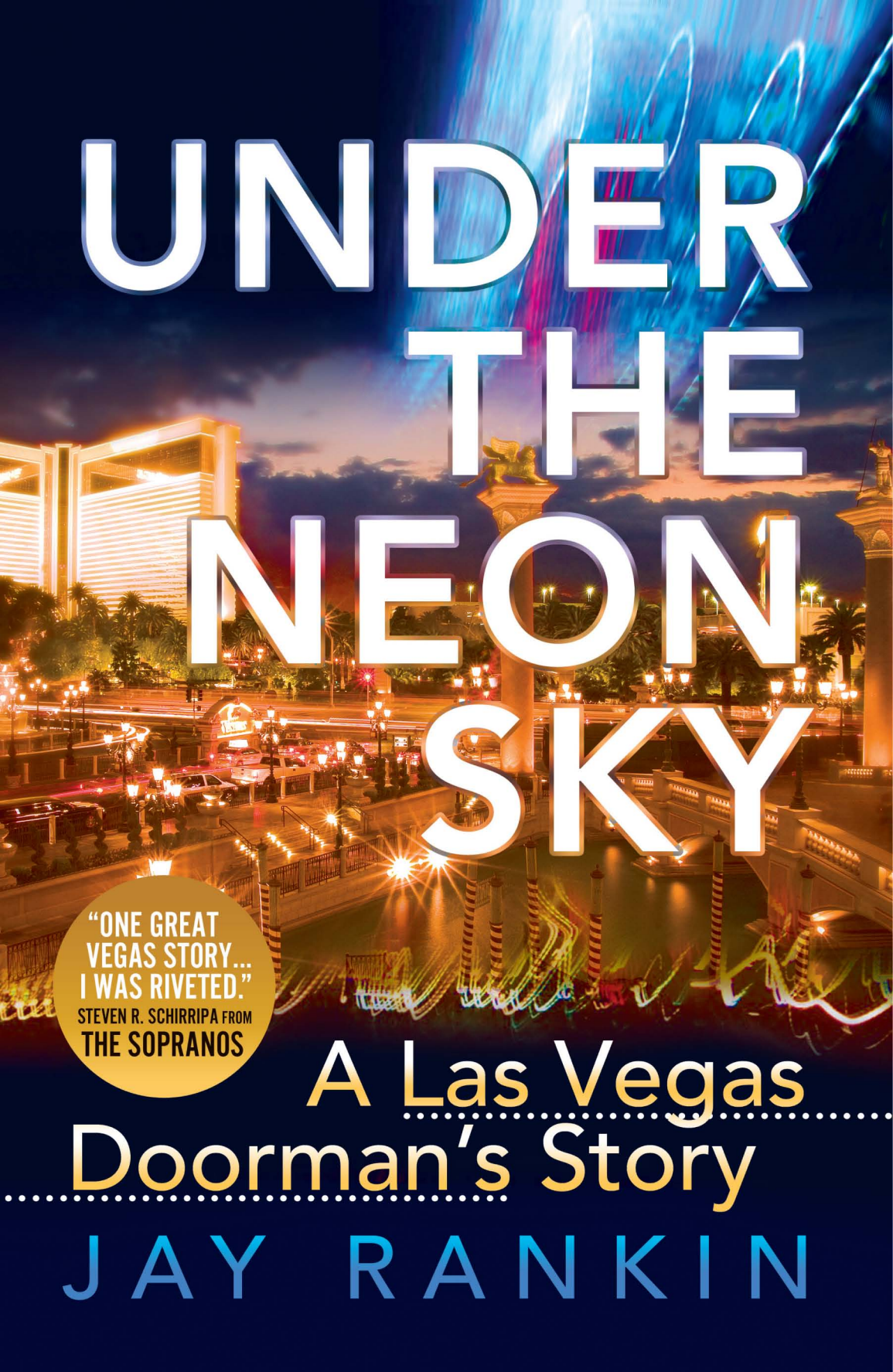




# UNDER THE NEON SKY

"ONE GREAT  
VEGAS STORY...  
I WAS RIVETED."

STEVEN R. SCHIRRIPIA FROM  
THE SOPRANOS

A Las Vegas  
Doorman's Story

JAY RANKIN

## CHAPTER ONE

Wait until dark, when the mood is right. The night is about possibilities. Invite a hooker to the blackjack table. Drop an extra hundred bucks on your bet. Order more drinks than you can handle. The forbidden makes Vegas unforgettable.

