
GunMen

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I had two calls to make.

One I knew the person wouldn't want to hear from me.

The second: I'd have to try and shut the *hell* up just to get a word in edgewise!

I was in my computer room that was connected to the living room by a small hallway, clicking on the MSN explorer. Dante was raiding the frig, at the same time he was talkin' about that job we had in Indochina back in the day.

"Yo, Dante, since you're eating on my bill, make me a sandwich, huh?" Dante could run a mean grill. Last Barbeque he threw for his wife and two kids was something straight out of a gourmet kitchen. His reply was filtered through Lazarus and Jesus' ongoing conversation, "Yeah man, you got it! I'll hit you off with somethin' *sweat*."

I could hear Lazarus speaking Japanese to Jesus in a very loud tone in the living room. The 60-inch was playing 'Street Fighter' starring Sonny Chiba. Jesus was yelling right back at him. Picture this: Laz was 6'3' 225 lbs. Jesus was 5'5' & 123 at last guess with your usual build for a Japanese male with gray highlights. I knew, in about five more minutes, they'd be facing off, wrecking my living room and most likely killing each other. I wouldn't place bets. Lazarus was dangerous, but so was Jesus.

I yelled as well as I could at them with a swollen lip, "You two want to take that into the ring downstairs? I got things I have to think about and don't need to hear you two sounding like a Japanese restaurant at lunch time!"

The language stopped. Lazarus came in like a bull charging, "I'm about two seconds from breaking your friend's neck Moses! I don't box so I'm not about to go into a ring." *Goddammit*.

"Look, there's a judo mat downstairs next to the ring. Go down there and beat the *hell* out of each other until you work this junk out. *Don't* break any bones and *don't* kill each other. What the hell good would you be to me then, huh? 'Sides, if he kills you, then that let's me off the hook with you killin' me, right?" Man, the things I have to do to keep Lazarus from murdering someone other than me. Guess that should give him some motivation. He looked at me with a smirk twisted on his face,

"Heh, funny. *True*, but funny nonetheless. Fine!"

Lazarus half-turned and screamed out,

“あなたに来られてたましなさい、私達を戦いをすることを許可しなさい。多分死なない!”

(Come on you fool, let us do battle. Maybe *you* will not die!)

I had to add this because I know Lazarus wouldn't have thought about it, "Hey! Use the body pads. Bruises are fine, but broken *bones* aren't."

Lazarus' voice came at me from a short distance from the stairwell leading to the basement, "*Fine, dammit, fine*. Your ass is mine, Twinkie!"

Oh sh-but Jesus' voice cut in on my thought, "Yo, I know you just did *not* call me a *Twinkie* you 6 foot tall Green Mile lookin' muthafu-"

"*Do not kill each other!?*" I had to reiterate. God, why Lazarus had issues with American born Asians was something I could never figure. Screw it! Right now I had better things to do. I dialed the first number on the portable that sat next to my computer. I still remembered the direct line number that he gave me when I was working for him.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Who is this?" His voice still had the ability to command your attention.

"It's Moses Gunn, Mister Richardson." He could hang up before I got to say what I needed to say, but he knew we had unfinished business. I clicked through my email, deleting the junk and filtering out the spam. There was an email from my Dad, but that would have to wait. Mister Richardson spoke, "Why are you calling me, Moses? We-have nothing to discuss. You didn't do your job! My son was murdered because of *your* lack of skill. I could have you buried in a landfill somewhere for the ineptitude you've shown me! I trusted you." He was both pissed off and disappointed in my character. He'd come, over a short time, to respect me-and treat me as a close friend. He had every right to be both. I was both at myself.

"Easy on that kind of talk Mister Richardson. I don't mean to sound smart but 'They' are listening to our phones now." I was serious, but he didn't care.

"To *hell* with the government! I couldn't give a good goddamn if they hear this or not. Half those bastards in Congress owe their damn jobs to me! I backed most of them in their campaigns and have the proof to show for it! Forget that, this is about what you've cost me and what you *owe* me."

"That's why I called. I've found the ones responsible."

"....."

"Mister Richardson?"

