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Second Time Around

Written by Raymond Khoury

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SECOND TIME AROUND

RAYMOND KHOURY



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PROLOGUE

I'd had this dream before.

Not recently, though. Last time must have been a couple of years ago, at least. But just like I had back then, I woke out of it in a cold, clammy sweat, my breathing clipped, my fists balled tight around a clump of sheet, my head feeling like it was encased in lead.

Did I say dream? I should have said nightmare.

It wasn't a very long one, but what it lacked in duration it more than made up for in intensity. And it felt so real that for several breaths afterward, I couldn't tell whether or not I was still back there, on that Mexican mountain, with Munro's voice barking through my earpiece.

'Pull the goddam trigger and get your ass out here,' he was shouting. 'We've got to clear out NOW!'

My thought: *Tell me something I don't know.*

My eyes darted around, reacting to the three-bullet bursts and the longer, wild frenzies of gunfire that were echoing around me from all over the compound. Then some dull thuds and a searing grunt tore through my comms set, and I knew that another operative from our eight-man team had been cut down.

My body froze as opposing instincts duelled for control. I swung my gaze back to the man who was cowering next to me. His face was all crumpled up, pinched with anguish from the big, bloody gash in his thigh, his lips quivering, his eyes wide with fear, like he knew what was coming. My grip on the handgun tightened. I could feel my finger hovering

over the trigger, tapping it indecisively, like it was red hot.

Munro was right.

We had to get out of there before it was too late. But—

More gunfire pummelled the walls around me.

'That's not what we're here for,' I rasped into the mike, my eyes locked on my wounded prey. 'I've got to try and—'

'—and what,' Munro rasped, 'carry him out? What, are you Superman now?' A long burst ripped through my comms set, like a jackhammer to my eardrums, then his manic voice came back. 'Just cap the son of a bitch, Reilly. Do it. You heard what he said. You heard what he's done. "It'll make meth seem as boring as aspirin," remember? That's the scumbag you're worried about wasting? You happy to let him loose, is that gonna be your contribution to making this world a better place? I don't think so. You don't want that on your conscience, and I don't either. We came here to do a job. We have our orders. We're at war, and he's the enemy. So stop with the righteous bullshit, pop the bastard and get your ass out here. I ain't waiting any longer.'

His words were still ricocheting inside my skull as another volley of bullets raked the back wall of the lab. I dove to the floor as wood splinters and glass shards rained down around me, and took cover behind one of the lab's cabinets. I flicked a quick glance across at the scientist. Munro was, again, right. There was no way we could take him with us. Not given his injury. Not given the small army of coke-fueled *banditos* bearing down on us.

Dammit, it wasn't supposed to go down this way.

It was meant to be a swift, surgical extraction. Under cover of darkness, me, Munro and the six other combat-ready guys that rounded off our OCDETF strike team – that's the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, a federal program that drew on the resources of eleven agencies, including my own FBI and Munro's DEA – we were supposed to sneak into the compound, find McKinnon and bring him

out. Him and his research, that is. Straightforward enough, especially the sneaking-in part. The thing is, the mission had been ordered up hastily, after McKinnon's unexpected call. We hadn't had much time to plan it, and the intel we were able to put together on the remote drug lab was sketchy, but I thought we still had decent odds. For one, we were well equipped – sound-suppressed sub-machine guns, night-vision scopes, Kevlar. We had a surveillance drone hovering overhead. We also had the element of surprise. And we'd been pretty successful in raiding other labs since we'd first arrived in Mexico four months earlier.

Quick in and out, nice and clean.

Worked a treat for the 'in' part of the plan.

Then McKinnon sprang his eleventh-hour surprise on us, caused Munro to go apeshit, got hit in the thigh and screwed up the 'out' part.

I could now hear frantic shouts in Spanish. The *banditos* were closing in.

I had to make a move. Any longer and I'd be captured, and I didn't have any illusions about what the outcome of that would be. They'd torture the hell out of me. Partly for info, partly for fun. Then they'd bring out the chainsaw and prop my head in my lap for a photo op. And the worst part of it is, my noble death would all be for nothing. McKinnon's work would live on. In infamy, by all indications.

