was able to get fifty-seven microwaves out of the building before the firetrucks showed up. I'm selling them now at a hundred and fifty. All profit. You do the math, bro."

"You destroyed the warehouse for chump change? What the hell were you thinking?"

Mitch made a hurt face, as if he couldn't understand why Jack would be upset. "Chump change? Nah, bro, I'm going to clear over seven grand. I had to set the fire to cover my tracks. But what's the big deal? Nobody was hurt and insurance will cover the losses. That company will make out just fine. They'll rebuild and it will be like nothing happened."

It was more luck than anything else that no firemen were injured or killed in the blaze, but Jack was too exasperated to bother explaining that to his brother. No big surprise, Mitch was wrong about nobody losing out. The company might've made out just fine with the insurance, but they decided not to rebuild the warehouse, and instead moved the operations to North Carolina, causing over sixty people to lose their jobs thanks to Mitch. The warehouse remained a burnt-out shell and a blight on the area. Jack hadn't thought about it in almost three years, but six months ago he got a call from Mitch asking him to bring over jugs of water, a case of beer, and a week's worth of food. "I might need to camp out for a few days or longer until cooler heads prevail," Mitch explained.

If money could've bailed him out, he would've been asking for that instead. Whatever the mess was, Jack didn't want to hear about it. Resigned to the situation, he asked where Mitch was hiding.

"Remember the warehouse that caught fire? The one that had those microwaves?"

A chain-link fence surrounded the warehouse, but Mitch told Jack how he could get in. Jack loaded supplies into his car, drove over, and found Mitch in the back part of the building. His brother had set up shop there, bringing in a

mattress, a beat-up recliner, and a small fridge. Mitch had also rigged up an extension cord from a neighboring building, and when Jack walked in on him, Mitch was fully reclined on the chair, smoking weed, and watching one of the Furious movies on a tablet.

“You like my digs?” Mitch said, grinning.

“When did you set this up?” Jack asked, amazed.

“Two years ago. When I saw that no one was in a rush to tear this building down, I decided to take advantage of the situation. All the creature comforts of home. I was even able to hack into a Wi-Fi signal from a neighboring building. A perfect hideout, huh, bro?”

Not quite the creature comforts. While faint, the fetid odor Jack detected was enough to tell him that the water and sewer to the building had been turned off, and the toilet Mitch was using had become little more than a latrine. In a week, the odor in the place would be unbearable. He also guessed, from the way Mitch was scratching himself, that the mattress and recliner were teeming with creatures that weren’t all that comfortable; namely, bed-bugs. Mitch seemed particularly annoyed when Jack turned down his offer to smoke weed with him.

“Bro, it’s your fault I’m here,” Mitch complained, scowling the same as if he were breathing in a stronger version of that fetid odor.

“Why’s that?”

“I want to repay what I owe you, at least from last time.” Mitch’s mouth weakened. “I know what you lost because of last time.”

“You don’t have to repay me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna.” For the first time Mitch realized that Jack hadn’t brought any supplies with him. “Where’s my stuff?”

“In my car.”

“I can’t go out there, bro. Someone might see me.”

“Yeah? You expect me to lug all that stuff back here? Not a chance. Besides, at this hour, the area’s a ghost town. No one will see you.”

Mitch complained every step of the way, but he accompanied Jack outside, and while Jack sat in his car, Mitch made several trips to lug back the supplies. When he was loaded up to make his last trip, he promised Jack he’d be finding a way to pay him back.

“You want to pay me back? Quit this small-time grifting and get a real job. All of this is getting old.”

Mitch flashed him that irrepressible grin. “No can do, bro. But I’ll be hitting the big time soon enough. And you’ll be getting your money back. With interest.”

Jack watched as Mitch worked his way through the cut in the fence and disappeared into the shadows. He later heard talk that Mitch had tried pulling off a blackmail scheme that soured badly, but as his brother had promised, he worked things out, because a week later he was back in the neighborhood boosting what he could off the back of delivery trucks.

This was why Jack brought Bishop’s hired muscle to the burnt-out Dumbo warehouse and led them to where the chain-link fence had been cut.

“You’re making this so easy for us,” Nails said as he pulled back a ragged piece of the chain-link fence. “Taking us to a deserted warehouse. If your brother’s not here, we won’t have to wait even a minute to take care of you.”

A twisted piece of metal snagged the thug's suit jacket and ripped it. Nails glared back at Jack as if he were blaming him for the accident, and Jack wisely acted as if he hadn't noticed anything.

"My partner's right," Marvin said, huffing as he bent down and pushed his way through the opening. "If your brother's not here, this will be the end of the road for you, because it sure looks to me like you're going out of your way to waste our time."

"Look, I'm trying my best," Jack insisted.

"Yeah? Give me one good reason why you think he's here?"

"Call it a hunch."

Marvin shook his head as if he were dealing with a slow-witted child. "Your funeral," he said softly under his breath.

Jack led them to one of the entranceways that had been boarded up, and he pulled off loose boards, revealing an opening big enough for them to squeeze through if they crouched. Both of Bishop's thugs stiffened when they heard voices from inside the darkened warehouse. The voices were too low to make out, and when they also heard tinny music, they relaxed, realizing that they were hearing a movie being played on a phone or some other electronic device.

"Maybe you do know something," Marvin said.

They let Jack enter the building first, and they followed him to the back of the warehouse where Mitch was sitting in the recliner smoking weed and watching a movie on a tablet. He started to grin when he noticed Jack, then froze when he saw Marvin and Nails behind him. For maybe the first time in his life he showed a halfway-decent poker face and acted as if he were confused as to why two of Bishop's hired muscle were accompanying his brother.