"Where are they," his voice changed, losing the fire, gaining the coolness of a businessman.

"I wanted to get them myself. I owe it to you, I owe it to your son who I failed to keep alive, and-" he cut me off, "And you owe it to your honor and rep which the bastard pissed on when he murdered my son! Both things, of which, I could give a *damn* about. I have my own way to handle this, I just want to know *where*--they--are! I've an operative that can get the job done, unlike you." A phone rang off in the background of his office, "Look, hold on." -*blip*- and I was on hold. I clicked on the email from my Dad. The screen loaded & the message read:

'Hey Moses, How're you holding up, boy? You've been hard to pin down. The time difference is only an hour from here in New York, but the time they let us access the phones is strange here in the 'Home'. I'm thinking of finding a new place, more like a retirement village to live in, maybe a place out on Long Island. Junior's supposed to come from upstate in a week or so to help me look.'* Lazarus was a junior. *'I know you're busy with Detective stuff and traveling is a bit much to do when you're on a case, but when you get some free time, come out to visit. I know we don't get along well,'* last time we saw each other, we'd gotten into a fight that Lazarus doesn't know about. It was about things that happened when Laz was in the service and Mom was still alive. I was still in my first year at college--I didn't like remembering. I continued reading, *'but you should come out so we can talk about things. Call me when you can.'

Dad.

Mister Richardson came back on the line. I was poking at my lip, feeling the

swelling, knowing that it had gone down since this morning.

"Look, Moses," he said with more of a relaxed tone than before. "I'll let you do this the way you think it should be done. Just call me when everything is handled. I want to know in detail, exactly what happened." I was surprised that such a man like Richardson would fold so easily. I had a question I needed to ask. "If you don't mind me asking this Mister Richardson, but, what was it this, and by the way, the name that the leader of this crew goes by is 'Jerry Bell', anyway, what was it that 'Jerry Bell' was trying to hold over you when they tried to extort money from you?" Dante came in, placed my club sandwich down next to the computer mouse, and took up roost in front of the Street Fighter Alpha coin-op that sat in the corner of my office near the window.

"Well," Richardson hesitated a moment. "I'd had some dealing with an overseas company for some Formica that I could get at a cheaper price wholesale. It was just 'not' exactly on the up and up in the way of embargos from the U.S. standpoint. I wound up going in another direction, but there was a minor 'trail' left and whoever this 'Jerry Bell' was got a hold of it. Not that it would have gotten my business into any kind of trouble, but the scandal would have been bad for the company image. But, I let *no* man dictate to me *anything* when it comes to my business! To think I was about to let some cheap extortionist do it was unthinkable. I would have sold the company and hunted him down just to show him the face of a man who takes nothing from anyone!" His pride was deep, as deep as his voice. I had more respect for him than I had before.

"Daniel?" I was pushing it with using his first name, like nothing had gone down up till now.

".....yes Moses?"

"I will get them for you, I give you my word. I know that that isn't worth much as of right now, but it's all I have to give." I paused, holding the portable, waiting for his response.

"One way or another, Moses, I will see that my vengeance is *done*. Either by you, or by someone else. Remember, we still have unfinished business." He was counting on my honor. I might have to go toe-to-toe with him. Something I wasn't looking forward to with a man I had such high regard for, but he was a man's man, and handled things in

a fighter's manner. If that's what it took, then so be it!

"I'll call you after everything's over." *-blip-*

I placed the portable down into its charger. I picked up half of the triangle club with gherkin pickle spiked into it by a toothpick. I took a deep bite. The subtle taste of Dijon mustard and horseradish gave the turkey with bacon and tomatoes and lettuce, and there was the tinniest bit of onion and Spanish paprika mixed, enough flavor to make you bust!

"Jesus H. Christ Dante! You sure haven't lost you touch in the kitchen, son. This club is *hype*."

"*De nada* Moses, *de nada*. Goddammit, Ryu is the king of all pains in the ass in this version! *Maricon*" Dante said as he jerked the joystick and slammed the buttons.

