

The Ramon Factor

Part One of a Nine Part Series

by **Eric Heise**

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As far as Ramon could see, there were two types of people in the drug world: The junkie and the dealer. He had met several junkies who had tried to be both a junkie and a dealer, but the junkie side would always get in the way. No matter how much these junkies wanted to be an entrepreneur, the merchandise would no sooner become their private stash and then they'd be out hustling again to pay for the shit.

Carlos Quimby was one of those types. Ramon knew Carlos from the neighborhood, and he wasn't surprised to see him get involved in the street business. Carlos was a follower. He followed the troublemakers around the neighborhood when they were all kids and he followed them right into the street life. Sooner or later, probably sooner, Carlos would follow them to the grave. Or would he lead them to the grave, Ramon thought. It didn't really matter. Carlos was stuck in the drug life for the long haul and he was as good as dead.

Ramon Enriquez looked at his watch. It was twenty past four and he had already been there a half an hour. He took a deep breath and muttered to himself, "Jesus Christ, that kid is late again. I'm forty-six years old. I haven't got time for this shit." He leaned against the wall by the window of the abandoned apartment, the one that looked over Montero Street from where Carlos would be coming. Ramon rapped his knuckles on the wall in a nervous and impatient manner. He looked at his left wrist again. Another minute had passed.

Carlos came swaying through the Montero Street neighborhood and crossed the street to the vacant apartment building where he was to have his meeting with Ramon. Ramon saw him cross and sighed a breath of relief. He didn't like to have to deal with stupid people, like Carlos, but a day's pay is a day's pay and if Ramon had not dealt on the side, he would have never have been able to survive on what he made from his appliance and second hand store. After a while, the store simply became a front and drug deals were frequent business in the backroom. He preferred to do business there, but Carlos was stupid, and a known dealer and user. The only reason Carlos would ever go see Ramon at R Appliance and Seconds would be to deal.

Carlos came through the front door of the building and trampled upstairs. He wandered up like he lived there instead of being more cautious as Ramon would have preferred. Carlos got to the apartment door and rapped his knuckles on it. Ramon answered and looked at him annoyed.

"You're late," Ramon said gruffly. He stood with the door open partially in brown trousers and a white button down shirt that was ten years out of date. "I've been waiting a half hour for you."

Carlos smiled in a cocky, suave fashion and pushed the door open, letting himself in. "I'm here, ma' man. No cause for sudden shock," he said smiling as he walked past Ramon. Ramon closed the door behind. Carlos walked to the table in the front room where Ramon had waited for the junkie. "Have you got something for me, old man?"

Ramon, a gruff and ruffled looking man didn't say anything. He walked to the table and really wanted to slap Carlos, but he knew that Carlos had a brother, Julio and Julio was smarter than Carlos. Julio was a high ranking member of a very dangerous gang, a gang who Ramon paid weekly to make sure no one broke into his store, especially the gang members. Julio had very little use for his younger brother, but he would never stand for someone else slapping him around. Not even an old timer like Ramon.

"I've got my stuff," Ramon said. "But it is no good to you without payment."

Carlos smirked like he was offended, wrinkling up his thin mustache that looked more like adolescent unshaved fuzz than a man's mustache. "Damn fool, I am ready as always." He looked at Ramon and smiled, but Ramon didn't smile back. His mustache hid his lips and Carlos couldn't figure out whether they were pressed together tightly or not. To Carlos, Ramon looked like guy on the Olympics, the woman's gymnastic coach Bela Karolyi. There was a great similarity, but Carlos could never remember Karolyi's name. He remembered him lifting his athletes in the air after a heroic performance to win a gold medal, but those images were mostly seen on news reports and commercials. Carlos's mom had only ever bought one television and that was a used 19-inch for \$50 from Ramon. A week later it had been stolen. Julio owed some money and when he couldn't come up with the payment, the collectors robbed their mother's apartment.

"Good," Ramon replied, "then let's see it. You know the drill. No tickie no laundry."

Carlos frowned; disappointed he was unable to edge ahead in the deal like his brother would have been able to do. He slid his hand inside his jean coat and fingered the wad of money in the inside pocket. He pulled it out and showed it to Ramon, twisting it back and forth in his hand. The wad was folded and wrapped with elastic.

"I'd like to count it, if you don't mind," Ramon said and Carlos tossed it on the table. Ramon was a dealer who didn't try and pull any funny business and Carlos knew this. He moved away from the table and stood by the window looking out. "Do not stand so close that someone will see you," Ramon scolded. Carlos moved back a couple of steps.

The wad of money was all in twenties and surprisingly it was all there. For this, Ramon was glad. If Carlos was followed to the building, and the cops did move in, Ramon preferred to be caught on the street with a wad of money than drugs. He could always claim the money was from his business, but the drugs would carry their own explanation. It wasn't a big secret that Ramon dealt, but he kept it quiet and he paid a weekly fee to the cops, like he pays to Julio to make sure such business is kept quiet. He turned to Carlos.

"Very good," Ramon said and he pulled a paper bag out of his brief case and slid it on the table. "And there you are, just as you ordered."

Carlos turned away from the window and smiled again. Ramon didn't like his smile, it was too care free and very cocky. It made him feel vulnerable to Murphy's Law. "Told you, old man. Now, if you don't mind hanging back a moment, I'd like to verify my purchase."

