

Dead
Run©

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This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers

New York

2008

Padgett leaned against the cool brick wall of Martine's, five feet from the door. Country Music Rocks, the sign said. From what he could hear, Padgett wouldn't argue. The notes coming out were distorted, but the band could play. No question. Hardback Road, a real Texas roadhouse band. A couple in college sweats paid the cover and went in. The bouncer took a look at Padgett, decided to leave him alone.

The street was blocked off, a parade going by both ways. College kids mostly, going bar to bar. Some working guys with their wives, some tourists out catching the scene they'd heard about. And the regulars. Padgett knew the regulars. He could spot them in the crowd, the way they eyed the people, sizing them up, seeing what was out there. He'd been a regular, other places. He wasn't one now, but he still knew the moves.

A black man was staring at him from twenty feet away. Tall, skinny, with hollow, wasted eyes. A shiny shaved head. A red muscle shirt on a man with no muscles, gold chains on his neck. Padgett looked away, kept his eyes on a spot across the street. Five minutes on the street and something was already up. Whatever it was, he didn't need it. He thought he'd go down another block or two, see how things were down there. He started moving, being casual.

"I know you?"

Padgett looked at the man, now a few feet away. He shook his head a little. "I don't know you."

"Sure, man. Sure you do. Down in the Easy. You used to hang around Mama Delain's with those chemical boys. I remember you working on that corner there, selling that bad crystal to the college trade. You were a regular down there."

"You've got me confused with someone else."

The man laughed, a relaxed, easy laugh. "Man, you don't want people to know you, you need to change your outfit. And do something about that bad tattoo on your arm there. That's a real giveaway, right there."

He was right about the outfit. Black on black. He'd worn it so long he didn't even think about it now. He should buy some Hawaiian shirts, try for a new look. Wear a little more sleeve, to cover the chain around his biceps with the logo from his army unit and the crosses around it. Either that or stop trying to hide in the world.

"Okay," he said. "That was me. It was a long time ago."

"Hey, I knew it. Never forget a face. You looking good, man. Don't take this wrong, but back in the Easy you didn't look so hot. You looked like you was going to fall over dead most of the time. You're doing good now. Laying off the product."

"There isn't any product. Not any more. I'm just out here listening to some music. Who the hell are you?"

"Ricardo Salt, man. You don't remember? I used to hang at Mama's, too. Did an act on the sidewalk, reading minds for the tourists. Local color, you know. I used to do okay, too. Had it down good. You remember that."

Padgett remembered Ricardo Salt. In detail. The man had been cold-blooded. He had lived out on the street, sizing up the tourists, checking the girls. Everything he did was trouble. There had been some stories about the man. Stories that went past the usual hustles into some very dark places. Padgett didn't want to be out here with him. He didn't want to be anywhere around Ricardo Salt.

"No. Really, the way things were back there, it's all kind of hazy to me now."

Ricardo laughed. "No surprise. So what, did 'Trina run you out of the Easy?"

"I left before that. It got old."

"Man, you missed the excitement. That whole gang from Mama's wound up going down. Mostly for drugs, but there were a whole lot of other beefs going on. It was a rough time. Then 'Trina hit, things got rougher. But you know, God takes care of his children. He takes care of me. And I take care of myself." Ricardo started laughing. It wasn't a nice laugh.

"Sure. Well..." Padgett started edging away. "Good seeing you. I got to be somewhere..."

"Hey, don't run off on me, man. How 'bout we go into one of these fine clubs they got down here, catch some music. Have a few drinks. On me." He had hold of Padgett's arm, and it didn't seem like he wanted to let go.

Padgett stepped into him and got his face up close. "You want to let go of my arm," he said. It wasn't a question.

Ricardo backed off a step. "Man, you jumpy."

"No, I just don't like people grabbing onto me. Tell you what, I cleaned up some. That means I don't go into bars, for one thing. And I don't hang around with people who do, for another. No offense, but I'm guessing you were trouble then and you're trouble now, so I'm going to move on down the road. Have a good life." He turned and started walking.

