

MACHINE GUN JELLY

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Part 1. Vegas. 1999.

The contradictions in Las Vegas begin almost immediately. The Spanish term *las vegas* translates as “the fertile plains” or “the meadows.” Another interpretation, used by the people of Patagonia, could be “the water meadows.”

Even for a town that prides itself on hyperbole when describing its many and storied attractions, the aforementioned terms seem a bit of a stretch. Las Vegas is set in what is, by and large, a burning, arid, hostile desert filled with wilted cacti, scorpions, and lizard shit. The only water meadow you are likely to encounter anywhere in the region is if some zonked-out greenskeeper forgets to turn the sprinklers off on the golf course. Furthermore, the town would not survive more than three days without irrigation before regressing back into a searing uninhabitable salt pan, and the nearest fertile plain is actually in Kentucky. Of course, this is nowhere near as inappropriate as Los Angeles, the City of Angels, but you get the drift.

In Vegas, they don't wait for the suckers to be born; they make them, and the only thing you are not allowed to do is not have any money. Disneyland on acid, mob playground, corporate meat market...Vegas constantly reinvents itself to stay ahead of the game and, depending on what kind of eyes you have, can be anything you want it to be. Shimmering desert oasis or sleazy skid row burlesque, as radiant as a fairy story princess or as ugly as a two-bit whore in daylight.

Vegas is sugar and cyanide, schmaltz and suicide, soft dreams and hard knocks, where the odds are stacked and so are the cocktail waitresses, and even the fickle finger of fate is on the take. It is the Church of Disillusion with rhinestone icons, where the gods are old fat guys and the only virgin is an airline. The sultan's palace where the harem doors are thrown open, but the tits aren't real, and the eunuchs do requests. The enchanted kingdom where you kiss the frog and take your chances on whether it turns into a handsome prince or a case of herpes. It is The Hard Word Hotel, where the welcome mat is a rental and the long-term residents are required to have their souls surgically removed.

Vegas is a deranged vaudeville, an old-time carnival mutated and gone mad, like one of those old fifties Cold War movies where the innocuous creature gets irradiated by nuclear fallout and assumes gigantic proportions. Las Vegas is a radioactive behemoth, sucking the energy it needs to survive through the I-15 freeway to LA like a giant straw.

In the movies the creature only stomps the shit out of everyone until the jets blow it away or the bespectacled white-coated boffins figure out how to destroy it, although they never tell you what they plan do with the body.

But Vegas just keeps on getting bigger and more voracious, and so do some of its inhabitants. And they never tell you what they plan to do with the body, either.

Chapter 1

The room went quiet as Handyman Harris prepared to take the shot. The faces of the onlookers appeared ghastly and spectral through the neon-lit haze of cheap stogies and unfiltered cigarettes. They had been playing for six hours straight, and it had come

down to this. The eight ball hanging over the top left pocket, the white hard up against the center of the bottom cushion, and Handyman Harris bent over his cue, squinting down its length. Only this. Nothing else in the world but that bright expanse of green baize between the two balls. Between the two balls, and between Handyman Harris and five grand.

His opponent, some rail-thin rube from Chickenshit, Minnesota, leaned his skinny denim ass against the bar, clutching his whisky. He peered from under the rim of his Stetson, using every ounce of his Saturday-matinée-learned cowboy cool to try to disguise the fact that he was shitting his pants. Big time. He had been very good. Much better than Handyman had expected. As a matter of fact, almost too good. But now it had come down to this. A tight angle on the cue, the gentle roll of the white down the table, that soft, sweet, barely audible kiss on the black, the silky roll of the eight ball down the pocket, the white coming softly to rest against the top cushion, and it was five big ones, in cold blood. Handyman closed his eyes for a second and played out the scenario in his mind's eye, mentally rehearsing the shot. He opened his eyes again and slowly drew back the cue, feeling the

smooth cool wood sliding between his fingers just right. He started the tip of the cue on its short journey to the surface of the ball.

The phone rang, loud and jarring, in the silent room.

Handyman jerked the cue. The mis-hit shot skewed down the table and smacked into the black with a loud crack, cannoning it off the edge of the pocket and across the table. The white ball rolled, all soft and silky, into the pocket. Handyman stared in disbelief. Nobody spoke. The cowboy took out his finest shit-eating grin and plastered it across his face.

The phone rang again. The bartender lifted it from its receiver, held it briefly to his ear, and looked over to where Handyman was still staring at the hole where the white ball had disappeared. He held it toward him and said, "Handy. It's for you."

Handyman Harris went completely ballistic. "WHOEVER THAT MOTHERFUCKIN' COCKSUCKER IS, TELL HIM I'M COMIN' ROUND THERE, AND SHOVIN' THAT PHONE UP HIS FUCKIN' ASS SIDEWAYS."

"He says it's really important," said the bartender quietly.

"IMPORTANT. I'LL TELL YOU WHAT'S FUCKING IMPORTANT. FIVE GRAND IS FUCKING IMPORTANT. IMPORTANT IS NOT SOME DICKLESS PUKEBAG RINGING THE PHONE WHEN PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO PLAY POOL. WHO THE FUCK IS IT, ANYWAY?"

"It's the Don," said the bartender.

Suddenly the call was very, very important.

At first Crispin thought it was a request, until he looked up and saw the uniform of the bellhop that had handed him the slip of paper. The show was going great, and Crispin was bringing the house down. All the tables were full, all the seats at the bar were full, and people were standing around at the back and sitting on empty blackjack tables. People were screaming with laughter at his jokes and singing along with his songs, and his tip jar was overflowing. They were queuing up and falling over themselves to buy him drinks, and he was already sailing on an uneven keel. It was like the good old days. He was a star again and he adored it, lapping it up like milk and bathing in it like the sun. His fingers were flying over the keys, each intricate run bringing a new crescendo of applause and a new jolt of energy from the audience, and he felt as if he could play and sing 'til the cow jumped over the moon.

