

The Way It Crumbles

by Kevin Michaels

“Got your Nine?” Cheese asked.

Twist nodded.

“Keep it tucked inside your pocket,” Cheese said between sips of Pepsi. “Make it easy to pull when the time comes to use it.”

Twist didn't say anything — his eyes never left the front of the discount liquor store on Raymond Boulevard. He sat quietly behind the wheel of the Sentra, his head resting against the seat, taking in everything up and down the street. Nothing escaped his stare. It was a hot Tuesday afternoon - the store's neon sign blinked off and on in the sunlight, like a beacon pointing the way towards hope, refuge, and salvation. They had been watching the store for at least an hour but in that time saw only a handful of customers, and Twist wondered about the size of this score. No way it would get them more than a couple of bucks, he worried. It didn't seem worth the effort.

“Ain't important what they got in the registers,” Cheese told him.

Twist shot him a look. “It's a waste of time if all we gonna get is a couple of twenties and some cold six packs.”

“Gonna be a decent score. More to it than just the money in the till.”

“How you know that?”

Cheese smiled. “Guy who manages the place don't go to the bank more than once a day,” he said. “That means he still got last night's cash sitting in a bag underneath the counter, just ready to be taken.”

“And how you so sure about that?”

“I know how things work,” Cheese said with certainty as he eyed the street. “Know all about this store.”

He was all cockiness and street — short, compact body like a point guard, hair cropped short, and a thin trim line of stubble stretching beneath his chin. Attitude, style, and a cocky smile.

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Twist leaned back and waited. His expression was hard, tired, and weary, and his eyes heavy and drawn. His hair was cut high on top and shaved close on the sides, and a deep scar cut across his ebony skin from his right eye to the corner of his mouth. Barely eighteen, he carried weariness and anger that came from needing things he couldn't have while everyone else got what they wanted.

“How you want to do this?” Twist asked.

Cheese shot him another hard stare. “Been through this already,” he finally said. “Ain't gonna be doing nothing different than the last time we talked about it. Do it just like we planned.”

“Just want to be sure,” Twist replied. “Don't want no surprises.”

Cheese had five or six years on him - a lifetime of knowledge and experience Twist couldn't match. He had lived in Newark his entire life, banged with the Skulls since he was thirteen, and spent an eighteen month stretch inside East Jersey State for manslaughter. He had credibility and cool. He knew the neighborhood and knew how the streets worked; there were things he could teach guys willing to listen and Twist was one of those students. They called him Cheese because someone once said he snitched like a rat whenever the cops knocked on his door, even for things that had nothing to do with him. But nobody could ever prove he talked. There had been whispers that the cops used a bogus warrant to search his Mama's house when he got out of East Jersey State and found a stash of drugs — that they had enough to bring distribution charges against her and Cheese's little brother if he didn't cooperate whenever they pushed him for info. Ten years with no early release for each of them. Cheese always claimed that there was no truth to any of that, but Twist wasn't so sure. Ten years was a long time, especially for somebody's mother.

Family was sometimes the only thing any of them had to hold on to.

You did what you had to do and protected what you got, Twist thought; he didn't know who else to trust except family.

Cheese had been tight with Twist's older brother Raphael. Together they had jacked cars on South Orange Avenue, sold dime tins and nickel bags to commuters outside Penn Station, and knocked off convenience stores in Middlesex and Monmouth Counties. It all turned when Raphael got pinched for a gas station robbery in Elizabeth three months earlier — it had gone badly and somebody popped the booth attendant, but there wasn't anything to connect it to Raphael. No witnesses, no fingerprints, and no evidence for the cops to analyze. Just him and Cheese pulling a job that left one of them locked up and the other one free.

It was worse for Raphael because he was looking at three strikes, and a sentence that would leave him inside for a long time.

“Ain't no snitch,” Cheese had said back in the Skull house on Murray Street. “Wasn't me telling no Po Po about what went down in Elizabeth.”

The Skulls had grilled him for details anyway, wanting to know what happened and where it went bad. Raphael was important, especially with the Bloods trying to inch into their turf, and they needed everything he brought to the gang. With Cheese's reputation they couldn't take any chances that he had snitched — it wasn't just about what went down in Elizabeth but about trust and integrity. There was too much risk for all of them if Cheese had snitched. Twist didn't care about that; at least not the same way the others did. Raphael was all he had left. He didn't know how it had happened; all Twist knew was that he had to get his brother out, no matter what it took.

“Don't know how 5-0 got him,” somebody said.

“Sure they didn't get the gun?”

Cheese had pulled out his Nine for everyone to see. “No way,” he said. “I got it right here.”