"Hadou *that* one, bitch!" Dante hit the 'pause' button. "So what's the haps son? What's coming down the line? Your email was urgent, but it left a lot out in the detail department." Dante pulled up the chair I had next to the end table and sat backwards on it.

"Well it goes down like this, son. I was hired by Daniel Carl Richardson to body-guard his middle son because he had received threats against him that if he didn't play ball with these guys, that they would kill his son as an example that he can be reached." I was finishing up the second half of my club, crunching on the garlic chips, finishing up the gherkin.

"Eh, man," said Dante. "You mean *the* Daniel Carl Richardson, the construction magnate? Damn my brutha. You have moved up into the big time. No mo' Mercenary work for you. What popped off with that to get you hollerin' at Jesus and me?"

"Some sonofabitch came and took his shot at the kid, sniping him from a distance. Didn't even have the balls to come and step to me on the road. Man to man, ya feel me."

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, you know, ain't that like the thing you did when we were in Bosnia back in the day? That job we were hired to do by some Serbian general to take out the man funding a Croatian militia that was doing real damage to his troops. Didn't you sniper on that job?"

Damn, I forgot about that.

"Yeah, yeah, I remember that now. That was work, man. We were ghost after I took my shot remember. As if we were never there. *Damn*, I let that slip my mind."

"Think it could have something to do with that?"

"Wouldn't think so. Remember, that building was also *Semtex* to hell by Jesus for good measure. This 'Jerry Bell' could be any one of the enemies I'd made since then. It just gets my balls twisted that this bitch is playing games with me! You know this punk-ass tried to blow Lazarus and me to hell a few days back? My ribs are bruised, my bottom lip is coming down from being swollen, and I damn near had a concussion."

"Damn," Dante said, shaking his head back and forth.

"Yeah. It's not the only thing, but I'll catch you up on that later. Right now I got to call a man about a house schematic. If you want to see something of interest, go down stairs and see if Jesus and Lazarus killed each other. It'd be nice if they didn't."

"Word, playa, word. You make your call, I'll go get the children."

Dante unsaddled his chair, moving it back to its resting place.

His footsteps echoed as he made his way to the staircase. I dialed the second person that had to be heard from because his info was necessary for the plan to be made.

He picked up on the first ring.

"What the hell happened man!" his mouth ran at the pace of a crackhead feening for an early morning hit. "First I help that crazy brother of yours get tools to do whatever he was going to do to the dead guy I saw on the floor in your office/apartment that *really* kinda got me scared for my life. I was cool with the Escalade explosion, but now I get the lowdown on a massive explosion happening at some auto emporium taking out most of the building and nearby business' that got splattered by freakin' cars! I'd ask you if you had anything to do with that, but really I'm afraid to."

Idiot. "No," I said. "I had nothing to do with that. Or anything you've just said. You're getting your stories mixed up as you are telling them to me." You think I'm going to sit here and admit to this fool something that could be taken as a terrorist attack in the middle of Highland, IL? Or to anything else over an open line? Hell *no*.

"Oh?" will he catch the hint? "Ooh, yeah, yeah, those are the stories I'm working

on. Thank god. Stuff like that would be even too much for me to get into. So, what can I do for you Murtaugh?" The little prick likes to change up personalities like flippin' a channel.

"What I need from you is the schematics to the house on this address." So I gave him the address. Footsteps, more than one, clumped up the basement stairs.

Riggs always had a 'backdoor' into the building permits department downtown. He'd always been able to get me information on building layouts when I had to take matter into my own hand and hunt down individuals I was hired to find. Said individuals that had the money to hide in comfort and the security was more than a broken window would allow me to do.

He came back to the line. "Found it. Check your email, I sent it as an attachment. Nice place, if you're a freak for Spanish army forts. What's this all about, Murtaugh? This have anything to do with what went down at your place?"

"Riggs."

"Yee-yo?"

Dante returned, pulling out the chair like he did before. "You ask too many questions that you don't want the answers to. You want to live to get the complete story, I suggest you chill on that and wait for my call.

Peace out." -*blip*-

OnE

"So what's going down?" Dante asked insistently.

