

Twenty-Ten

by David Borcharding

He picked her out of the crowd at Club Mai, easy when you knew what to look for: long, dark hair, pretty Latina face, store-bought tits. This one wore a tight dress that showed off her legs, sculpted to perfection by God and a pair of four-inch stilettos. Yeah, she was the one.

She had a blonde with her, and a couple of vatos followed them around but kept their distance. Bodyguards, not boyfriends; thugs in club wear.

He watched them, watched her, and thought about how to pull this off. Everything he knew about catching women, he learned from Jesse. Most importantly, he learned not to trust himself, his instincts.

"When it comes to women," Jesse said, "your instincts are crap. Always do the opposite of what you think you should do. Comprende?"

He trusted Jesse -- he always trusted Jesse -- and his ability to get women improved drastically after that. Even so, it still only lasted a night, a weekend at most. He couldn't keep up the act forever, after all. Soon, the mask would slip and they'd see what he really was, and they would bolt like scared rabbits. He couldn't help it; it's who he was.

Right now, his instincts told him to send a drink first to test the waters. He ignored them and went over to her instead, hoping to come off confident but not cocky. The vatos eyeballed the shit out of him as soon as he got within ten feet. He ignored them, walked over to the booth where she sat with the blonde.

"I'm gonna buy you a drink." Hands on the table, leaning in close enough to smell the sweet muskiness of her perfume.

She smiled, amused but not offended. Her eyes were the same pale green of his mom's favorite pair of earrings -- circles of polished stone that made her earlobes sag under the weight. Moss agate, his mom called it -- a fact he never thought he'd have remembered, but there it was.

"Jameson, neat," she said.

He went to the bar, waved to the girl working it. Her nose and eyebrow were pierced and she had a sleeve of Japanese art tattooed down her left arm. Not the kind he expected to know good booze, but he gave it a shot.

"What do you have that's a step up from Jameson?"

"I got sixteen-year-old Jura."

"Good? This is really important. A lot depends on this drink."

She grinned. "Trust me."

"Okay, give me two doubles, neat."

"It's a single malt. Of course I'm giving it to you neat."

The bottle she grabbed had womanly curves and a gold label with the name in large, black letters. Simple, yet classy. She poured the hooch into two rocks glasses, being generous.

He tipped her well and took the drinks back to the table.

"This isn't Jameson," he said, setting a glass in front of her. "This is better. One of the best scotches I've ever had, as a matter of fact."

She looked at him, wary but smiling.

"If you don't like it, I'll buy you Jameson for the rest of the night."

She sipped, leaving a small crescent of cranberry lipstick on the glass.

"Good, right?"

"Very." She set it down. "I'm Elle."

"Duncan."

"Duncan." She repeated it with the same look she had when she tasted the scotch. "This is my friend Amanda."

Amanda glanced at him with an insincere smile, pissed at the interruption or because he didn't buy her a drink. He smiled back with equal sincerity, then ignored her.

"So, Duncan, why the drink?" Leaning forward, her elbows on the table.

"I own the company." He grinned. "Profits are down, so I'm taking a hands-on approach. Using the drug dealer model -- first drink's free, get you hooked."

She laughed, showing perfectly white, straight teeth. "Bullshit."

"No, really." Playing it for yuks, having fun with her just like he'd seen Jesse do a thousand times. "Duncan Jura, that's me. Inherited it from a long line of Scottish drunks."

"You don't look Scottish. You look like a local."

"When in Rome, right? Back home, it's all kilts and bagpipes and sheep fucking."

She laughed, and that was the end of the conversation for a while. The pop music that had been playing since he walked in was suddenly replaced by a lung-rattling bass beat. Amanda shouted something in her ear and Elle left her drink to follow her friend and the rest of the club to the dance floor. Duncan stayed at the table and watched.

It was interesting, the way the two women moved to the shitmix the DJ was pumping out. Amanda mostly stood in one place, swinging her head and arms. Elle, however, danced like she didn't give a sweet fuck who was watching, telling the world she was just here for a good time. He realized he was enjoying the show, and felt a twinge of guilt about what he was going to do to her.

He glanced over at the bodyguards, found only one of them watching her. The other one -- the one with the sideburns shaved to look like lightning bolts -- stared at Duncan, telling him to fuck off with his eyes. Duncan raised his glass to him, then went back to watching the girl.

They hit Bang after that, danced some more, drank a lot more. The girls would go to the bathroom together now and then, returning a few minutes later with traces of coke around their nostrils. Just after one of these visits, Amanda got a phone call and had to leave, getting pissy when Elle wouldn't go with her. The two vatos stayed.