The Strip is dangerous. Like a jungle, exotic creatures materialize, and their beauty seduces, but they are predators, and their poison is lethal.

I watch the people and am bewitched by their downfall. I know Las Vegas is tearing me apart, but I crave the excitement. It's the only place where I feel intensely alive, even as it kills me.

The Strip stabs me with bolts of neon twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The power of flashing red, blue, orange, green, yellow, and white jolts me into existence. People shimmer with an inner light. The colors and sounds grow distinct, then overwhelming. The smells of the Strip tell me who I am, what to do, where to stand, when to jump out of the way.

I used to hate working nights. I felt alone and frightened. The guests are unpredictable and often crazy. Gradually, though, I became part of the Vegas night.

I can't leave this place. Why try? I've got nothing to lose. The dreams my wife, Cassy, and I brought to Las Vegas are tumbling across the cold Mojave. My soul is numb, my body's shot, my head is pounding, and I'm twitching like some nervous, fucked-up kid. When I look into the mirror, I see blond hair shot with gray and blue eyes dulled by exhaustion. My body is losing its strength. I know I should get the hell out, but tonight is about possibilities for me, too. I feel lucky. Las Vegas is giving me another chance.

I open my car window and inhale deeply—a ritual on my way to the MGM Grand. I exit at Tropicana Boulevard and nose into bumper-to-bumper traffic. I check the dashboard clock as I creep past New York, New York. Shit. I can't be late for work, not after being suspended for almost punching my supervisor..

My grip tightens on the steering wheel. My head throbs and my heart pounds. I am officially in work mode.

I fish around for the Vicodin in my duffel. I promised Cassy to cut back, but I don't have to answer to her anymore, and fuck it, tonight doesn't count. Tonight is the Sound and the Fury. Fight night.

Everyone is hopped up for the Holyfield-Tyson rematch. Fifteen thousand people will be at ringside in the MGM Grand's Garden Arena, and I'm told one-hundred fifty thousand more thrill seekers will crowd inside to gawk at celebrities.

The Grand comes into view. Everywhere I look is pandemonium and armies of patrolling police. Media trucks and city-services vehicles form barricade lines across the hotel driveway. Soon I will stand in the midst of this, at the entrance to the hotel.

I wonder if my partner, T-bone, got here, and if he has, how hopped up he is on drugs. He got rammed by a taxi two days ago and isn't doing too great.

I pop a couple painkillers and repeat my mantra. *Stay out of trouble, Jay. Just stay the fuck out of trouble.* Human Resources gave me official notification: One more complaint in my folder, and I lose my job.

Terrible foreboding fills me. Tyson attracts a dangerous crowd. Rappers claim him as their own. So do the two most notorious gangs in Los Angeles and New York, the Bloods and the Crips. Those guys are fuckin' out of control. They've been partying since their jet touched down at McCarran. If I lose my temper, they'll beat me down to my bones. If I show my fear, I'm a dead man, and no one will care. These maniacs are big spenders, and that's all that counts in this town. I've got to act cool. It ain't easy, though, wearing a stupid safari uniform, a ridiculous helmet, and tasseled knee socks.

I manage to swing my car into the employee parking lot. A thug I recognize as an off-duty cop blocks the way and scowls at me through the windshield. Then he waves me forward with a meaty hand. "Yo, Jay! Your mob wagon threw me for a second there."

I own a Lincoln Mark VII. The mob loves the Lincoln Mark series, and I take a lot of shit for owning one, even though mine looks like hell from parking in the lot. The sun seared the paint off the hood and roof, and the blowing sand stripped the finish off the body.

Valets are stealing employee spaces for guests' cars, but I finally find a place, grab my duffel, and run to the staff entrance. If T-bone came in, he will need my help out front. His shift starts earlier than mine, and he's probably been going nuts for a couple hours already.

I pass security guards on full alert. Movie stars, famous athletes, and politicians in ringside seats get off on the big stakes and bloody spectacle. They won't cause trouble, but they need protection.

Inside, I take the stairs two at a time and run through the Bell Department, a cavernous room off the front of the hotel. It holds all the luggage for guests checking in or out. Thousands of suitcases and garment bags pack the shelf space and pile high on the floor. I squeeze through the labyrinth to my small locker and change into my uniform as fast as I can.