I opened the email, clicking on the attachment. The download window opened, then the Windows picture view came open when the virus scan said it was safe. I expanded the window to fit my 30-inch monitor's window. "Come over here and study this layout. We strike this place tomorrow night. Where're Laz and Jesus?"

He jerked his head toward the living room. "Yo, they out in the living room."

"And in what condition are they in?"

He shook his head, tracing the hallways and the outer wall on the layout with his index finger. "Go look for your self, esse. Those two are *loco* in the cabasa mia migo." I moved casually, remembering the tenderness of my ribs. I was looking at Lazarus and Jesus at the kitchen counter cracking open some bottles of Amstel and talking in Japanese and laughing. Jesus had a bruise growing on his jaw and he was rubbing his left shoulder with an ice pack. Lazarus had a heating pad rapped around his kneecap, rubbing and rotating his right shoulder. He also had a slight limp that looked more temporary than permanent. He saw me looking at them both.

"Hey, Moses? Your friend here ain't so bad after all. He's a good fighter and does his people proud. I like him. I guess that let's him off, but you aren't. I'm still breathing."

Great. "Glad to see that. I got the layout to the fort from Riggs. Dante is looking them over. When you and your new geisha buddy are through with the lovin' you may want to take note of the layout yourself. You too Jesus."

"That's cool, Moses," said Jesus, taking a deep drink of his beer.

Lazarus just nodded in agreement, walking around, walking off the limp. He made his way over to the front door, casually looking out one of the side windows.

"Hey Moses?"

"Yeah Laz," flopping down into my soft couch, changing the station to the history channel. They had a documentary on the Mafia I always caught the middle of. This time was no different.

"You know anyone on this block have a jet black Plymouth Prowler convertible with chrome alloy rims and illegally tinted windows?"

"Nah, why?"

"Because there's been one sitting four houses down ever since your friends got here."

I got up, walking over next to him. He pointed toward it, pressing his finger against the glass. "I noticed it when they first showed but paid no mind to it because I don't live in this hood and don't know your neighbors, but that car hasn't moved from

that spot and there's someone in it."

"How can you tell?"

"I can tell by the distribution of the weight of the car. How it sits. If you look hard enough you can tell when a car is occupied. There's one person, most likely behind the driver's seat. The tint is dark enough not to allow the casual onlooker to see into it from a distance. See?"

Man, no wonder his superiors were afraid of him. I looked. The car was in front of the Mancusso house, nearest to the tree on the corner. Whoever was there didn't let on that we saw them. They played it cool. Couldn't tell if they were there or not.

"Don't sweat it. It's not 'Jerry Bell' because he's busy waiting for us to find him. If that was one of his hitters, he'd have come in blazing the place up with bullets and gun smoke. Finish off your beer and plan out your attack. I'll be in shortly to cover the rest."

"Fine. But don't get too comfortable barking out orders little bruh. Remember, after I get my fill of killin' these Bosnians, I'm out. You can't take this joker by yourself, that's on you. I'm here for that reason only. Remember-we ain't cool."

Lazarus let the drape drop, walking towards the computer room. Jesus soon followed.

I stood at the window, studying the Prowler.

Two

The plan was simple. We go in silent. Jesus and Lazarus went in, taking down the guards rear guards. Jesus would then set the Semtex and Dante and me would go in the front. Lazarus would be working in the shadows, silent killing. We were driving out to the Spanish fort in Dante's van.

Did I forget to say that Dante had strange taste in vehicles. Granted I liked my classic muscle cars, but Dante, he had a taste for-TV vehicles. From the Dukes of Hazard, to the car from VIPER. This was an exact duplicate of the van from the A-Team. Dante did Mr. T proud. I sat in the light gray passenger seat shaking my head.

"Why did you bring this van, Dante? It stands out like a black man at Klan rally."

His voice changed as he gripped the steering wheel, "C'mon fool! Uhn, these wheels are on and poppin'! Outer shell is bullet proof, along with the wind shield and tires. Weapons are stored in the panels and the trunk." He was doing a very bad Mr. T impression. Laz was sharpening and loading his blades. Twin semi-autos sat 'V' shaped in the back holsters. I had eight GLOCKS, and two .45's in the front. Light body armor all around. Dante was a Sweeper. He was, back in our Merc days, our initial impact man. His job was to go in with a street sweeper and spray the area and the rest of the crew would perform clean up. Jesus was our boom-boom man. An artist with Semtex. He could shape and explosive that could blow the head off a zit. I was the planner. A loose planner. Not having things down in stone allowed for on the spot changes to adapt to situations that would come.

