

# The End of The Matter

*A short story by*

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My hands shook as soon as the smoke poured from the gun. I instinctively knew the bullet had hit home. I didn't need to see the man collapse to know that the battle was finally over. At least, that was my excuse for not paying attention. Truth be told, I didn't see him fall due to a pain in my side. Regardless of the minutiae, I knew I had won.

My father told me victory never comes cheap. It always comes with a price sometimes too steep for one person to bear. The price for my victory came with my mind fully aware that the principles of yin and yang demand balance.

The gun tumbled from my hands and I watched it slowly descend to the pavement below. It spiraled end over end until it hit with a thud, resting on its side. Soon I would share the same fate.

Immediately I turned my attention to the pulsating pain in my side. A dark, sticky stain of blood had stretched out across my shirt, hungrily engulfing the cotton fabric in its deadly grasp. My hands flew to the wound and I cursed myself for not wearing the kevlar vest. Reggie said it would be a dead giveaway.

The source of the pain was the lower part of my right rib cage. The pain flowered and spread like a vine into all parts of my torso. The sensation caused my vision to blur and the room to spin.

The two legs holding me up decided it was more important to give their energy to the immediate threat at hand and they gave out underneath me. I tumbled like the gun to the pavement, which only sent out more waves of pain. *Where was the backup I was promised?*

Before losing consciousness, I grabbed at my cellphone tucked in its holster at my belt. With one hand I managed to open the flip and I tried dialing 911. It took a cou-

ple of attempts because my head felt full of molasses. *When did the room get so cold?* I thought.

“911, what is your emergency?” The voice on the other end asked. I could barely speak at this point.

“Shot. Get Harris. It’s Frank,” I managed.

“Holy shit! Frank Jeffrey, is that you? Are you okay?” The voice on the other end said in recognition.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Here I was, on the brink of death, and Doris McClain was asking me if I was okay. “No Doris, I’ve been better. I’ve been shot.”

“Hang on sugar, I’ll get Harris and an ambulance over there right away.”

I hung up the phone and curled up into a ball. I applied pressure to the gunshot wound even though it hurt like hell, and focused on not blacking out. I knew if I blacked out it would be the end of me, and there was still the matter of Becky to resolve.

Minutes that seemed like centuries passed, and the next things I remember were the flashing lights and people all around me. For some reason I couldn’t hear anything. After that, there was darkness, where I found comfort.

The darkness gave away and I found myself looking at the florescence of a sterile hospital room. A slight buzz from one of the lights warned of its impending need of replacement. My ribs hurt like hell but at least I was alive.

A woman rushed to me from her vigil in the chair beside the hospital bed and grasped my left hand. Becky. She had come.

“Frank, are you awake?” She asked, her voice cracking slightly.

“Yeah,” I managed. “Sore as hell, but I’m awake.”

“Good. I have two things to tell you, then.” She had that matter-of-fact tone of voice that meant a good ass-chewing was to commence. Suddenly I wished I *hadn't* woken up just then. “First off: that was just plain stupid of you to go to Jimmy’s house like that alone. You should have called for backup instead of pulling that macho shit. You almost died!”

“I know, Becky, but...”

“Let me finish!” She said. “I understand what you were trying to do, and I thank you for that. But you can’t just keep playing the loner. This isn’t some noir detective movie, this is real life! Did you ever think of how I would feel if you got yourself killed like this?”

I was floored. “Becky, the last time we met you were ready to shoot me yourself!”

“I still am,” she said with a slight grin.

“Let me explain myself,” I said. “I found out from Harris that Jimmy’s deal was going down on Saturday night. After that he had booked a one-way ticket to Mexico for a ‘vacation’ of sorts. This was my last chance to nail him.”

“So you went in there guns blazing, all on your own?”

“I may be crazy, but I’m not suicidal. I had Reggie Nightow in an unmarked outside, and I was on a wire. He was supposed to get backup while I went in. I was too excited to finally get the bastard to be suspicious of Reggie, even though in retrospect I should have known better. It was all a setup to get rid of me. Jimmy knew who I was all along and I was oblivious.”

It was Becky’s turn to be floored. “Reggie was in league with Jimmy? I didn’t know he had the brains to be such a double-crosser.”

“It goes deeper than that. I’m a marked man, now, Becky. Do you wonder why Jimmy and his gang have gone free for so long? The chief is apparently a client too, as is the DA.”

“Holy shit,” she said, sitting back down in disbelief.

“Tell me one thing: Did I manage to kill Jimmy? I never saw him fall before I collapsed.”

Becky looked uneasy and wouldn't make eye contact. I knew something was up. “Well,” she began.

“Tell me!” I said.

“That's the second thing I need to tell you. Jimmy's condition was critical for a week. You're not going to like this.” She said.

I was afraid that I had failed. But I was so sure that the bullet had hit its target. Becky sighed and cleared her throat to calm herself. I didn't know what to expect.

“Jimmy is dead. You shot him, and he died yesterday. I'm sorry Frank, but Jimmy's influence goes even farther than you can imagine.”

I finally noticed the handcuffs on my arms, binding my hands to the rails of the bed. Rage built up in me, and Becky could see it. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she began to sob her apologies. Everything became a blur.

Two officers entered the hospital room and flanked the bed. In the chair Becky pulled her legs up to her chest, buried her face, and wept. “What the hell? Don't you see what's happening?” I yelled.

One of the officers punched me in the face and the other one snickered. “Frank Jeffrey, you are under arrest for the murder of James Giordani.” He continued reciting the Miranda rights peppered with contempt while the other clown just laughed. I had failed to remain silent and now it was time to receive my punishment.

Victory never comes cheap. I exacted justice on the deserving at the cost of my own freedom. The world has moved on and forgotten the man who acted on justice and

what is right instead of silently ignoring the corruption of a man bent on obtaining money, drugs, and power.

If the world is a place that prefers that type of evil to flourish, then I am thankful that this is the end of the matter; that I am locked away from it for the remainder of my days. There's a funny sense of peace that comes from being separated from such sick corruption. I have come to terms with my fate, and I am happy I did not compromise my morals to ignore what everyone else around me embraced. For that, I am truly happy.