“Not like there was anybody else who knew what went on.”

Cheese had shrugged. “The cops be tricky,” he said. “Got all kinds of CSI shit like you see on TV. Be figuring out fingerprints and DNA and all kinds of shit niggers don't understand.”

"Don't need none of that if somebody snitched," somebody else put in.

"Cops just use that snitch's testimony in court," one of the Skulls said. "Put him up there like some kind of protected witness, hide him behind a screen so nobody can see him, disguise his voice, and get him to rat in front of a jury."

"Wasn't me," Cheese said again.

Twist sat in the car now, taking a drag off his Marlboro and closing his eyes. He wondered what kind of chances his brother had left with the trial just a few weeks away, and how the cops would prove anything. No gun. No shell casings. Nothing left at the scene to tie his brother to the crime, he thought. At least nothing he could figure out. Just somebody's words.

"Talk to your brother much?" Cheese asked.

Twist shrugged. "Not more than once a week. Can't sneak a cell phone to him so he's got to stand in line for a pay phone, and they got him in lock down most of the time," he said. "Told him it's a gang thing. Don't want Skulls mixing with Bloods or Latin Kings inside."

A moment passed between them — an uncomfortable silence broken only by the sound of Twist blowing out smoke, then stubbing out his Marlboro before flicking the butt out the window.

Cheese looked at him and held his stare. "Know what you're thinking."

"Ain't thinking nothing," Twist said.

"Ain't no snitch," Cheese said. "Important you know that. I didn't betray nobody."

Twist looked away from Cheese and quietly focused his attention back on the liquor store. He kept quiet.

"Don't know how they got him, know what I'm saying?" Cheese said. "But it wasn't me who said anything."

"Tell me again how we gonna do this job," Twist said instead. "Want to make sure I don't screw it up."

Cheese took a breath then gestured towards the store. "We walk in there real slow and cool," he said. "I'm gonna grab some

bags of chips while you go to the refrigerated case in the back of the store. Pick up a couple of six packs.”

“What kind?”

“Huh?”

Twist turned to him. “What kind of beer do you want me to get?”

“Don't matter,” Cheese said with a shrug. “Just get a couple of six packs, then bring them to the counter.”

“Like we having a party,” Twist said.

“Like I used to do with your brother,” Cheese said, turning away to stare at the street. “Maybe this works out, you and me can be a team. Just like him and me was a team.”

“You need to stick with me,” he added. “A lot you can learn.”

Twist stayed quiet — anything he could say about that he kept to himself.

“Just gonna be the clerk in there,” Cheese said. “Manager don't pay more than minimum wage, so this guy ain't gonna fight over somebody else's money. Not with a couple of Nines pointed at his head.”

“What about security cameras?” Twist asked.

Cheese smiled. “Got ‘em, but they ain't been hooked up for months,” he said. “They just for show - scare people into thinking they on film, so you think twice about trying to rob them.”

“Got it,” Twist said with a nod.

“We in and out quick and fast,” Cheese added. “Be no problem. Just like always.”

Twist pulled up the hood on his sweatshirt and slipped on his Ray Bans to hide his face. The Nine was still in his pocket, tight in his grip in case they needed the firepower. They slipped out of the Sentra and crossed the street, slow and casually without attracting interest from anyone. Downtown Newark was quiet. There were a few cars on the street — still another ninety plus minutes until the rush hour exodus out of town — and nobody passing on the sidewalk paid attention to either one of them. There

was nothing unusual nor out of the ordinary about two Black guys ducking into a liquor store in the afternoon in Newark.

The blast of cold air that hit them when they entered the store was a welcome relief from the heat outside, and it cooled the sweat on their skin. The Pakistani guy at the counter, not much older than Twist, looked up when they walked in. He had a newspaper spread out across the counter and he eyed Twist for a moment, watching him make his way towards the back of the store, then went back to reading. Twist opened one of the glass refrigerator doors, hesitating for a moment before grabbing two six packs of Bud bottles. He tucked the beer under one arm and made his way to the front, still gripping his Nine while keeping it deep inside his pocket. Cheese was in the front of the store, lingering at a display rack of snacks and chips for a moment before grabbing a jumbo bag of Doritos and a handful of Slim Jims that he brought to the counter.

He held up the Slim Jim packages.

“Love these things,” he said to Twist.

The clerk watched them approach and slid his newspaper to the side, keeping it open to the section he had been reading. Cheese spread his chips and Slim Jims across the counter, and Twist placed the Buds alongside the snacks.

The clerk looked at Twist and said, “Need to see some ID.”