Three

It was night time and Dante parked the van deep into the woods. Night-vision showed us a pair of guards in the front. Jesus used intercept tech to overhear burst communiqué between the guards that numbered in about ten. Four in the front, four in the back, & two on the outside walls on each side. There were guards in the watch towers that surrounded the inner wall. Frightening that people would dump millions of dollars into a life-sized replica of a fully functional Spanish fort. It had sandy yellow walls and clay red colored ceramic roofing.

Jesus and Lazarus were to take out the back guards. I had the sniper rifle set up,

aiming for the towers. After I snipe them, Dante was to bring the noise!

The head piece came to life. "This is Lazarus. The four guards in the back are terminated." That was my queue.

I took aim, adjusting for the wind.

Foop

Foop

Foop

Foop

"Dante. Lazarus. Go!"

Dante came up from the camouflage rig he had on as he snuck slowly toward the front.

The rain fell. Dante was spraying like Jesse the Body in Predator. I broke down the rifle, running with the MP-5 and GLOCK drawn.

They came out the wood works. 'Jerry' was well prepared. He had men hidden in the area. Hidden enough for us not to notice. I met Dante back to back, hidden behind a rock sculpture made out of boulders.

"Take one of my grenades off my vest, Moses and blow the front door." Dante screamed over the loud gunfire. Chips of rock *spacked* and flew off in chunks.

"Fire in the hole!" And the grenade made an impact that was lost in the second it took the thing to shatter the double gate off its hinges. Gunfire was going on behind the walls. Jesus was laying waste to the army inside. We pushed our way into the fort, followed by the remaining soldiers. We met Jesus in the remains of a shed that matched the fort, but was missing the roof.

"I laid the Semtex on the outside and on the inner wall. I could smoke the entire place right now, the only thing left would be this building. Just say the word." Jesus was shooting off suppression fire. Dante kept spraying on his side.

"Where's Lazarus!"

"He's in the inside of the fort. 'I came here to cut down some Bosnians and a bullet in they skull would not satisfy!' So quote-eth the man himself."

I looked out, peeking over the rim of this defensive wall. The soldiers were buried

like ticks. The deafening sound could drown out even silence. They were good. Best money could buy.

Then nothing.

Silence.

Then a voice, muffled, came out from multiple directions.

"Well, well. I am glad to see you here Moses. And with more friends. Very good. Gives my men something to do while we finish the business you started so long ago. Come on in. The door's open. Oh, and don't worry, they have orders not to shoot you. Your friends on the other hand are free game. And I wonder where that brother of yours is at? Oh well. Guess he will show up eventually. So come. I await you in the downstairs hall." Now I was pissed! I'd finally had it with this whole game. I was ready to finish this, walk straight into the endgame, and put many bullets into the chest of this prick! Jerry Bell. I was going to squeeze his real name out of his mouth before I strangled him, then shoot him, then shoot him some more!

I looked at Dante and Jesus, giving them the nod. They knew. If I did not come out or they didn't hear from me, to let the *hellfire* of Semtex blow this place to the four winds and make their escape. They knew where my stash and things were. The instructions were in the safe in my office. Dante knew where. I'd left everything I had to them both. Dad had no use for all of my things, and Lazarus would never take any of it.

These two--were the only family I had.

I stood up, walking past the soldiers sectioned away in strategic areas towards the front double doors. There was an imbedded stone awning that ran the full front of the house with wooden chairs, matching tables, wicker couches, and a mini-wicker chair swing that were all shot to hell.

The high arched double doors opened, then closed behind me.

FouR

"Find that bastard, now! Move, move." I walked casually as 'Jerry Bell's' men scrambled around. Dead bodies with their throats slit were laying around, like shattered glass. Combat boots clopped and M-60's clacked against clip packs, and it all moved like slow motion.