Two blocks down, Padgett eased himself back against the wall outside a club. Uncle Freddie's. A piano bar with a sing-along going. Some Elton John crap. He didn't want to hear the music. He wanted to think about Ricardo Salt. He wondered why the man wasn't in prison with most of his friends. Or dead, like the others.

He didn't think God was watching over Ricardo.

Padgett leaned his head out, watched the crowd coming up. Out on the street there was a college kid in a tuxedo on eight foot stilts. A chorus of coeds was singing "Talk Dirty To Me" as some kind of initiation. There were cops on the next corner, staying together, looking for something to do. He didn't see Ricardo Salt.

He went down another block and listened to a black man dressed like Jimi Hendrix playing an electric guitar with a fuzzed amp in a setback storefront. He killed a few minutes and threw a dollar into the guitar case. He walked a little further and turned on a side street. He waited a half a minute and stepped out. Ricardo wasn't there. Maybe he wasn't coming.

Seeing Ricardo Salt had killed his mood. He needed to get out of there, think things over. He walked up the hill to the lot where he'd paid ten bucks to park for what was turning out to be forty-five minutes. The lot was half full and the kid who'd taken his money was gone.

He got a cigarette out of the truck and leaned against the fender, thinking about lighting it. He wanted to, but he knew he wouldn't. He hadn't had one in a couple years.

"I know what you did, man." He didn't have to turn around to know who it was, but he turned around anyway. He wouldn't give his back to Ricardo Salt.

"You don't know anything."

"You were gone a week, the law came down. Hard. And they weren't just looking to get lucky. They knew just what to look for and where to find it. You remember Calen, your old buddy? They blew him away when he refused to lie down on his kitchen floor. He told them to piss off and they blew his brains out. You remember Blackjack, Jimmy Malone, Jay Cee? They're all up at Angola, and they'll be there for a long time. Sarah Sane, she got ten years just for knowing those guys. And a lot of other people went down with them. Good people. And they all knew you."

"Sounds like they knew you too, Ricardo."

"Some of 'em. A few didn't. But they all knew you. This was a week after you just vanished. There was a lot of talk about that. People saying, what happened to Padgett? Where'd he go? How come he doesn't have a trial coming up?"

"How come you didn't?"

"I caught a break. Some of the evidence against me disappeared. And there were some problems with the warrant. Like I said, God looks out for me."

Padgett knew Ricardo wasn't going to let this go. The man used a knife, and used it well from what he'd heard. He wouldn't be out here without that. Padgett had his hands. He'd been good with them once, but it had been a while. He didn't think he'd do that well without help. There wasn't any help around. He had a thirty-eight under the dash but Ricardo wasn't going to let him get to it. He could try to outrun Ricardo, but he knew he wouldn't get far. He wasn't in that kind of shape.

"The way you tell it, they bounced you loose. Must have been a reason. You must have cut some kind of a deal." It was a shot in the dark, a stall. A way to live an extra

minute.

"Good luck with that. I didn't just happen to show up here. There's some people from the old days, moved here after 'Trina came through. They saw you hangin' out, dropped a dime. I'm not just here for payback, I'm getting paid for this. Paid pretty well. I don't really care what happened, I just want a payday." A knife appeared in Ricardo's hand.

Padgett forced himself to relax. He started backing away. He had the keys in his hand. He made a fist with a key coming out through the fingers. That would be a long shot.

"Okay, Ricardo. I'll tell you what happened to me when I disappeared. I died. I put so much crystal up my nose one night my heart stopped. I swear I felt it stop and you know what? I didn't mind. I didn't care at all. Get it over, I thought. Then that girl Vangie I was living with, she walked in. Next thing I know, I'm in the hospital, hooked up to enough equipment to launch a space shuttle. I was dead about six minutes total, once home, another time in the ambulance. That's what happened."

"Man, you can save it. I don't care. I told you, I'm getting paid for this. I get paid either way." Ricardo took a step forward. A small smile formed across his face. "Dead two times. Third time's the charm, brother rat."