Ramon sighed. "Fine, just make it fast, I have other things to do today."

Carlos really wouldn't know the good stuff from the bad and could probably be fooled with items from a grocery store, Ramon thought. But in the interest of looking good, Carlos took out a small Swiss Army knife he'd shoplifted from Ramon's store several years before and made a small incision in the package. "Be careful," Ramon warned. "You don't want that stuff going all over the place."

Carlos waved him off and removed a sample of the merchandise on his knife blade. He tasted it and nodded. "All right, ma' man. Very good. And very good to do business with you once again." Carlos smiled again.

Ramon broke a like sweat on his forehead and felt nauseous. The summer heat wave had been driving Ramon crazy "Why don't you leave first and go out the front. I will go out the back where I have my car."

Carlos, still smiling held his arms up in the air. "Hey, anything you say." He left the apartment and trudged down the stairs again leaving Ramon once again by himself in the apartment. He breathed a sigh of relief and vowed never to do business with Carlos again. The dealing was giving him a nice nest egg for retirement and it wouldn't be too long before he could retire to Arizona and away from the Carlos's of the world. There were plenty of things he could do in Arizona, like open up another appliance store or simply do nothing. He was forty-six, but he felt and looked like sixty-six. He had lived and worked in a gritty environment and he was tired of it. There was no one at home for him and he hadn't spent his money unwisely. Another couple of years, he thought maybe even when I turn fifty, I'd be set to go. Thinking of retirement made Ramon feel better, but the next sound he heard took that solace away.

A screech came from outside the window and there was a loud crash. A few screams followed and then another crash. Ramon rushed to the window and saw the intersection was filled with parked cars crumbled around one another. Steam streamed from the hood of the one car while its nose imprinted into the driver's door and fender of another. That car also had a spider-web cracked windshield and it's driver wasn't moving in the front seat. On the ground just beyond the cars lay a body. Ramon focused clearer on the object and he recognized the jean coat. It was Carlos and Carlos was bleeding from his head. He wasn't moving and had white stuff coming out of his coat. It covered the lower part of his blue t-shirt and the ground.

"Oh no," Ramon said. "I am done for." The intersection looked like a pile up at a junkyard. Cars that hadn't slammed into the one in front of it, rolled up to the scene and drivers slowly got out of them. "Oh Jesus, I really have got to get out of here."

Ramon grabbed his soft case brief and fled out the apartment door. He thought of what he may have touched while inside the apartment, where he may have left fingerprints, but he didn't have time to clean up after himself. He raced down the stairs and to the bottom floor. The front door lay adjacent to the stairway and when he got to the bottom, Ramon peered out in to the daylight to see the activity. People started to gather around Carlos and sirens flared in the background. The place will be filled with cops in two minutes, he thought. He looked at the accident scene for another moment and then snuck down the hallway and out the back of the apartment building. No one from the accident scene noticed him.

Ramon pushed himself out a back door and into an alley where his car was parked. He opened the trunk and tossed the briefcase inside then shut then it. He got inside the car, a 1975 Ford Torino and fiddled with the keys before he was able to make it roar to life. Slamming the gearshift into drive, Ramon pressed on the gas, spinning his tires up, but no one from the accident scene could hear him over their own excitement and whale of the sirens now closer.

Ramon got to the end of the alley and prepared to zoom right out on to 5th Avenue, when a police cruiser zipped by, lights flaring and the siren blaring. Ramon stopped short and held his breath, but there wasn't any need. The cruiser kept going and the cop driving had barely noticed. Ramon caught his breath and looked both ways before pulling out on to the street. He pulled out and went south, away from the accident scene. A fire truck passed him going the other way and Ramon watched it in his rearview mirror. He was twenty blocks from his shop, but he thought it might be better to just keep going. He pulled to a stoplight and breathed heavily. He looked around and saw no one in sight. Leaning over his seat, he opened the glove box and pulled out the .357 he stashed in there. There was a newspaper on the front seat and he covered the gun with it.

The light turned green and this time he looked around before cautiously pulling back into traffic. He was still sweating and breathing heavily. He cursed himself for not exercising more. He cursed himself for doing the deal with Carlos and for not being the one to leave first. Another cruiser passed him going towards the accident scene. He watched it a little but he knew that no one was going to stop him, not now in the car. Later on would present a different story and Ramon had to think quickly in case the police came questioning him later. He'd have to be calmer, for starters. Ramon wiped his brow on his short sleeve and drove on, thinking of the story he'd be able to tell the cops when they came around to pay him a visit in the next couple of days. But until that meeting, he had a lot of work to do.

He thought of telling them he'd been visiting a supplier, a legitimate supplier that is. Sweat streamed down the side of his head and Ramon wiped it off again.

I'll tell them I was looking at second hand air conditioners, he thought. His old Ford had no air conditioning and the heat swelled inside.

Ramon looked in his door mirror again. He never saw the garbage truck pull out of 132nd Street and when his late model Ford slammed in the truck between the rear of the cab and the rear wheels, his head bounced hard off the steering wheel. It wobbled from his neck for a moment before Ramon came to his senses. Blood poured down from his nose and a cut above his right eye, just as sweat did a moment before.

This is very bad, Ramon thought. This certainly complicates things. He took the wad of cash from his pocket and shoved it down his shorts. I am in big trouble.

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