Munro's voice crackled back to life, blaring deep inside my skull. 'All right, screw it. It's on your head, man. I'm outta here.'

And right then, my mind tripped.

It was like a primeval determination bypassed all the resistance that was innate to me, and brushed aside everything that was part and parcel of who I was as a human being and just took control. I watched, out-of-body-experience-like, as my hand came up, all smooth and robotic, lined up the shot right between McKinnon's terrified eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The scientist's head snapped back as a dark mess splattered the cabinet behind him, then he just toppled to one side, a lifeless mound of flesh and bone.

There was no need for a confirmation tap.

I knew it was final.

My gaze lingered on the fallen man for a long second, then I rasped, 'I'm coming out,' into my mike. I took a deep breath, popped the strikers off two incendiary grenades and lobbed them at the *pistoleros* who were hunting for me, then sprang to my feet, laying down a wall of gunfire behind me as I bolted toward the exit. I stopped at the back door of the lab, took one last look at the place, then I burst out of there as the whole place went up in flames.

And that's when I snapped awake, my pillow damp, my neck cold, my jaw muscles strained.

I glanced at the clock, took a sip of water, then rolled over to Tess's side of the bed, which was nice and dry and vacant, given that she was away. And managed to drift back into a comatose sleep, exhausted by the experience.

Like I said, I hadn't had this dream – this nightmare – for years. I didn't need any Sigmund-wannabe to explain it to me. I'd actually been there. I'd lived through it, around five years ago. No mystery there.

What I still don't get, though, is the timing of it. Why then? Why that particular night?

Given everything that happened.

Given the blood-soaked crapfest that kicked off the next morning.

1

San Diego, California

The doorbell chimed shortly after nine a.m. on that lazy, sunny Saturday morning.

Michelle Martinez was in her kitchen, emptying a dishwasher that had been stacked far beyond anything the laws of physics could explain while accompanying the rousing choral outro to the Red Hot Chili Peppers' 'Under The Bridge' that was belting out from the radio. She looked up, used her forearm to sweep back the chestnut-brown bangs that kept playing games with her baby blues, and gave a gentle yell in the direction of the living room.

'Tom? Can you get that, *cariño*?'

'You got it, *alteza*,' came a reply from the front of the house.

Michelle grinned, threw a glance over her shoulder at her four-year-old son, Alex, who was playing out in the backyard, and got back to emptying the cutlery tray. In the background, the lead Chili was lamenting the dark days he'd spent chasing speedballs in the bowels of LA. She loved that song, with its haunting guitar intro and its epic closing chorus, despite the emotions its lyrics stirred in her. Being a retired DEA agent, it was a world of pain and devastation that she knew well. But right now, what she loved far more was when Tom called her that – *your highness*. It was so *not* her, so wildly off the mark, and the sheer absurdity of it never failed to tickle her.

He usually said it when she asked him for something, which didn't happen that often, not even with her consciously reminding herself to do so every once in a while. The fact was, there wasn't much that Michelle Martinez couldn't, or

wouldn't, do for herself. She was as self-sufficient as a military spouse, which is exactly what her mother had been, something that had probably been ingrained in her by watching her mom all those years while growing up on army bases in Puerto Rico and New Jersey. It was that self-sufficiency, combined with her iron will and her intolerance for bullshit, that had got her into all kinds of trouble – she'd been expelled from a handful of schools before dropping out of high school altogether – but it was also what had helped her straighten up, get herself a General Education Diploma and parlay her wild streak, her sharp tongue and a series of brushes with the law into a meteoric, if ultimately cut short, career as an undercover agent of the Drugs Enforcement Administration.

The thing was, guys didn't appreciate feeling like you didn't need them. At least, that's what her girlfriends kept telling her. Apparently, it was some vestige from man's hunter-gatherer days and, truth be told, they weren't all wrong. Tom seemed to enjoy the occasional request, whether it was for something as trivial as opening the front door or for something more, shall we say, intimate. And it had generated the *alteza* nickname that she'd grown to love, one she far preferred to the various macho nicknames her fellow agents had for her back when she was on the force. *Alteza* was much smoother on the ears and had an old-world, romantic ring to it. It was a word that triggered a little grin at the edge of her mouth every time she heard him say it.

