Dead Ends

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Carlos Leon emerged from his Tuscan style villa at exactly three minutes to eleven. In five days of watching, Dante'd never seen him leave a minute later. Or earlier. His bodyguard followed a couple steps behind, a brown handled pistol not so discretely tucked into his belt. He was taller than Carlos, but with the same stocky build and thick black hair. Perhaps they were related in some way? The duo made their way around the perimeter of the house, then disappeared amongst the red-rocked boulders at the base of the hiking trail in the backyard.

And the countdown began.

Six minutes. Dante had six minutes before the men ascended to within feet of him, sat amidst the group of naturally placed boulders that were unnaturally sanded to accommodate human guests. He was going to let them get comfortable. Talk their business about this hit and that shipment and all the rats. Carlos would curse and spit and seethe and prognosticate, sure there was no one around to listen but his faithful servant. *Then* Dante'd shoot. The bodyguard first, from his sniper's nest. Shock Carlos good before surfacing. He *had* to show his face – for just a second, just to ensure he was the last image Carlos focused on before departing the Earth.

Five minutes. Four. Dante pulled hard on a Marlboro Red. He took his phone from his pocket, gave one last look at the rare picture of them Adrianna'd allowed. "Mi bonita." It was a selfie they'd taken just days before the newspaper explained why she'd always been so secretive about her other life: "Wife of Drug Lord Killed in Apparent Turf War." The phone call'd come days later. "There *is* a war," the man'd said, "but Carlos Leon knows just what he's doing. Adrianna died because he found out about you. You're next." Calling the cops wasn't an option. Dante was packed – lightly: some underwear and a pistol – and primed for vengeance even before his attention was directed to the blacked out truck in the driveway across the street. There waiting for the perfect moment, the man said.

Three minutes. Dante did a final check of his pistol, the ammo clip he'd purchased specially for the occasion. He looked forward to expending it completely. Two. One. Sweat beaded on the tip of Dante's nose. The footsteps should be approaching by now. Crunching on the orange, scorched earth. But they weren't? And he'd have seen if they'd gone back down the tr –

A click. Laughing. The cold steel against Dante's ear was a shock in the heat of the desert.

"You come to my house and hunt me like an animal?" Carlos stepped out from behind Dante, examined him through small, but piercing black eyes. They were smart, but hollow at the same time. Void of any feeling, just as they appeared in pictures. But worse. Colder.

"You're shorter than I thought you would be."

"Likewise."

Carlos laughed again. A loud, sadistic cackle. "Bollas grandes," he said to his bodyguard with mock reverence. Then to Dante: "Too bad I don't have the time to cut them off and feed them to the vultures." He gave a signal and Dante felt the crack as the steel collided with the back of his skull. Dante fell to the ground.

"You must tell me. Did my wife ever tell you while you were fucking her how I rescued her from the barrios in Mexico City?"

"Fuck you."

Carlos grunted haughtily. "You too, *puto*. You too." He gave another signal and the bodyguard stepped around, pistol raised. "So long, motherfucker."

The sound came after the shot. For a split second, Dante thought the blood on his face was his own. The bodyguard, now with barely half a head, hit the sand with a thump. Carlos hesitated, but then pulled his gun. And then another shot. And another. A second passed, maybe, before Carlos dropped his pistol and reached for the hole in his throat, gasping desperately for air. Blood spilled over his fingers. He dropped to his knees as the sniper materialized. From behind a boulder he came, seemingly from out of the sand, and delivered the lethal shot to Carlos' heart. It blew Carlos backward, splayed him out on the ground, arms stretched wide.

Dante put his hands in front of his face when the man turned toward him.

"Know murder's a capital crime, right? Even when you commit it to avenge the death of a lover? And even when the guy you're killing is the most feared, notorious drug lord in the world?"

Dante stared hard at the man. A tall *gringo* with reddish, side parted hair. Wearing jeans and a brown t-shirt: "Outlaws Welcome."

"John Macon, special agent." He held out a hand to Dante, helped him to his feet. "Then, there's killing a prized asset of the FBI."

"Huh?"

"Carlos was an informant. *My* informant, to be specific. The golden goose whose identity no one knew but me. Good thing for you I like to watch over my geese." John pulled a cigarette from behind his ear, lit it.

"What about Adrianna?"

"What about her? Her murder's still under investigation. Carlos did a knock-up job making it look like the Cinaloas. There was no chatter in his house or from any of his associates before her body showed up. Even after, we heard nothing about it. I got a tip, just like you did."

Dante hesitated. "You know about -- ?"

"How do you think I know about you? Pretty sure our tipster was the same guy. He mentioned you. I'd have picked you up if you didn't do such a damn good job of getting here fast and, uh... changing your look. You really should put sunscreen on that thing. Skin cancer kills, you know?"

Dante fingered the burnt skin on the top of his freshly shaven head. He barely felt it considering the throbbing from the pistol whipping.

"So am I under arrest?"

"For what? Watching ME kill a drug lord? A mass murderer?" He walked around Carlos' body, gave him a nudge with his shoe. "Real pillar of the community. It was bound to happen eventually. That's the thing with these drug guys. Always someone trying to take their place. It's why we both got tipped off. Why I've had to protect him for so long." He leaned over Carlos body, stared into his eyes, wide, fixed, dilated. "To be honest, I was getting a little sick of his shit."

Dante looked on attentively, but stayed silent. What could he say?

John took a last hard drag of his cigarette, put it out with his shoe.

"What do you say we get you to the hospital, eh? Get you fixed up?"