The place was well lit, furnished in deep reds, dark browns, Spanish-styled rugs, and burgundy wooden posts. The stairwell that 'Jerry Bell' pointed me towards, spiraled down and opened into a deep set cathedral like hall with high ceiling that were covered in dark shadows and wide support banisters. The place was like a dance hall, surrounded by audience seats and was fenced in. Jerry stood with two military blades in scarabs.

"Welcome, Moses. You've finally come to the end of your great journey. Here," as he tossed me one of the blades. "We'll finish this in a more personal way than what you and I are used to doing when handling such things."

"Who are you, Jerry? Really."

"Genni Gropovick, glad to finally meet you."

"Why have you gone through this whole game to screw with me, huh?"

He stood there, scratching his chin with the butt of the blade. I didn't recognize him. I've never seen him before. He was six foot, dressed in gray army fatigues, with dirty brown hair, and tattoos that ran the length of his arms like shirt sleeves up to and covering his shoulders.

"Remember that little job you had in Bosnia where you did a sniper job for some general? Well, I and a group of others were hired by your target to take out his enemies men. We were earning a good living at it. Until you took him out. That was aggra-

vating to say the least, *but*," he pulled out the blade, positioning himself into a ready position. *"The unforgivable act was the goddamn destruction of that building, taking me, and the groups of men involved out. I and five others were the only ones to survive the cave-in of the building. That, now that was the last straw! It took me a long time to find out who did it. When I did, I decided to screw with your life! Take away the thing most precious to you, I researched you, studied you. Found out that your rep and your damn word were the only things I could take from you. So, to make you feel the pain, I took a page out of your book and sniped the bastard son of that rich sonofabitch. The money didn't matter, nor did the paperwork I bought off the information black market. It was all just to get to you! Feel honored?"*

My teeth clenched so damn hard I could feel the cracking of bone.

"You killed an innocent boy just to get to me?! All the damage, all the destruction, for this! You destroyed my rep for this! Well, Genni, let's get this over with. I-want-you-dead!"

I set my blade, positioned my feet.

"And I want you dead. Let's go!"

We rushed like samurai, yelling, our blades clanging loudly over the silences of the hall. Echoes of the metal on metal, sparks flew, we battled for position, his eyes burned into mine, he pressed, I pushed, he dodged, spinning around, ducking low, slicing into my left side. A cut, possible deep, but the adrenaline was already scorching through my veils, my eyes were dilated, I came up under his guard slicing into his breast muscle, a dance of elegant rage moving with just a follower, and just a maestro, we danced the dance of death. His forearm, my left shoulder, a ground sweep, a knee to the midsection, I sliced to his throat, not fatal, he avoided it skillfully, we both moved back, eyeing, aiming, analyzing, waiting for that perfect opening.

I saw my opening, he was tilting to his right, leaving his ribcage open for a thrust strike. He smiled, blood drooling from his mouth. He was ready.

He ran, I ran, then.....

-PIFF!-

....a single shot, silent, empty, came from somewhere.....from where....there.....no...up...upwards...the ceiling....echoes....something shined.

A dark figure slowly dropped down on climbing rope. A short figure dressed in nylon black, holding a sniper rifle with a silencer on the rifle muzzle the size of a three liter bottle. His feet made a soft tap as he landed.

Genni's eyes went wide, wide with shock, he fell to his knees, the blade lodging itself into the floor with a *chunk* sound. I hobbled over to him, kneeling next to him, his last words couched out slowly through his thin pale lips. But the assassin drew my attention by resting his rifle hard against the paneled floor. I looked over from Genni. I was entranced by the identity of the assassin that took my revenge from me! Oh I had to know the guy I was going to put thirty-two bullets into just to make up for it. They removed the night-vision, pulling the nylon facemask off. Jet-black hair dropped free and sat around close to her shoulders. Her full lips were unpainted, her honey-colored skin still looked smooth, and she turned those wet marbles upon me. I felt her gaze focus on me with intent. She wasn't worried about Genni, he was on his last leg. I-was in shock.