"What's the story with those guys?" He asked because he thought she'd get suspicious if he didn't.

"They're my babysitters. I wasn't sure you'd noticed them."

"Lightning Bug's been staring me down all night. I don't think he likes me."

That got a laugh. "Fuck him."

"No thanks." He grinned. "So they're your bodyguards or something? You a movie star?"

"Haven't you seen any of my films?"

"I don't go to the movies much."

She laughed again. "No, I'm nobody. Those guys, it's a long story and I don't know you well enough."

"Fair enough."

Having a What Would Jesse Do moment, he sensed he should shut up for a while. Elle stared the crowd on the dance floor and he stared at her.

"Look," she said at last, "let's ditch the babysitters and have some real fun."

"All right."

She leaned forward, smiling wider than she had all night.

"You stay here for a few minutes. I'll pretend to go to the ladies' room, they'll come over and threaten you. Tell them you give up and leave. I'll slip out the back and meet you in the alley."

"Tricky," he said. "You sure it will work?"

"Trust me."

She waved to the vatos and headed for the back of the club. She wasn't gone but a few seconds when they came over to where he was sitting. Lightning Bug leaned over the table, got in Duncan's face.

"This is the part where you threaten me, right?"

"You don't know who you're fuckin' with, guy," said Lightning Bug, all attitude.

"No, I don't. I just hit on her 'cause I thought she was a movie star, but she says she's not." He drained the last of his drink. "So fuck it. I don't need this kind of shit."

He stood up and made his way to the front door, glancing back to see if they were following him. They stood by the empty table, staring him down. Lightning Bug blew him a kiss. Duncan gave him the finger and left.

Elle met him halfway down the alley, her musky perfume lost beneath the pungent tang coming from an overloaded Dumpster some 2010 asshole had tagged.

"For a second, I thought you might be ditching me," he said.

"Yet, here I am."

"Here you are." He could tell she'd had another bump on the way.

"So where do we go now?"

"I was thinking your place."

"A few expensive drinks and I'm supposed to fall on your cock?"

Pretending to be offended, but not selling it.

"Something like that, yeah."

"Wow, seduction. In an alley. Next to garbage."

He sensed someone behind him, turned, and took a sucker punch to his left eye. He caught the wall, scraping his knuckles across the cement block but hanging on enough to stay upright.

Lightning Bug reached for his waistband; Duncan's foot got there first, and the thug folded like laundry. The other one charged and Duncan sidestepped, grabbed the back of the asshole's collar and slammed his face into the Dumpster. The guy went limp and Duncan dropped him in a puddle of something foul.

Lightning Bug recovered in time to get Duncan's boot in his face. He went over on his back, head bouncing once off the pavement. Neither of them moved after that.

He expected the girl to be running by now, but she was just standing there, looking at him with a mixture of fear and -- Jesus Christ, was she turned on? Regardless, the mask was off now; no use pretending anymore.

A quick check revealed a 9mm Sig in Lightning's waistband. He took it and the stainless .45 his partner was packing. Tucked the .45 in his waistband where the jacket covered it, kept the Sig out.

"Who are you?"

"I told you." He pushed up their sleeves and found matching tattoos on their right arms -- MMX.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Elle, you said. Judging by the tattoos on your bodyguards, I'd bet you're Xavier's girlfriend. That's what I'm hoping, anyway."

"So you know Martin."

"Yep." He stood up. "And you're going to take me to him."

"Or what, you'll shoot me?" Looking pointedly at the gun in his hand.

Duncan looked at the dark windows above them and the sparse traffic on street just a couple dozen feet away.

"Funny thing about this neighborhood. You got a place like Bang, and yet --"

He shot Lightning Bug in the chest. The blast rang loud in the narrow alley. He fired again, putting a second shot in the other bodyguard. It felt good, familiar; this was his element, not some goddamn dance club.

Elle clutched the trash bin like she'd forgotten how to stand up. Nothing but fear in her eyes now, and lots of it. He kept her in sight as he tucked the 9mm next to the .45.

"My car's around the corner," he said. "Time to see your boyfriend."

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The clock in the dash of the stolen Honda said it was after three in the morning. They'd been driving fifteen minutes, both of them silent, Elle staring out the window. Duncan wanted a smoke, but there was only one left in the pack and he was saving it.

"You're a dead man, you know." Still scared, he could tell, but trying to sound ballsy again.

"We'll see."

"So who the fuck are you?"

"My last name isn't Jura, and I don't run a distillery."

"I figured that out, thanks. Duncan's your real name, though."

"Dunc, for short. Slam Dunk, if you're a 2010 asshole." He shook the last cigarette out of a pack on the dash, lit it with the Zippo in his pocket. "Christ, what a stupid fucking name for a gang."