On my way to the porte cochere I don't see the hundreds of bell carts. They're all in use. The bellmen are earning their tips tonight, just as T-bone and I will earn ours—two weeks' worth in a single night.

I arrive a couple minutes early to where I've been standing for years, at the maw of the largest hotel in the world. Tens of thousands of people have passed by me. Most look brain dead except for their pleasure-seeking synapses. The men remind me of vampires. They sweep down one side of the porte cochere, then pivot and head back, hunting for girls, games, and trouble.

One whiff of their breath exposes just about everything. Garlic reveals one set of facts; scotch relates something else entirely. Same with a cigarette or big Havana. I construct the guests piecemeal, every detail adding to the portrait, purpose, and propensities. Is he wearing snug custom clothes or loose, casual duds? Are his hands dirty from coins or chips? Are his fingernails manicured? What about shoes, hairstyle, age, cologne, gait, jewelry, tone, body language, teeth, expression?

Once I put the bits together, I know exactly who these people are. It's not a game; it's survival. In a city without boundaries, I have a chance to defend myself by knowing instantly, accurately, who's coming and going. I marvel at how much

visitors believe they can get away with here. Sooner or later, though, everyone pays.

Some of the valets and doormen wear bulletproof vests on nights like this, but I won't. I could never do my spins and kicks strapped into a chest protector. My routine in the MGM Grand's driveway earns me the big bucks, and that's the only reason I'm here. I'm referred to as a "hotel ambassador." I'm a doorman—an anonymous, forty-something, theme-park actor. I can't justify what I do. I can open any door in Vegas and procure anything a visitor might want.

I fight my way through regiments of police. Thousands of people surge into the lobby and casino entrance. Never have I seen a bigger crowd, although most types are familiar: Beverly Hills mixed with gangstas, agents, cronies, wannabes, informers, and hookers. We're going to need more ambulances.

The ornate stanchion ropes that define the cab-line boundaries are gone. In their place are galvanized-steel girders twelve feet long and four feet high. If these babies don't keep the mob moving in the right direction, I don't know what will.

The porte cochere roof and the hotel facade that's ten feet behind me trap the roar of voices and cars engines and then amplify it tenfold. Rip currents of taxi fumes, cigar smoke, hot tires, and carbon monoxide take me under. A coagulation of grease, oil, and road-kill stuck to the undercarriages pins me down.

*Stay focused, Jay. No margin for error.* Drinking plus Gambling multiplied by Loss of Sleep equals Disaster.

T-bone glares at me. "Bout time you got here, Rankin!" He's heaving huge, hard-sided luggage from a limousine.

I don't ask how he's feeling. His pain is obvious, and he's limping. His speech is rapid-fire and sloppy from drugs.

"This is like th' old days, with Wingy and Meyer and Ash and Roughhouse Rothman."

“Yeah, good, T-bone.” I remember the big, healthy man he used to be and wonder if he thinks the sacrifice has paid off.

Now I turn to the couple at the head of the cab line. I recognize a Japanese high roller with a tall, slender Asian woman on his arm. She is young, maybe in her twenties, and she wears a stunning red, white, and blue cocktail dress with a single strap.

“Where are you folks headed tonight?” I inquire with a perfect balance of deference and enthusiasm as I summon a taxi.

I wait for an answer. They step to the side. The man grabs her long, black hair and yanks her down to her knees on the pavement. She is completely still, and for a moment they look like two dancers. I am confused. Is this performance art? A promo for some new show? I move closer, trying to make sense of the tableau.

Very slowly, grasping her hair in his fist, he pulls her face close to his crotch. What the fuck is happening? It still seems theatrical but now more like a snuff film. I squint at the woman, looking for a clue. Her mascara is smeared with her tears.

He encircles her graceful neck with one hand, and winds her hair around his other, then forces her head back, back. I am afraid he is going to snap her neck. I look around. Doesn't anyone else see what's happening? I don't want to intervene—not when I'm already on probation with HR. Jesus, no one's watching.

“Hey!” I shout, and spring toward them.

The man stops and impales me with his piercing gaze. I pull up short and watch as he slowly, deliberately, puts his arm around the woman and helps her to stand. Then they float out of my sight into the Vegas night.

