

# Hot Enough For Ya?

By Todd Robinson

Jimmy Romance felt the blood drain from his face like somebody pulled out the stop plug in his neck.

"So joo had no idea that she was his daughter?" asked Carlos with a smile. He asked the question slowly, savoring the words like a fine wine.

Jimmy couldn't answer the obvious question since his mind was still spinning with the new information. The girl with whom he'd recently broken several laws of New York State, physics and nature with was the one and only daughter of the one and only Jonathan Bass.

Or, depending on who you asked, "Butcher" Bass.

And asked quietly.

Jimmy thought he might vomit right on his countertop.

Carlos clicked his tongue. "Of course joo didn't know.

Because..."

Jimmy didn't need Carlos to finish. The rest of the sentence would have been something about sado-masochism, death wishes, or both. "Does he know yet?" Jimmy hated the tremble he heard in his voice.

"He knows," Carlos said, grinning, his gold incisor winking in the

harsh florescence inside Jimmy's Tan-O-Rama. Carlos was the type of guy who liked to bring sour grapes to the dinner table. He only talked about the movies he didn't like. The restaurants with sucky food. The bad luck around the neighborhood. And he did it with glee. Carlos was the local ghoul of the jinxed. "She come home last night wearing somebody's old bowling shirt. The one with Jimmy R. embroidered over the pocket?" Carlos traced a finger over his heart.

Jimmy felt another wave of nausea run roughshod through his intestines. "How do you know this?"

"I heard Jonathan hollering as I passed by getting the paper this mornin'. Sounded kinda juicy, no offence, so I hung around front to hear."

That alone didn't bode well. Jimmy knew that Bass's apartment occupied the top floor of a brownstone on Thompson Street. If Carlos heard him from the sidewalk, then he was hollering to beat the band. Wait a minute here. "Home? She still lives at home?"

"She's only sixteen, Jimmy."

That did it. Jimmy ran into the can and lost his breakfast, lunch and part of last night's dinner into the toilet. "Ohgodohgodohgod", he muttered to the dead man in the mirror.

Carlos rapped 'shave and a haircut' on the bathroom door. "Hey Jimmy? Joo okay in there?" The blood flooded back into Jimmy's

brain with a roar. Was that little prick making some kind of joke? They both knew the rumors about Butcher's weapon of choice. A straight razor.

Jimmy burst out of the bathroom and grabbed Carlos by the neck, slamming him back into the counter. "Why are you telling me this!" he screamed, spittle flying in Carlos's face.

Carlos only smiled condescendingly into Jimmy's outburst. "Cuz I'm a friend, Jimmy. I figure maybe somebody should keep an eye on the salon while joo away."

Away.

That was it all along. Carlos knew that he'd need to go away. Where the hell was he supposed to go? Didn't matter. They could sure as hell find him here.

Mean Gene popped into Jimmy's mind's eye, uninvited. Bass's cause and effect man. As in, cause Bass any grief, Mean Gene Ricciardi effects serious damage on your ass. Then he brought you to The Butcher for the coup de grace. Mean Gene had just been here a couple of months ago before his vacation. Where was he going? Paris. That was it. Jimmy remembered thinking of that crap movie, An American Werewolf In Paris. Slightly less vicious and Gene could have passed for one. He said he wanted to get a head start on his tan.

Man oh man. Jimmy was woozy with the realization of just how big a world of shit he was suddenly in.

He had to go.

Fast.

"How much you got?" he asked Carlos.

"Well, I got a couple hundred on me that I can give joo until..."

Jimmy caught Carlos with a hard uppercut to the chin. Carlos's jaw snapped shut with a sound like cracking ice and he stumbled, leaning backwards into one of the empty tanning beds. Jimmy slammed the top of the bed shut with all his weight, sandwiching Carlos's face in the bed. Something crunched in the machine and Carlos slumped to the floor, bloody and out.

Jimmy felt Carlos's neck. He had a pulse. Good for him. He reached into Carlos's pockets, took the money and dropped the keys to the salon on the floor. He wouldn't need them because he wasn't coming back.

Couldn't come back.

Ever.

"Hi", he'd said. Like most of life's grandest clusterfucks, this one had started out simply enough. Jimmy could see with just that one little word whether or not to continue talking to the girl two seats over

or to flash his practiced smile at another. And there was always another.

Jimmy thought she looked young, but hell, they were in a bar. How young could she be? The big goon in the Jets jersey sitting at the door must have carded her on the way in.

She was obviously looking for some attention. The only kind of attention that Jimmy gave women. She was decked out in a black leather miniskirt and a gold spaghetti-strap tank that showed off her flat belly and clung to her nipples nicely.

"Mm-hey," she replied through her ruby lipsticked mouth. There was a small smear of that lipstick under her lower lip.

Jimmy gauged the situation at so far, *very* good. Her eyes had the soft glaze that indicated she was just past her personal alcohol tolerance. In the twenty minutes he'd been sitting there, she'd popped back two and a half apple martinis. A little more grease, Jimmy thought, and this engine is a-runnin'.

"Want to do a shot with me?" He asked. "I hate to drink alone."

Jimmy made a mental note to stab that fucking bouncer in the throat if he ever saw him again.

The paranoia was the worst part. Eight days since Jimmy ran from the Tan-O-Rama and hauled ass to 14<sup>th</sup> Street, dove into a cab

and got home to Brooklyn. He hadn't opened his door since.