Twist looked first at Cheese then back to the clerk. “Don't have none. Forgot it at home.”

“Can't sell you nothing without ID.”

“Told you I ain't got it,” Twist said.

Before the clerk could answer Cheese had a familiar looking Nine out of his pocket and leveled at his head. Twist hastily brought out his own gun and pointed it towards the clerk.

“Open the register,” Cheese demanded.

The clerk looked first at Cheese and then Twist, pausing for a moment to think through his options. Focusing on the guns pointed at his face — trying to answer the millions of questions racing through his head.

Cheese reached across the counter and pressed the barrel of the Nine into the clerk's forehead. He looked at Cheese with a wild eyed stare and his hands shook slightly as he reached for the register.

"Nothing to think about," he said. "Just do it."

"There's not much," the clerk said, opening the drawer.

Cheese smiled. "That's why you're gonna give us the bank bag with last night's receipts in it."

The clerk shook his head nervously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," Cheese said. "We all know you got a bag hidden underneath that counter with what you brought in last night. Know you ain't gone to the bank yet, so that means its still there —"

"Think we need to stop wasting time," Twist said, looking nervously to the door.

Cheese glanced at him. "Easy youngin," he said. "Stay calm."

For a moment there was something in the clerk's expression — it might have been anger or even defiance, and it was hard for Twist to tell the difference between the two. But whatever it was, within seconds the look passed and changed into one of resignation. The clerk bent forward, reaching slowly under the counter without taking his eyes off Cheese.

Twist and Cheese exchanged their own looks and Cheese gave him a slight nod.

When the clerk stood he came up fast and determined, clutching a double barrel shotgun in his hands. Twist dove for cover as the clerk pumped the gun and lifted it towards them, but Cheese never flinched and never moved. No fear nor remorse in his expression. There was no hesitation as he simply smiled and squeezed the trigger on his Nine. The first shot hit the clerk in the stomach and knocked him backwards. The shotgun fell from his hands and skidded across the floor as he staggered into a Plexiglas display filled with instant lottery tickets. He reached for the display

to stay upright but could only grab a handful of tickets as he slid to the floor, pulling a string of scratch-offs down with him. He wound up sitting with one leg tucked beneath him with his back against the wall, looking up at Cheese. Trying to find something to say and clutching the hole in his gut as blood poured between his fingers — pleading with his eyes.

Cheese leaned over the counter and quickly fired two more shots to the chest. A geyser of blood sprayed from his body, arcing towards the counter and splattering the floor. There were no last gasps for breath; whatever words the clerk had tried to mouth died along with him on the floor.

With his smile still stretching from ear to ear, Cheese turned to Twist.

Twist struggled to get back to his feet. He looked across the counter at the corpse on the floor, blood slowly inching across the linoleum. “Wow,” he said with a low whistle.

“Guess he never learned the way it goes,” Cheese said, grabbing the handful of bills from the register drawer. He pocketed his Nine and swept the beer, chips, and Slim Jims out of his way as he leaned over the counter, pulling a zippered green bank deposit bag from beneath the register. “Shit happens, even when you think you're prepared for anything.”

“Like it did with my brother?”

Cheese glanced up.

Twist had his Nine pointed at Cheese's chest.

Cheese straightened up, shaking his head. “Boy, I told you I had nothing to do with that.”

“I know. I heard you,” Twist said. “That's your story.”

“That's the truth,” Cheese said. “Besides, what you think shooting me gonna do for your brother?”

Twist returned his stare, shaking his head slowly.

“Figure nobody gonna be able to rat him out on the witness stand,” he said. “Especially if the only other witness is dead.”

“Nigger, that ain't how it works.”

Twist shrugged.

“Don't know nothing about that,” he said. “But you still using that same Nine from the gas station hold-up. Cops find you here, holding that gun, it's a good day for Raphael.”

“They don't need no CSI stuff to put it all together and figure out they got the wrong man locked up,” he added.

“And what makes you think the Po Po gonna find me here?” Cheese asked.

Twist smiled, then shot him once in the chest. Cheese dropped to his knees, looking up at Twist — surprise and pain etched in his expression. Twist held his stare for a moment then took a step backwards and calmly shot him again, this time in the face. The third and fourth shots hit Cheese in the body as he slumped over on his side. Twist kept shooting until he had emptied the clip and could be certain that Cheese was dead. It was the only thing that really mattered, he thought. That, and making sure the Nine from the gas station robbery was still in Cheese's pocket. He didn't even bother taking the bank bag or the twenties scattered across the counter when he ran out of the liquor store.