The grin didn't last long.

As the chorus gave way to the song's closing solo guitar strums, the next sound she heard wasn't as pleasing.

It wasn't Tom's voice. It was something else.

Two sharp, metallic snaps, like someone had just fired a nail gun. Only Michelle knew it wasn't a nail gun at all. She'd been around enough sound-suppressed handguns in her life to know what the automatic slide action of a real gun sounded like.

The kind that fired bullets that killed people.

Tom.

She yelled out his name as she sprang to action, propelled by instinct and training, almost without thinking, as if the threat of death had triggered some kind of Pavlovian reflex that took over her body. Her eyes quickly picked out the large kitchen knife from the mess of cutlery, and it was already firmly in her grip as she rounded the counter and hurtled toward the kitchen door.

She reached it just as a figure emerged from it, a man in white coveralls, a black cap, a black pull-up mask covering his face from the nose down and a silenced gun in his hand. The split-second glimpse she got of him shouted out some vague features – thickset, bad skin, what looked like a buzz cut – but most of all, she was struck by the unflinching commitment that emanated from his eyes. She took him by surprise as they almost collided and she leaped at him, pushing his gun hand away with her left hand while plunging the knife into the side of his neck with the other. His eyes saucered with shock, and the blade had pulled down his face mask, exposing his thick, black Fu Manchu moustache just as blood spewed out of his mouth. He dropped the gun and reached up for the knife with both hands and grappled with it, but Michelle had plunged it in deep and it was solidly embedded. She'd also clearly hit his carotid as blood was geysering out of the wound, spraying the door jamb to his left.

She wasn't about to hang around and watch. Especially not when her gut was screaming at her that the man probably wasn't alone.

She threw a flat kick at the gurgling intruder's midsection, sending him crashing into the wall of the hallway, away from the fallen handgun, which was lying there, tantalizingly close. She bent down to grab it when another man appeared, at the other end of the hallway, similarly masked and armed. The man flinched with a stab of shock at the sight of his bloodied

buddy, then his eyes locked on Michelle's and his gun sprang up in a solid, two-fisted grip. Michelle froze, caught in the crosshairs, staring death in the eye, right there, in the hallway outside her kitchen – but death never came. The shooter held his stance for a long second, long enough for her to dive at the handgun, spin around and loose a couple of rounds at him. Wood and plaster splintered off the walls around him as he ducked out of sight, and she heard him yell out, 'She's got a gun.'

There were others.

She didn't know how many, nor did she know where they were. One thing she did know: Alex was out back. And it was time to hightail it out of there and get him to safety.

Her mind rocketed into hyperdrive, focused acutely on that single objective. She darted back and took cover behind the kitchen wall, tried to ignore the pounding in her ears, and listened to any sounds coming at her from the front of the house, then she made her move. She fired off three quick rounds down the hall to keep them guessing, then rushed across the kitchen and flew out the patio doors, running to the drumbeat of survival as fast as her legs would carry her.

Alex was there, on the grass, orchestrating yet another epic confrontation between his small army of Ben 10 figurines. Michelle didn't slow down. She just stormed over to him, tucking the gun under her waistband without breaking step, and scooped up his tiny, three-and-a-half-foot frame in her arms and kept going.

'Ben,' the boy protested as a toy flew out of his tiny grasp.

'We gotta go, baby,' she said, breathless, one arm clasped around his back, the other pressed down against the back of his head, holding him tight.

She sprinted across the lawn to the door that led to the garage, stopping to glance back only once she reached it, her heart jackhammering its way out of her ribcage. She saw one of them appear through the patio doors just as she flung the

garage door open and ducked inside, fiddling with its key to lock it behind her.

'Mommy, what are you doing?'

His mouth was moving, but nothing was registering as her eyes surveyed in all directions, her mind totally channeled on one thought: escape. She told him, 'We're just going for a ride, okay? Just a little ride.'

She flung open the door of her Jeep, hustled Alex inside, and clambered into the driver's seat. The Wrangler was parked with its back to the garage's tilt-up door, which was shut.

