

# El Bandido

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I followed his stinking trail across the States, from L.A. to the Apple. It was an easy trail to follow. It was one long atrocity. From New York, it led me across the Atlantic. I picked it up again in London and followed it to Madrid. I lost it there for a while, but I never give up. Late one autumn evening, I caught his foul scent again, and followed him south. To Cádiz.

He led me to the dark side of Cádiz, the side you go to only if you can make brave men quiver and women faint. I've done both. Several times. Each. I walked down a street that diverged from the local business district, if you could call it that, and entered an evil smelling region just above the oldest most neglected docks on the southern coast. It was a region of ancient warehouses whose owners have long since gone to pauper's graves. The place was infested mostly by sinking derelicts who couldn't find anywhere else to die. Such business as there was took place between the desperate and the merciless.

I walked deeper into the gloomy region. I hadn't seen a working street light for blocks. I hadn't seen a working anything for blocks, unless you counted the whores. The gutters were filled with filth and some of it wasn't people. The smell was horrible. It made me want to puke. I did. Nobody noticed. The street ended at the face of a building that might once have been a small theatre. More likely a — well, who can say? Anyway, its door gaped open. Its walls sagged under their load of graffiti, dirt, and old beer and cigarette ads. A sidewalk had been improvised through the ancient building's rat infested interior, an impromptu continuation of the dead-end street, into the uncharted regions beyond. That part of my trip would have been in total darkness had not a huge portion of the roof caved in at some time in the past. A glimmer of moonlight made it just barely possible to avoid stepping on — whatever it was that littered the improvised sidewalk through that rotting structure.

Out in the open where I could breathe again, I turned a corner and suddenly there it was. The seediest, sleaziest, filthiest, most scum-infested parasite-ridden pest-hole on the face of the Earth. It wasn't a pretty sight but that's where El Bandido was. If I wanted to get him, then that's where I'd have to go. It was exactly his kind of place. It was called Los Bandidos.

Three steps down from ground level at the entrance was a pool of some vomitous putrid liquid that would probably have eaten a hole in the ground anywhere else on earth. Here, the ground refused to absorb it. Even evaporation couldn't remove it because the already overladen air wouldn't have it. I stepped over it and into Los Bandidos. The thunderous roar of riotous noise quickly tapered off. The naked, twisting dancers coasted to a stop. The creaking, out-of-tune piano gave one last uncertain plink, and was silent. Within seconds, every eye was on me. My eyes were on him. He was leaning casually on the bar with his back to me, but he knew I was there. El Bandido.

## El Bandido

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Everyone in the room slowly backed away, getting out from between us. I began to walk slowly toward him. Slowly he turned to face me. He took two steps out from the bar, giving himself a little room, and I stopped about two paces from him. Few men are brave enough to face me. I've seen some ugly ones turn away when they saw me in their path. But this man was different. He was the meanest, toughest, lowest, most feared, most hated, most underhanded, cheating, conniving, stealing, scheming, low-life scum-bag cut-throat ever to be produced by the human race. He was unique. He was El Bandido. His lip curled in just the beginning of a sneer. His eyes glinted like steel. I saw him flex his shoulders almost imperceptibly under his crossed bandoleers of knives, bullets, hand grenades, and ampoules of sodium pentathol. From where I stood, I could smell his rancid breath, his fetid sweat, and worse. Even in the smoky yellow light of that decrepit place, I could see the crusty rings of scaly dirt around his thick and hairy neck. He was almost overwhelming. Anybody but me would have staggered away, blindly retching, and most likely have gotten a knife in the back. He seemed unbeatable. He almost was. Almost, but not quite. Every man has a weakness. El Bandido had a weakness. I knew what it was.

As we stood there, our gazes locked together, a low sinister chuckle, a hollow unearthly sound, escaped from deep within his throat. He thought that he was going to enjoy this. I let him think it for a few more moments, then I struck.

“What’s green,” I asked, “and goes buzz?”

His eyes widened a little. His mouth opened but no sound came out.

“What’s green,” I asked again, “and goes buzz?”

He took a hesitant step back, as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard. I advanced a step.

Relentlessly I demanded, “What’s green and goes buzz?”

He took another step back, but he was against the bar. He couldn't go any further. He was trapped.

“What’s green and goes buzz?”

His face had gone pale. His mouth was working but he seemed unable to speak. I leaned forward at the waist, my eyes boring into his.

“What’s green,” I demanded, “and goes buuuuuzzzzzz?”

I shook my head back and forth with my lips loose, giving the word a kind of Donald Duck jabbering sound. El Bandido grasped the edge of the bar. Behind me, someone gasped. El Bandido's knuckles began to turn white. At last he found his voice.

“No — ” he croaked.

“What’s green — ”

“No! Please!”

“What’s Green!”

“No! I can’t take it!” he pleaded. At that point, everybody bolted for the door. Some of the more fear stricken customers actually jumped through the windows and several grandmothers were trampled by younger folk. I regretted their injuries, but there was only one way to do this. The way that worked. My way. As the sound of breaking glass echoed into the distance, our gazes remained locked.

“What’s green,” I demanded, my face directly in front of his, “and goes — ”

“No!” he screamed, at last breaking his eyes away from mine and turning his head aside. “Not a vegetable joke! Please! Not that!”

“And goes buuuuuzzzzzz?”

Suddenly his knees gave away. He slid slowly down toward the floor. He hung between the bar-stools by his arms, his eyes closed, panting. He hadn’t slid all the way to his knees, but he was beaten.

“Please,” he begged, “Not a vegetable joke.”

I was almost sorry he’d caved in so easily. I know dozens of vegetable jokes. If that hadn’t worked, there’s elephant jokes. And jokes about elephants and vegetables. And Mommy Mommy jokes. And Shaggy Dog stories. I can even remember a few Little Moron jokes. I could have kept at it for hours but, as they say, the bigger they are the harder they fall. I had him where I wanted him and I’m a professional. I didn’t prolong the agony.

“I’ll tell you,” I said. He cringed and waited for the blow to fall. I delivered my coup de grace.

“It’s an electric grape.” I said, and he fainted.

When I walked out into the open with El Bandido slung across my shoulder, nobody tried to stop me. As I walked back through the dark side of Cádiz, the place was deserted. Word gets around fast.

There’s a brighter side to my work, but I seldom go back to see it. Today, things are looking up on the dark lower side of Cádiz. Los Bandidos has closed and I hear there’s even a new theatre. The whores have moved on and people have begun flushing the gutters. An arsonist recently leveled several square blocks of ancient warehouses and now there’s talk of putting in a park. And El Bandido? His days were always numbered with me on his trail. He’s out of circulation now, doing life without parol, and he’s a model prisoner. He’d better be. The warden’s one tough hombre and I spent several hours coaching him on vegetable jokes. El Bandido knows what will happen if he causes any trouble. Of course, my job isn’t finished. My kind of job never is. The human race keeps producing scum and men like me have to keep rounding it up. Today I’m on another trail. I’m writing this to kill a

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little time while I wait for the train to Amsterdam, because that's where the trail is taking me. Every town has its dark and seamy side, its abandoned docks, its crumbling warehouse district, even Amsterdam. I can find my way around all of them. This time I'm after bigger game. The biggest. This time, I'm after Sweetie. No matter where she tries to hide, I'll find her. By the time I do, I'll know her weakness. It's a dirty job but, as they say, somebody has to do it. I do it very well.