"Mind if I --"

"Sure." He slipped the lighter into his pocket and handed her the empty pack. She crumpled it, flipped him off.

"So you've got a grudge with 2010. Let me guess, disgruntled former employee."

"Something like that. Exactly like that, actually, but not as stupid as you make it sound."

"Of course not. Nothing stupid about going up against one of the most feared drug lords in North America."

"He killed my best friend."

"So you figure it's only fair to let him kill you, too."

He punched her, just grazing his knuckles off her cheekbone, but hard enough to bounce her head off the passenger window.

"Fuck!" She covered her eye with her hand. "You fucking psycho! Goddamn it!"

"Don't crack wise about Jesse. He was my best fuckin' friend, a brother to me."

"All right. Jesus." She rubbed the side of her face. "Shit."

"Your boyfriend thought he was a snitch. Sent some punk, shot him in the face coming out of a Seven-Eleven. Point blank, took half his fucking head off."

"That's horrible."

"Really? I thought a girl like you'd get off on it."

"Fuck you."

"What, you draw the line at watching guys get the shit kicked out of them?" He glanced at her as he drove. "You saw those guys coming up behind me in the alley, didn't say anything, didn't warn me. Is that how you get your kicks? You wait for guys to hit on you when your boyfriend's not around, get 'em all worked up, and at the end of the night, your two watchdogs beat the pretty out of them while you watch?"

"It wasn't like that. I just ... wasn't paying attention."

She might have been telling the truth. If her head was full of Xavier's yeyo, fuck knows what she saw or didn't see. He let it go, and neither of them said anything for a few blocks.

"You don't just waltz in and kill someone like Martin Manuel Xavier, you know," she said, breaking the silence. "He's not stupid. He's got bodyguards."

"You had bodyguards."

"He's got more."

"He makes mistakes."

"Like killing your friend?"

"Like not killing me first."

She looked out the window for a moment, then, "How did you even know he was in town?"

"The fight. He always slithers up from Mexico when there's a big fight."

"You haven't asked me where he's staying, so you know that, too."

"Hotel Selvage, penthouse suite."

"So why do you need me?"

"I need a human shield and I don't like holding guys."

"Fuck you."

"And your perfume smells nice."

"This isn't a fucking joke!" She was crying, he realized then.

"You're going to get me killed, and I didn't do shit to you. What the fuck!"

"Stop bawling, your makeup will run."

They were coming up on the hotel. He drove slowly past, checking it out. The lobby looked empty, but it was hard to tell through the cut glass windows on the front doors. "I'm not going to kill you, and if this goes right, I'm not going to get you killed. Not tonight, anyway. 2010 will probably come after you, though, no matter how this turns out."

"Just let it go. Let me go." She blinked a few times, more tears spilling out of the corners of her eyes.

"Sorry, not my style." He leaned over the wheel, trying to see the top of the hotel. "Your best bet, no matter what happens? Skip town -- tonight. Go someplace big, New York or L.A. Change your name."

"I hope Martin kills you slow."

"You better hope I kill him. It'll buy you more time."

He went around the block and pulled up across the street from the Selvage. Engine off, waiting for her to get it together. She pulled a tissue from her purse, dabbed at the corner of her eyes. The mascara was a little smeary, but it would pass.

"This is a tow zone."

"It's not my car."

They got out and he checked to make sure his blazer covered the guns.

"Didn't you bring your own gun?"

"Couldn't get one in time."

"So you just have the two, then."

"It's enough."

She laughed. "You are so dead."

"Once we get up to the penthouse, you can go. Take the elevator back down."

"You really think you're going to pull this off, don't you." Her voice was high and tight.

"You're not part of this. You're a real bitch, but you're not 2010."

"Then why involve me at all? You know they'll kill me."

"Next time, don't date the head of a drug cartel."

He pulled open the front door and ushered her inside. They walked quickly past the lobby's marble columns, heading for the twin curved staircases that led up to the mezzanine.

"Why the fuck does he stay here?" Duncan scanned the opulent lobby as they walked, but didn't see any of Xavier's boys. "This joint's too classy for a shitbag drug lord and a bunch of gangbanger fuckwits."

"It's close to the fight."

The brunette behind the desk looked up at them and smiled as they strode past. Resting his hand on the small of Elle's back, Duncan guided her up the stairs, past the empty lounge and down a short hallway. A 2010 fuckface in a dark suit stood at the end, guarding the private elevator to the penthouse.

"The fuck you been, puta? Boss lookin' for you." He pushed the call button. "And who's this asshole? Where's Juan and Pago?"