'Down there, sweetie,' she told Alex, herding him into the passenger's footwell with a careful mix of urgency and tenderness. 'Stay there. We're gonna play hide and seek, okay?'

He gave her a hesitant, uncertain look, then smiled.

'Okay.'

She dug deep and found him a smile as her fingers fired up the ignition. The V6 sprang to life with a throaty gurgle.

'Stay down, all right?' she told him as she threw the gear lever into reverse, floored the gas pedal, then turned to face back and yanked her foot off the clutch.

The Jeep bolted backwards and burst through the garage door, careening onto the street in a storm of rubber and twisted sheet metal. She spotted a white van parked outside the house and slammed the brakes, and just as the Jeep screeched to a halt, she saw two men, also in white coveralls, rushing out from her front door. She slammed the car into gear and roared off, keeping a nervous eye in the mirror, expecting the white van to come charging after her, but to her surprise, it didn't. It just stayed in its spot and receded into the distance before she hung a right and turned off her street.

She snaked her way past slower cars and turned left, right and left again at the next crossings, zigzagging away from the house, keeping one eye peeled on her rear-view mirror, her mind ablaze with questions about Tom and what had happened to him. She didn't know what state he was in, didn't

know whether he was even still alive, but she had to get help to him, fast. She reached into her back pocket, pulled out her phone and punched in nine-one-one.

The dispatcher picked up almost instantly. 'What's your emergency?'

'I'm calling to report a shooting. Some guys showed up at our house and—' She suddenly realized Alex was in the car with her, eyeing her curiously from the floor of the passenger side, and paused.

'Ma'am, where are you calling from?'

'We need help, okay? Send some squad cars. And an ambulance.' She gave the dispatcher her address, then added, 'You need to be quick, I think my boyfriend's been shot.'

'What's your name, ma'am?'

Michelle thought about whether or not to answer as she glanced at Alex, who was still staring up at her, wide-eyed. She decided there was no point in adding any more information at this point.

'Just get them there as fast as you can, all right?'

Then she hung up.

Her heart was thundering away furiously in her chest as she checked her mirror again and flew past another slow-moving car. There was still no sign of the van. After about five minutes, she started to breathe easier and helped Alex up and into the front seat, where she belted him in. It took her another half an hour of just putting miles between her and her house before she felt she could pull over, and finally did so in the parking lot of a large mall out at Lemon Grove.

She didn't move for a while. She just sat there, in shock, picturing Tom – and started to cry. The tears smeared her cheeks, then she looked over and saw Alex staring at her, and she forced herself to stop and wiped them off.

'Come on, baby. Let's get you back into your seat.'

She got out of the car and helped Alex into the back and onto his booster seat, belted him in, then got back in and sat

there again, shivering, collecting her thoughts, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Trying to figure out what to do next. Who to call. How to deal with the insanity of what had just happened.

She looked up into the mirror and glanced at Alex. He was just sitting there, looking tiny, staring at her with those big, vulnerable eyes of his, eyes that fear now had firmly in its grip, and as she stared at his face, one name broke through the daze and the confusion swirling around inside her head. And although it was someone she hadn't spoken to for years, right now, it seemed like the right move.

She scrolled her phone's contacts list, found his name and, mumbling a silent prayer that his number hadn't changed, hit the dial button.

Reilly picked up on the third ring.

2

Mamaroneck, New York

I was dumping some dry-cleaning and a beer-heavy grocery bag on the passenger seat of my car when my BlackBerry warbled.

It was a typical July morning in this small coastal town, hot and still and humid, but I didn't mind it. Between the unrelenting heatwave that had turned Manhattan into a sweaty, oxygen-starved cauldron for the past couple of weeks, and the heightened-alert July fourth weekend I'd just spent there dealing with its associated onslaught of false alarms and hysteria, a quiet weekend by the ocean was definitely a heavenly proposition, regardless of the supernova looming overhead. As an added bonus, my Tess and her fourteen-year-old daughter, Kim, were out in Arizona, visiting Tess's mom and her aunt at the latter's ranch, and I had the house to myself. Don't get me wrong. I love Tess to death and I love being around them, and since Tess and I got back together, I've realized how much I hate – truly *hate* – sleeping alone. But we all need a few days alone, now and then, to take stock and ponder and recharge – euphemisms for, basically, vegging out and eating stuff we shouldn't be eating and being the lazy slobs we love to be when nobody's watching. So the weekend was shaping up pretty sweet – until the warble.