"Hello Moses. It is good to see you again."

Llama Dominguez-was the last *person* I expected to see.

FivE

"Don't be so surprised, Moses. I told you I did the things that Daniel's regular people did not do. Oh, hold on," She was beautiful. She was graceful. I was bleeding from my left side where 'Jerry', whose name was Genni Gropovick, had cut me with his

blade.

I would have ended that *bastard's* life & I would have *buried* his ass! He-was-mine! But a sniper's bullet cut the air, hit Genni in his back, blowing his chest wide open.

His last words, '*y-you think is over. There was five of us lost our money that day, I'm the first wave, you will see*'. It was all I could get out of him.

She walked over, her movements were slow, exacting. "You may have heard my name before. My professional name. The Torcher. That was my Prowler outside of your place. I would guess you can put the pieces together from there. Hold on, my cell phone just vibrated."

Llama Dominguez was hired by Daniel Carl Richardson to snuff out whoever hit his son. He used me to find the extortionist, used me as bait. She followed me, used me, and then took my revenge away. I was heated, and if she were a man, I would have pulled out my GLOCK and slammed hot lead all up in her ass! But, I couldn't do it. There was that place inside that she touched. A place dangerous for someone in my profession to have. I had heard of The Torcher. No one knew what he looked like or who The Torcher was, but they always knew that the job he was hired to do was done. No matter who was the target. The Torcher always had a way to get close, closer than any hired assassin. Now I knew why.

Her jet-black hair swayed, moved in a swooping wave as she turned back to address me. She still had the hint of sandalwood and peaches. "He wants to talk with you." She handed me the cell. I held it to the ear lacking the burst communiqué head-piece.

"Moses," his voice still commanded you to hear him.

"Mr. Richardson." I was bleeding, I was tired, my crew was still shooting the hell out of the remainder of Genni's men and were about five minutes from doing a Manhattan Project to the fort. But I had to take this call.

"You served your purpose, Moses. You led me to the Extortionists, you led me to the *bastards* that killed my son.....you kept your word. But now, this is business. You won't be bothered by the ATF. They will get what they need on the gunrunners, I'll see

to that. But as for you, I don't want you in my city. Your rep will be made right, but you have two weeks to get your affairs in order. You are to leave Highland....never to return."

What!

"I-"

"The Russians that were dealing with the Extortionists, as I've come to find out, found the body of one of their own within the wreckage of the auto emporium explosion of recent. Seems like they've been led to believe you had something to do with his death. They may be grieving now, but-they will come looking for you. So you have no choice but to *leave*." His voice spoke in finals.

"Daniel," always the risk taker I was. But I had nothing to lose.

"Yes..."

"I'm-sorry."

".....so am I..."

The phone went dead. No one was on the other end. I handed the phone back to Llama. She flipped the cell closed. Her eyes, those wet black marbles stared up at me, sultry, cold. Her lips whispered softly, *"I'm sorry it had to be like this, Moses. It was a job, you're a pro so you know the deal. Go on, stay alive. I know Daniel, have done business with him in the past, you may be able to make this right. But you have to live to do it. So live. Live to buy me that drink. That friend of yours has this place wired,"* her lips brush softly against mine. *"I suggest you get in contact with him soon."*

Ciao for now." A click on her belt and the rope pulley pulled her back into the darkness of the banisters above.

Two quick bursts came from the earpiece: One, "Moses, I'm ghost bruh." Lazarus was almost cackling with glee." I killed every last one of these soldiers and enjoyed doing it. Had my fill-don't let me lay eyes on you again. Remember. As long as he lives, you live. I'm out."

The second: "Yo, Moses, you still breathing? If so, say something or Jesus gonna go Hiroshima and we'll bounce. Moses, you there?"

".....yeah Holmes I'm still livin'. Come get me, then have Jesus blow this place to hell! Don't sweat about Lazarus, he's ghost. Once we get out, I got some moving to do. You down to hang for a bit?"

"Yeah, money. You know I'm down. Be there in a flash."

I stood there, leaning on burgundy hand-carved post.

This wasn't over, none of it was. But I needed distance.

I needed a new start.

end