I feel as if I might throw up. I need a moment to collect myself.

Behind me, people jam the lobby but will have to make room for the newcomers T-bone and I are helping from limousines and

taxicabs. I fantasize that the new arrivals use a steel girder as a battering ram.

The hookers are out in force. New Jersey Rick knows all the in-house hookers. I am not that familiar, but I can pick 'em out of a crowd. Hookers are young, beautiful, and a lot smarter than you'd expect. We're all the same here on the street—humping for dollars.

T-bone is from back East, like almost everyone else working here. I'm from California—a Jew in the midst of Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and Mormons. I have a master's degree in Psychology, which doesn't mean I'm less crazy or self-destructive than anyone else, but I can see when someone's about to cross the line into ruin. I can't do anything to stop them—or myself.

Vegas is carefully constructed to propel visitors toward disaster. Most guests are in freefall. Naïve, unsuspecting, they have no defense. I witness the assisted suicide every night; I've seen it a million times. I'm almost guaranteed to be there when the thrill ends.

I turn to the next people in the cab line. Their backs are to me. "Where are you folks headed tonight?" The cab is already waiting, choking me in a fog of fumes. My eyes and lungs burn. My vision blurs, and instinctively I hold my breath. I'll do it hundreds of times before the night's over. Learning how to breathe in this city requires practice. After all these years, the atmosphere has become corporate, but the air is the same as when Meyer Lansky, Moe Dalitz, and Bugsy Siegel called the shots. Intimidation rules. Strength gets the respect.

T-bone and I have been friends for years. He likes my dangerous temper. People are afraid to push me. That's why I almost beat my supervisor half to death.

I want to keep my job. When work gets intense, like tonight, I can't think about my shitty life. I can make thousands on a fight night, so I start my act: spinning, sliding, waving my arms, and

pulling out every sly, slick trick I've learned from years on the job. T-bone and I draw crowds with our performance under the porte cochere. Tourists videotape us working at triple speed.

A tall, beautiful hooker passes by, and she winks at me. I smile back. Her skirt is slit up the sides to her smooth thighs, and her neckline plunges, all nude inside. The backless dress shows off the dimples on her gorgeous ass. I wish she would take me away.

"How you doin' tonight, Angel?" I ask.

"I'm so-o-o good," she says from whatever high she's on. Her joint's gone out. A man materializes with a lighter. She smiles at him, forgets about him, then turns back to me. "My God, the last fight night I must have done twenty-five guys in twenty-four hours. Know what I mean?"

"No."

She scans the lobby over my shoulder. "Of course it's nothing I'd care to do every day"—she laughs, a low chime—"but I made a lot of money."

"I'm sure."

She takes a long, strong hit off the joint. "I worry about the real crazies. We never know what's in a human heart."

Another hit and then blows the sweet smoke in my face. I try to catch it. I wonder if we're on camera. I don't want to get into trouble for talking with Angel.

She looks me up and down. "You should get some dinner. You look a little on edge."

"Because I'm fucked."

"Like all of us." She takes one more hit and then drops the roach in her jeweled evening bag.

I see she has a wad of bills already.

She sends looks over at T-bone. "You have plenty on your hands."

She undulates into the lobby. If a girl is smart like Angel, she can have it all—a shelf-long collection of little black books plus a husband in the backyard and a couple of kids in Little League.

“Heads up, Jay!” T-bone shouts, and I turn just in time to avoid a tall gentleman in eveningwear throwing up at the curb beside me.

“Fuck you!” some dude behind me yells.

A fight breaks out. Just what the street needs. Two more violent drunks. I search the mob for a security cop, but none is in sight.

I watch the men swing at each other, and I brace myself. I’ve been hit by a stray punch or two. I turn away to open a taxi door, still expecting an uppercut to graze my temple. A moment later I turn back to see the opponents have settled their differences and are hugging each other. Jesus Christ.

The odors get denser, and the noise intensifies. I’m deafened by paradise. Coins filling up metal slot trays. Screams. Car horns. I have to yell to be heard. In a few hours my throat will be raw.

I reach for the whistle in my pocket. I lower the nylon cord around my neck and then clench the small plastic noisemaker between my teeth. My profession’s one piece of inventory. Stress causes me to destroy one or more whistles every week. I lock my jaw and grind the whistle between my teeth. At this moment black plastic shards fill my mouth. I spit out the pieces and reach for one of the three new whistles in my pocket. It’s that kind of night and that type of crowd. I’m filled with dread.