The name that flashed up on my screen made my heart trip.

Michelle Martinez.

Whoa.

I hadn't heard from her for – how long had it been? Four, maybe five years. Not since I'd walked away from what we

had going during that ill-fated stint of mine down in Mexico. I hadn't thought about her for years, either. The marvelous Tess Chaykin – I don't use the term lightly – had burst into my life not too long after I'd got back to New York. She'd snared my attention in the chaotic aftermath of that infamous, horse-mounted raid at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and had quickly engulfed my world, infecting me with that earnest, addictive lust for life of hers and crowding out any musings I could have had about any past loves or long-gone lovers.

I stared at the screen for a long second, my mind running a meta-trawl through possible reasons for the call. I couldn't think of any, and just hit the green button.

'Meesh?'

'Where are you?'

'I'm—' I was about to make a joke, something lame about sipping a mojito poolside in the Hamptons, but the edge to her voice ripped the notion to shreds. 'You okay?'

'No. Where are you?'

I felt the back of my neck stiffen. Her voice was as distinctively accented as ever, a vestige of her Dominican and Puerto Rican descent with an overlay from growing up in New Jersey, but it had none of the laid-back, playful sultriness I remembered.

'I'm out,' I told her. 'Just running some errands. What's going on?'

'You're in New York?'

'Yes. Meesh, what's up? Where are you?'

I heard a sigh – more of an angry grumble, really, as I knew full well that Michelle Martinez was not one to sigh – then she came back.

'I'm in San Diego and I'm – I'm in trouble. Something terrible has happened, Sean. Some guys came to the house and they shot my boyfriend,' she said, the words bursting out of her. 'I barely got away and – Christ, I don't know what the

hell's going on, but I just didn't know who else to call. I'm sorry.'

My pulse bolted. 'No, no, you did the right thing, it's good you called. You okay? Are you hurt?'

'No, I'm all right.' She took another deep breath, like she was calming herself. I'd never heard her like this. She'd always been clear-headed, steel-nerved, unshakeable. This was new territory. Then she said, 'Hang on,' and I heard some fumbling, like she was moving the phone away from her mouth and holding it against her clothing. I heard her say, 'Sit tight, okay, baby? I'll be right outside,' heard the car door click open and slam shut, then her voice came back, less frantic than before, but still intense.

'Some guys showed up. I was home – we were all home. There were four, five of them, I'm not sure. White van, coveralls, like painters or something. So they wouldn't raise eyebrows with the neighbors, I guess. They were pros, Sean. No question. Face masks, Glocks, suppressors. Zero hesitation.'

My pulse hit a higher gear. 'Jesus, Meesh.'

Her voice broke, almost imperceptibly, but it was there. 'Tom – my boyfriend – if he hadn't …' Her voice trailed off for a moment, then came back with a pained resolve. 'Doorbell goes, he gets it. They cut him down the second he opened the door. I'm sure of it. I heard two silenced snaps and a big thump when he hit the ground, then they charged into the house and I just freaked. I got one of them in the neck and I just ran. I grabbed Alex – the garage has a door that leads out into the backyard – and I got the hell out of there.' She let out a ragged sigh. 'I just left him there, Sean. Maybe he was hurt, maybe I could've helped him, but I just ran. I just left him there and ran.'

She was really hurting over that, and I had to move her away from her remorse. 'Sounds to me like you didn't have a choice, Meesh. You did the right thing.' My mind was struggling to process everything she'd said while stumbling over

the canyon-sized gaps in the overall picture. 'Did you call the cops?'

'I called nine-one-one. Gave them the address, said there was a shooting, and hung up.'

Then I remembered something she'd just said. 'You said you grabbed Alex. Who's Alex?'

'My son. My four-year-old boy.'

I heard her hesitate for a moment, I could picture her weighing her next words, then her voice came back and hit me with a three-thousand-mile knockout punch.

'Our boy, Sean. He's our son.'