

## With The Lights Out By Scribblesinink

"Which one, Mickey?" Wolf gripped the rail with one hand, his HK heavy in the other. "Help me. How do I choose? How do I choose, man?"

Michael shook his head and turned away without another word, disappointment warring with repulsion on his face. Inwardly, Wolf winced, but he found he couldn't hold it against the kid: he'd promised nobody would get hurt. Except that had stopped being an option when Albie shouted the warning: "*Gun!*" And look where they were now: an FBI agent shot, him mere minutes from having to make the shittiest decision of his life....

He turned back to the railing and looked out across the bank's main room. The hostages hunkered together on the sofas, glancing up furtively. They were trying to avoid his eye for fear of drawing his attention, but at the same time they were incapable of looking away. They all knew their lives depended on him, that he was the one to determine who'd live or die in the next half hour. Those pale faces, hovering in the darkness, were filled with apprehension and silent pleas: *not me*.

Except for Chloe. She showed no compunction about meeting his gaze full-on, her expression wavering somewhere between concern and trust. Jake stared at her for a moment before turning away. He could no longer bear her eyes on him.

Twenty minutes later, the hour was nearly up, and still the lights weren't back on. Wolf approached the hostages slowly. He let his gaze wander from person to person.

*Who? Who to pick? Who to kill?*

The old man—his name was Bernard, Wolf recalled—had volunteered, saying he was the logical choice. And he was right: he had already lived most of his life, while everyone else still had years to look forward to. What gave Wolf the right to take those years away?

He reached to help Bernard up, waving the Roman boys off with a quick shake of his head. This was his burden, not theirs. What sort of man would he be if couldn't even bear to face up to the consequences of his own actions? Let others do his killing for him?

He took Bernard into the manager's office, walking slowly and praying with every step that Cali'd come to his senses and turn the lights back on. But it was still dark, only the glow of emergency lights allowing him to see, when he told Bernard to get on his knees in the middle of the room. Shakily, his back turned to Wolf, the old man obeyed.

Wolf lifted his HK, resting the muzzle on his left wrist for a surer aim. His hand was

shaking, the nervous twitch more pronounced than usual, and he couldn't seem to keep the gun steady.

How the hell had it come to this? What the fuck had he been thinking when he'd blurted out that threat to give Cali an hour? If Anna were still alive—.

He quickly shoved the thought out of his mind before he could finish it. He couldn't go there, not now.

With a conscious effort, he banished all feeling and tried to find the state of mind that had got him through all the bad times in Iraq: coldly efficient, emotionless—an automaton.

He knew he had to do this. The instant the threat had left his lips, there had been no way back. If he hesitated, he'd give Cali full control, and they'd have lost: they'd never get out of the bank alive. No: if he didn't shoot Bernard, he might as well put a bullet in his own brain instead.

He raised his weapon again. The only sound in the room was the soft inhale of air that would be the old man's last breath. Wolf's finger tightened on the trigger....

—*Snap....*—

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