The elevator chimed and the door opened. Duncan broke Fuckface's nose, then snapped his neck, pushing him inside as he fell. He pulled the girl inside and punched the gold button marked "Penthouse."

His stomach dropped somewhere down around his balls as the express elevator launched itself upwards.

"Get up close to the door. I want them to see you first thing when it opens."

She did as she was told. She looked pale, but maybe that was the light in the elevator.

Fuckface had an MP5 under his black blazer and MMX ink on his wrist. The machine pistol probably wouldn't be good for much more than suppressive fire. If he was lucky, it might take out a couple Xavier's assholes -- but he wouldn't bet his roll on it. He moved it to his left hand, kept the .45 in his right, his gun hand.

The elevator slowed, returning Duncan's stomach to its normal, upright position. He tightened his grip on the guns, kept his eye on the girl. An electronic chime announced their arrival. The door slid open on a small marble foyer, with the living room of the suite just beyond.

One of Xavier's heavies stood right in the door, gun out, inches from Elle's face. He sneered at her and put the gun away, saying, "Ooh, you gonna get an ass-poundin', chica." Duncan shouldered the girl out of the way and shot the fucker in the face with the .45.

Four sicarios -- enforcers -- were sitting around a giant plasma screen television, playing something on a Wii. They all jumped at the sound of their friend's brains getting sprayed across the room, all reached for their guns. Duncan sprayed them with the MP5 until it was empty, taking three of them down, using the .45 on the only one still standing. The plasma screen sparked and went dark, riddled with most of the machine gun's rounds. He dropped it and pulled the Sig.

Two guys came out of the bedroom on the left, firing before they even knew who they were shooting at. They emptied their guns and Duncan felt a round burn through the top of his thigh. He two-fisted

them just like in the movies, putting 9mm rounds in the one on the left and .45s in the one on the right, both center mass. One fell back through the door; the other left a bloody smear down the wall.

For a second, all he could hear was the ringing in his ears from the gunfire. Smoke stained the air a hazy gray, smelling like the Fourth of July when he was a kid. Glancing behind him, he saw the elevator door close, heard it chime. The indicator above it lit up, a red arrow pointing down.

Good fuckin' luck, he thought.

The fire alarm sounded then, impossibly loud, like a battleship klaxon. Duncan looked down at his leg, saw his own blood soaking through his pants. He'd had worse.

When he looked up again, Xavier stood in the door to the master bedroom. He wore only a pair of black silk boxers and a large, gaudy cross on a gold chain around his neck. Pointing some kind of fucking cannon at Duncan, his mouth twisted, snarling a curse the alarm drowned out.

Duncan fired and Xavier fired and suddenly something exploded inside Duncan's chest. Once, when they were kids, Jesse and Duncan had played army using M-80s Jesse's dad bought in Mexico. Quarter sticks of dynamite, and they were using them as grenades. Jesse threw one and it hit Duncan in the chest and exploded, and that's what it felt like now, Xavier's magnum knocking Duncan into the elevator door. He couldn't breathe, his vision blurred, he tasted something hot and metallic. Time seemed to slow for a moment.

Somehow, he ended up on the floor. His left lung began to squeeze and burn, each breath a knife. When he could see again, he found himself inches from the man he killed coming off the elevator. A Glock was sticking out of the waistband of his black jeans.

Duncan pulled it out with his right hand; his left arm was useless now. Even his right shook badly as he held the gun out and craned his neck the door of the master bedroom again. When he didn't see Xavier, he forced himself to his knees, then braced himself against the wall and stood.

There were two steps down from the foyer to the rest of the suite, and he fell going down them. Stars swam in his vision and white-hot lightning shot through his chest. He coughed, tasted blood, spat.

Xavier lay in the bedroom door, three wounds clustered around the cross. Duncan pointed the Glock at him, waiting for him to move, waiting to put more bullets in him.

The fire alarm fell silent. Xavier didn't move. Duncan pulled his legs under him, used the wall to help him get to his feet, and stared down at the dead man.

"I don't know if you can hear me, shitbag, but you fucked up, killing Jesse. He wasn't a fucking snitch."

Xavier's lifeless eyes stared into the hotel shag.

"Ah, fuck you."

He shot Xavier in the face, then slid back down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. It didn't feel finished, didn't feel like enough. Duncan felt like he botched this somehow, but he wasn't sure how. Should he have killed the girl, too? Was that it?

Jesse would've known, would've told him. Jesse always told him when it was enough, told him when to stop, told him where the boundaries were. Now he had to find the boundaries himself, and they were hard to see. They were fucking hard to see.