I look at my watch. Tyson and Holyfield are starting to go at it in the massive MGM Grand’s arena. The arena holds over fifteen thousand, and the prizefight is not the only attraction: Tom Jones, EFX, and La Femme are performing in the Grand’s nightclubs. The moment the shows are over, the masses will pour outside, and the bedlam will worsen.

"I ain't waiting in no fucking cab line!"

Gee, what a surprise. A loudmouthed moron who doesn't think he has to wait with the little people. The standard drill begins: Joey G. hurries from the valet station and relieves me of cab line. I step to the side to deal with the troublemaker.

This one's tall and big boned, with coarse features and spotty hygiene. He breathes hotly in my face. Chicken cacciatore and beer, men's cologne from a drugstore. That means he's an asshole.

"I'm sorry, sir," I state matter-of-factly, "but we've got a system here. If you want a cab, you will have to take your turn."

Mr. Gorilla shoves me and opens his long coat. I know what's next. I look down to see a shiny thirty-eight tucked in his pants.

"Ya see dat? Ya t'ink ya can find me a ride now?"

Doormen learned how to handle this shit during our training. Sharkey warned us from the front of the classroom, "If you lose control even for a split second, it's all over. The job is all about control."

Well, fuck that, I decide. For me it's all about money. I'll make \$1500 or more on tips tonight. If I keep socking it away, I might make it out of this town.

"I'll see what I can do." I look at him with meaning.

He understands. Grinning down at me, he reaches into an inside pocket and pulls out a roll of bills. He peels off several twenties and stuffs them into my shirt pocket.

I feign surprise and signal for a taxi to find us. I make my way back to the cab line, where I hand Joey one of my twenties. "Thanks, man," I say.

"Fuh-ged about it." He tucks the bill in his pocket.

Kenny, one of the bellhops and not always trustworthy, hurries over. His blue eyes glitter with excitement. "All three judges give the first two rounds to Holyfield. Tyson is furious."

He scurries away before I can respond.

T-bone appears at my side. "You look like crap."

"I feel it. You do, too. How are you holding up?"

"I'm hurting, man. Can hardly move. The doc prescribed painkillers, and I told HR I need the pills if I'm gonna work."

"So you don't have to take a sick leave?" I'm amazed he is able to stand without crutches or a walker.

"I think my back could be broken, but I'm trying not to take days off."

"You're fucked up. If you're so seriously injured, you need to take care of yourself."

"Hey, we're all shot and runnin' on empty," he says. "But I'm runnin' it for all it's worth, Bro. The crowd'll be throwing hundreds at us all night. Nothing else matters." His eyes begin to glaze. "Don't you love it, man? Welcome to the real world, right?"

"It's not real, and I don't love it."

"Here. Stand still. This'll help." He faces me and grabs each of my earlobes between his thumb and forefinger. "Jay," he says, talking like Jesus, "think how you felt when you were a little boy, when you had no worries and no pain." He counts aloud, from one-one thousand to five-one thousand, while squeezing my earlobes harder and harder. Just when I can't stand the pain anymore, he lets go.

"You're one fucked-up dude," I tell him.

"I may be fucked up, but you need to relax."

Kenny interrupts, wearing a grin that shows his gums. "Tyson got Holyfield in a clinch and bit off a chunk of his ear. Holyfield's bleedin' all over—"

"Did they stop the fight?" I ask. If so, T-bone and I have to get cranking.

Words spill from Kenny's mouth. "The doc says the fight can go on. Holyfield went to his corner, and Tyson attacked him from behind. The crowd is apeshit, man!"

I turn back to the cab line. At the front a pair of young lovers are going at it. Writhing, they stumble into me, his hands busy under her skirt. She thrusts her pelvis forward.

Suddenly the masses morph into one huge, uncontrollable monster. Where the hell are the police?

Kenny appears. "Tyson just bit a bigger chunk from Holyfield's other ear, and then he took a swing at a cop who jumped into the ring. The crowd turned savage, man. Everyone was throwing stuff at Tyson. Swear to God, it's scary in there."

"Kenny, is the fight over?"