He opened the note and stared at it while the bellhop stood by waiting for a reply. The note said: *Urgent, repeat, urgent telephone call for Mr. Crispin Capricorn. Imperative he come to the phone immediately.*

"Oh, for fuck's sake," announced Crispin, forgetting the microphone and sending the room into paroxysms of laughter. Crispin slapped his hand over his mouth, with his eyes wide, mugging for the audience.

"Goodness gracious," he said with a stage giggle. "Did I just say that? Well, wash my mouth out with soap, Mrs. Johnson."

"Say it again," some wag shouted.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly. This is a family show. And besides, I never say 'for fuck's sake' in public."

He mugged again while the audience whistled and howled, before holding up his hands. "Ladies and gentlemen, and those of you who can't make up their minds,"—audience howl—"I'm afraid I have to ask you to excuse me for just a teensy-weensy moment. The president is on the phone...probably wants me to do a White House dinner."

Crispin launched into his Marilyn impression: "I wanna be loved by you..."

The audience cracked up again, and Crispin arose to rapturous applause. He boogied through the room, blowing kisses and receiving pats on the back, shouting, "Don't go away, now. I'll be back in five minutes. Stay right where you are."

Holding up five fat fingers he strode toward reception, with the bellhop bouncing at his heels. He grabbed the phone from the bell captain and hissed into it, "Who the fuck is this? What do you want? How dare you? Do you realize I was in the middle of a performance? A professional never, ever...what?"

"You heard what I said. Your friend Nigel is dead. My name is Jordan Young. My friends call me Baby Joe. Your friend Asia asked me to call. Do exactly as I say. Go to your room now. Have them transfer the call. Go now."

Crispin dropped the phone. He blanched, and his lip began to quiver. His heavy face with all its makeup had collapsed like one of those Dalí paintings of the clocks.

"Mr. Capricorn. Are you all right? Not bad news, I hope."

"Would...would you...can you please direct this call to my room?"

"Of course, Mr. Capricorn, right away," the bell captain said, as Crispin turned and walked slowly toward the elevator.

He could hardly get the key into the lock with his palsied fingers, and when he finally managed it he burst into the room and rushed over to the phone.

"Did you close the door?" the voice said.

"Why, no."

"Do it now. Close it, lock it, and put the chain on."

Crispin did as instructed, fiddling with the chain with trembling hands, and picked up the phone again.

"Do you have a mini bar?"

"Yes."

"Get yourself a stiff drink; then sit down and listen."

Robotically, his mind a blank, Crispin shuffled over to the fridge, took out a bottle of gin, and mechanically poured it into a glass. He flopped down onto the bed, picked up the phone, and said, "I'm here," in a small voice.

"Good. Now, Crispin, listen to me. Don't interrupt or ask questions. *Why* doesn't matter for now. There'll be plenty of time for that later. Nigel has been murdered. They were looking for you, and they know where you are. Change into the most inconspicuous clothes that you have. Go down to your car, and drive to Reno. Leave your car there and rent another. Something small that won't draw attention. Drive straight back to Vegas. Do it now! Don't check out, and don't speak to anyone, especially anyone who works for the hotel. Don't get the desk to bring your car. Go get it yourself. Don't use the elevators; use the fire stairs. When you get to Las Vegas, don't go home. Come to this address. Write it down..."

Baby Joe paused to give Crispin time to retrieve the notepad from the bedside table.

"Got it?" he continued. "Good. Now don't call anybody except Asia, on her cell phone. She will be at the address I gave you. Call her when you are on the road, call again when you leave Reno, and call just before you get to Vegas. Don't answer your phone, and drive carefully. Don't risk getting stopped by the police. If you do these

things, you will be okay. I know you're in shock, and upset, and probably scared, but everything will be all right if you do exactly as I've told you. I'm going to let you speak to Asia so you'll know I'm on the level. But be brief. Just say hello, and then hit the road. Okay, Crispin?"

"Okay," Crispin said weakly.

"Good man."

Asia came on the phone, trying not to sound upset. "Crispin, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Crispin lost it. "Oh, Asia. I'm so scared. What's happening? That man. That dead man. That was supposed to be me."

"What dead man, Crispin?"

"A man. A man got shot. It was on all the news. A man got shot on the ski slope. He was wearing the same outfit as me. They must have thought it was me. Oh, Asia. Oh dear, oh dear. Nigel. And Oberon. Where's my dog? I want my dog."

"Just hang on, Crispin. I'll give you back to Baby Joe."

"He's losing his grip," she said, as she handed Baby Joe the phone.

"Crispin, what's up?"

Crispin blurted out what he had told Asia.

"Okay. Crispin. Calm down. That's good for you. That means they think you're dead. It'll give you a little more time. But it won't be long before they realize their mistake. You've got to move fast. Hang up now, and do what I told you. Okay?"

"Okay."

Crispin heard the click as the line went dead, and he started to cry.

Back in the bar, the audience was slow-hand clapping and whistling, and shouting, "We want Crispin, we want Crispin," over and over again.

But Crispin wasn't coming back for an encore. Crispin was already on the road to Reno. He changed cars, rented a Ford Fiesta, and drove at a steady seventy all the way back to Vegas.

The next morning, when, as he was pulling into the outskirts of Las Vegas, a big red Mercedes zoomed past him doing almost a hundred miles an hour and the big ugly driver who was drinking from a bottle of Wild Turkey gave him the finger as he went by, he barely paid any attention.

Rewind three weeks...