"Hey, bro, what's going on?" Mitch asked, both eyebrows raised.

"They know you ripped off their boss."

"Bro, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"There was a surveillance camera outside of Bishop's money room, Mitch. They have a recording of you."

Mitch blinked several times as if he couldn't quite understand what Jack was talking about. Then it hit him, and his jaw dropped as he stared at Jack as if he'd been sucker punched.

"You brought them here?" he uttered in disbelief. "My own brother?"

"That's right," Nails said, cracking his knuckles.

"I had no choice," Jack said. "They would've beaten the truth out of me. But I was able to make a deal. If you give them back the money, they'll let you live."

Mitch's eyes deadened for a moment, and then he was back to showing his incorrigible grin. "Wow. That was stupid of me, waiting till I got to the door before putting on the mask," he admitted. He pushed himself to his feet and shook his head as if he couldn't believe his stupidity. "Damn, though, I was so close. But close don't count unless it's horseshoes or hand grenades, huh?"

Marvin said, "The longer you keep us waiting, the worse the beating is going to be."

Mitch's smile turned sickly as he nodded to himself and led the way to a corner of the warehouse. After moving boards and other debris aside, he pulled out a suitcase.

"The money's all there," he said sourly. "I didn't get a chance to spend a

dime of it.”

Marvin unlatched the suitcase and opened it, showing that it was stuffed with bundles of cash, each bundle fronted by a hundred-dollar bill and held in place by a rubber band. Jack caught the way Nails’s eyes glazed and recognized it as the look of a stone-cold killer getting ready to act. The thug glided his hand toward his holstered gun. He had no intention of honoring the deal Marvin made, but he moved leisurely, thinking he had all the time in the world. Jack, though, moved more purposefully, and Bishop’s thug was still pulling the gun from his suit jacket by the time Jack had reached behind him and swung out the nine-millimeter pistol his buddy Dennis had earlier left him. He fired two bullets into the side of Nails’s skull, instantly ending the thug’s life.

Marvin looked up, actually surprised. “You don’t have to do this,” he implored, his voice the same soft purr he had used earlier. “We can work out a deal—”

Jack shot him once in the throat to shut him up. The second bullet went through his eye. Marvin was dead before he toppled to the floor.

Mitch’s face froze in a look of stunned amazement, and Jack could almost see the wheels slowly turning in his brother’s weed-addled brain as he tried to process what had just happened. Then his brother was grinning from ear to ear.

“I should’ve known better, bro,” he said. “Damn, that was badass of you.”

“We need to get out of here now if we’re going to escape Bishop. Grab the money.”

“Where are we going?”

“Mexico, for starters.”

Mitch nodded, his expression intense as he latched up the suitcase and headed toward the exit.

Jack walked behind his brother, and he saw Mitch nearly stumble, his movement awkward and unnatural, and he knew his brother must’ve somehow realized the problem Jack had been struggling with over the last hour. Jack accepted then that he had only been kidding himself. He never had a choice about what he needed to do. It didn’t matter how much money was involved; if Jack brought Mitch with him, his brother would find a way to quickly lose all of it and drag them both down. If Jack split up the money and each went their separate ways, Mitch would inevitably end up in Bishop’s hands, and what would be done to him then would be a lot worse than a bullet to the back of the head.

Jack hated that his brother tensed right before he pulled the trigger. He wished it could’ve been like turning off a light. That Mitch would never know what was happening. But he did know. He didn’t plead or scream or say anything. He just accepted it. Maybe deep down he knew it was the only thing Jack could do to give himself a chance.

Jack closed his eyes and said a silent prayer over his brother’s dead body. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel any guilt or remorse, only relief. He went back to the two dead thugs, searched their pockets, got the keys for Marvin’s car, and both of their phones. He took out the SIM cards and slipped the phones into his jacket pocket. He’d dispose of them later, although none of this was necessary, at least probably not. He couldn’t imagine Bishop asking the police for help in locating his two missing thugs.

It would be a long time before Mitch and the two thugs would be found. Probably not until someone decided to finally knock down the warehouse. Not that Jack had anywhere near that time. In an hour or two Bishop would start getting antsy about not hearing from his men. But an hour was all the head start Jack needed. Bishop also had operations in Buffalo, and he would no doubt think that if Jack was on the run he'd be planning to slip over into Canada, and Bishop would have his men looking for him at the wrong border. It would be a longer path to leave the country, but as long as Jack could find his way into Mexico, he'd keep traveling south until he found a small town in Brazil or Argentina where he could buy a bar, maybe find a woman to marry, and live out his days. At least he no longer had a hundred and eighty pounds of dead weight tied to his neck.

On his way out, he took the time to place the loose boards over the opening of what would for now be a huge mausoleum for Mitch and Bishop's two thugs. After squeezing through the opening in the chain-link fence, he brought the suitcase to Marvin's car and got behind the wheel. He would ditch the car somewhere in Newark, and then find another ride to continue his travels south.

Maybe Bishop would someday find him in whatever sleepy town he ended up in, and he'd have to deal with the consequences of his actions then. Or maybe that would never happen. Jack wasn't worrying about it. If he were to be completely honest about it, even though he took the warehouse job to save up a down payment, deep in his gut he knew Mitch would find a way to screw things up so he wouldn't be able to buy Stockman's, just like his brother would somehow screw things up between himself and Lila. For the first time since his mom died he felt free.

Like he actually had a chance.

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