"Listen! Fights broke out in the stands, and the cops start dragging the assholes out. Then some moron wings a full bottle of water at Tyson, and Tyson goes after *him*."

"Kenny, for Chrissakes! Is the fight over?" T-bone yells. "Tell us!"

"Duh-uh. What do you think? The ref disqualified Tyson." Kenny shakes his head and walks away. T-bone goes back to his area.

I hear a weird buzzing. Cops appear by the door and talk among themselves. Don't they hear it? The first spectators from the arena hurry through, looking over their shoulders. The cops fan out.

T-bone and I exchange glances. He points to his ear and shrugs. He hears it, too. What is it? I'm sure one of the fifteen-thousand boxing fans will give me the lowdown.

A man stomps by us. He's enraged. "Muthafucker bit his fuckin' ear off!"

T-bone looks at me. I don't like seeing fear on his face. He's a former marine. Nothing scares him. He comes to stand next to me. "Whaddya think we should do?"

“Don’t know, we better be ready for just about anything.”

Paolo comes running over to us from his valet’s station. He looks frightened. What the fuck does he have to be scared about? Some very big, bad-ass guys with puny brains are on his payroll. His lips move, but I can’t understand what he is saying. Suddenly the depth of the crisis hits me.

“Keep your eyes open,” I tell T-bone. “I’ve got your back covered.”

T-bone smiles but doesn’t look convinced. I don’t blame him. The rumbling inside the lobby reminds me of a tornado or a tsunami.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “We’ve done this before. Sort of. We’re the workhorses, man. We’re the best. Remember that!” I pat him gently on the back, careful not to hurt him.

He nods and makes it back to his place.

Paolo stops beside me and shakes his head as he sees what’s become of T-bone. “The crowd is going crazy in there, tearing the place apart,” he says. “I’m getting the fuck outta here, man, and I suggest you do the same and take T-bone with you.”

“Yeah, well, that might be an option for someone who’s not on notice,” I mutter, watching as he jogs in the direction of employee parking.

The sound inside the hotel escalates to a jet spiraling to earth. Screams mixed with glass exploding erupt from the lobby. I see a fast-moving crowd, thousands of people, rushing toward the doors, coming straight at me. I stand paralyzed. My brain won’t work. Then my survival instinct sends me hurtling to the side, away from the force of this human tidal wave.

“They’re shooting!” a woman shrieks.

“They got guns!”

“God help us!”

Everyone is screaming so loudly, I can’t hear the gunshots.

The lobby doors burst open. T-bone and I look at each other in horror. They're all running for their life. Thousands of people race past me, the fastest ones push to the fore and knock down anyone in their way. Hundreds of people disappear underfoot.

I can't breathe. Nothing stops the momentum—not even the steel girders. Ripped from their frames, the reinforced barricades shoot up like missiles, then crash down. I hear the sickening snap of bones.

Cops draw their firearms and aim high, trying to slow the mob. I watch in disbelief as the police, too, disappear under the force of the charge.

My eyes fix on a body facedown on the pavement just three feet from the tip of my shoes. Hundreds trample him before they disappear into the darkness. Taxis push through the crowd. A woman lies crumpled at my feet, run over by a panicky driver.

I don't see T-bone anywhere. I call out for him. I walk blindly under the porte cochere, barely able to keep focused. Thirty or forty people are sprawled on the pavement in spreading pools of blood. No one moves. I want to help them, but I need to find my partner.

The shrill of the hotel fire alarms cut through the night air. Fire trucks, ambulances, and squads converge on the hotel. A SWAT van roars into the driveway, and people part for it as they are able. A half-dozen well-armed officers jump out and dash into the lobby.

*"T-bone!"* I scream. *"T-bone!"*

I won't leave until I find him. And when I do, I promise myself, I'll get him home, or I'll get him help, or I'll get him buried.

I CRAVED THE ENERGY OF THIS CITY.

I WAS ADDICTED TO THE CHARGE, THE RUSH, THE DRAMA THAT SURROUNDED ME.

LAS VEGAS HAD BEEN, FOR ME, PURE ELECTRICITY THAT BOMBARDED AND EXCITED ALL MY SENSES.

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Jay holds an advanced degree in Psychology. He began writing in

1993 and is currently working on his second book, about his life after escaping Vegas. He resides in Los Angeles, California.



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