Padgett backed up. He was trying to move out toward the street. He didn't want to move deeper into the lot. Ricardo slashed at him with the knife, just playing now, not close enough to do damage. He was going to take his time, show off a few of his moves. Padgett backed along the side of a pickup, then cut in front of something red and sporty. He was closer to the street now, feeling his way through.

His hand fell on an antenna. He snapped it off, held it up like a sword.

Ricardo Salt laughed at him.

Padgett twirled the antenna at Ricardo's face, then poked it into his crotch. It didn't do much, but it slowed Ricardo down. Padgett made it out to the sidewalk. He watched an SUV go by, then a cab. There was more room out here, but he was still alone.

He backed down the street, watching Ricardo. Twenty feet between them. Now he was outside a row of storefronts. Mickey's Tees. The Green Zone. Alley Gallery. Trendy. He kicked hard at the full-length window of the Alley Gallery, watched the glass sag in a cobwebbed mess. Another kick and the cobwebs fell in, wrecking a display of stone statues. The alarm came on, loud, and the spotlights overhead started flashing.

Ricardo Salt backed up a few feet, unsure of himself.

Padgett climbed through the opening into the store. Glass crinkled under his feet. He picked up one of the statues. It was grainy black stone, three feet long. He didn't know what it was supposed to be. Something artsy. He didn't care. It was a weapon now. He climbed back out onto the sidewalk.

Ricardo backed up a few more feet. There was a cab stopped a half-block down, a group of people across the street watching the show. They'd all be calling this in. Ricardo slipped the knife in his pocket and grinned. "I'll be around," he said. "Watch for me." Then he turned and walked away down the sidewalk, doing that cool walk that told the world to watch out.

Padgett gave Ricardo time to go a half block, then he tossed the statue back into the store window and headed for his truck. He had to get out of there before the police showed up. The people across the street were watching, snapping his picture with their

camera phones. He was finished here. He'd be lucky to get out of town.

He got the truck going and pulled out onto a side street away from the witnesses. He circled a few blocks and went looking for Ricardo Salt. He couldn't leave him out on these streets, with these people. The man had come here for him. That made it his problem. He had to deal with it, just on principle. He pulled the thirty-eight out from under the dash and checked the rounds at a red light. He spun the cylinder and snapped it shut.

He saw Ricardo Salt three blocks ahead. The man was walking fast along Volente. Padgett took a right and circled a few blocks to get in front of him. He took a side street, parked, and got out with the gun. He walked down to Volente. The streets were deserted now. Most of the streetlights were out. He waited around a corner with his back against a masonry wall, listening to the click of Ricardo's footsteps. When Ricardo walked up, Padgett stepped in front of him.

This time Ricardo didn't give him the grin. He just stared at the gun for a few seconds and shook his head. He reached for his knife. Slowly. The knife wouldn't help him now. He looked like he just wanted to hold it. He held it up sadly, like he was saying goodbye to an old friend.

"Tell me," Ricardo said. "Back in the Easy. What happened? You really turn snitch, sell out all your friends like they say? That what happened?"

"Not exactly. I was undercover. Had been for a long time. In a lot of places, all over the country. I was way under, real messed up. You saw how I was. It all went too far and I wound up in the hospital. Twice dead, just like I told you. Couple days in a coma. So I gave them what I had and they wrapped up all the cases I'd been working on. Then I disappeared. Simple as that."

Ricardo nodded. "All right. I guess that's simple enough. What do we do now?"

Padgett shot Ricardo Salt twice in the chest. Then he stepped up and put another bullet in the man's forehead, just to be sure.

Then he walked back to his truck and drove away. He had to get to his apartment and pack up. Then he'd call the people he used to work for and tell them that his past had caught up to him again. He wondered where he'd go this time. He was running out of places to hide. Maybe somewhere up north. Minneapolis. Milwaukee. Somewhere like that. He hadn't spent much time up there, not in the upper Midwest. They'd have to talk about it.

Maybe next time no one would find him for a while.

The end.