Part of his safety net was in his name. Everybody called him Jimmy Romance. Romance wasn't his real last name, of course. Jimmy earned the moniker from the long trail of women that he'd conquered over the years. They were his Achilles Heel. His one weakness. Jimmy didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't do drugs. Clean as a bean. It wasn't out of any moral or health concerns that he'd kept himself so straight-edged, it was the pussy. Didn't smoke, because he like to keep his breath clean and teeth polished. He was often complimented on them. Drugs and alcohol killed the body and mind. His mind was his greatest seductive tool. His body closed the deal. Why waste money anyway? The drug under the panty line was Jimmy's only addiction. It was all he wanted. The irony wasn't lost on Jimmy. It was women that kept him in prime physical condition over the years. It was one girl that might end up killing him.

He didn't know if anybody knew where he lived, but was pretty certain nobody did. Was his address written down anywhere in the salon? He couldn't remember for sure. It must have been. Was it anyplace obvious? Jimmy could just imagine that grinning prick Carlos handing his address over to The Butcher for his thirty pieces of silver. Not that he hadn't given Carlos any reason not to. Not having as much as looked at a Bible since Sunday school, Jimmy didn't recall

Jesus busting open Judas's face before the betrayal, but Jimmy he would have had it coming.

Jimmy didn't plan on going peacefully into his personal crucifixion either. During the few short hours that he slept, when he felt his eyes going too heavy for even his terror to keep open anymore, he would slide his recliner over to the end the long hallway and drift into an uneasy sleep, revolver in hand. He'd almost shot the mailman twice when he woke up in a frenzied panic.

Jimmy wondered how much longer he could keep it up. He was running out of food, for starters. His last meal consisted of oily old sardines on chewy Ritz crackers. He couldn't remember buying the dusty can of sardines. Who the hell bought sardines? Either way, Jimmy was glad he had them.

He lived in New York, for chrissakes, where anything at any time could be delivered to your doorstep, usually for a small delivery charge and a tip. Jimmy was afraid to get anything brought to his house. He didn't need anyone to know that he was home. He would carefully watch the street from behind his thick curtains for any unusual cars, but what qualified as an unusual car? Jimmy didn't know his neighbors, much less what they drove on a regular basis.

The dark van with tinted windows, for instance. There was a dark blue Suburban that sat kitty-corner to his front window that didn't

move for three days. Then on Saturday, some loser in full clown get-up filled the back of it with bright balloons. Jimmy didn't even know he lived next to a career clown. For some reason, he felt he should have known that before this point.

On the fifth afternoon, as Jimmy prepared himself a lunch of watery clam chowder (he'd run out of milk) and a Froot Roll Up, he heard footsteps on the porch. Jimmy pulled the gun from his waistband, and pointed it down the hallway. It was just about time for the mailman, but Jimmy wasn't going to be taking any chances. The footsteps were heavy. Whoever it was, they weren't feeling any need for caution.

A sharp squeak. Jimmy cocked his gun with a shaking thumb. Rustling papers and the click of the door slot snapping shut. Without thinking about it, Jimmy hadn't even checked his mail for the four days he'd kept himself a prisoner inside the apartment. Too close to the windows. Also, somewhere in the back of his mind, he feared a letter bomb, even though it wasn't even close to Butcher's style. The Butcher liked cutting people, if that could be thought of as a style. John Bass liked his punishments delivered first hand and close up. For hours and hours at a time.

Jimmy crept carefully over to the door and collected the pile of mail off of his doormat. It was the typical mélange of crap. Bill,

record club, phone bill, credit card applications...

...wait a minute.

There it was.

He didn't know how long it had been there, but right there, printed gaily on a five by seven postcard was his salvation.

"Fortune Estates," came the sugary voice on the phone.

"...."

"Excuse me?"

Jimmy cleared his throat, clogged from days of disuse. He also realized that he didn't need to whisper. "Yeah, I got your postcard."

"Well, sir, I can assure you that Fortune Estates offers the highest in quality living arrangements in the..."

"I want to see it."

"What? Oh. Um... Okay." The girl obviously wasn't accustomed to such an easy sale. "I'll need to check your name in our database. When would you like to see..?"

"Soon as possible. Name's James Romancelli."

"Well, Mr. Romancelli, I can send you the information packet in a week and..."

"I only have the next few days off. I can fly in two days or I can't fly out at all. You can overnight the ticket ."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I'll need to check with my manager and see if that's possible."

Jimmy was put on hold to the strains of muzak Rod Stewart. He hated the real Rod Stewart. What the hell made these people think that anybody wanted to listen to the muzak version? Jimmy broke out in an anticipated sweat while he waited. His foot tapped on the floor anxiously.

The line clicked back. "Mr. Romancelli?"

"Yeah."

"I've brought your situation to the attention of my supervisor, Mr. Casey, and he said that we can help you."

Jimmy exhaled the breath he didn't know he was holding in and almost broke into tears of relief. "That's great."

"I'll send your ticket tonight and we'll see you on Wednesday. Is there anything else..?"

Jimmy hung up the phone and sagged against the wall. He had his out. His ticket, literally, would be in his hand the next day. Up to that point, Jimmy's running potential had been limited. With the money he'd taken from Carlos and the register, he'd amassed a sum total of \$1,022.36. Not nearly enough to run - and run as far as he felt he needed to in order to be safe. Not enough to start over. He had a couple grand more in the bank, but couldn't access it, not

wanting to go out in public and such. But now, he got himself a free ticket to another time zone. He could get his money and live for a couple months while he set himself up. The operating words were *he could live*.

All he had to do was take a look at some dinky little timeshare. The location was the icing on his getaway cake.

Jimmy Romance was going to Vegas, baby.

Strutting through McCarran airport, Jimmy heard Dino singing "Ain't That A Kick In The Head?" through his brain. The only lyrics he knew were from the first line.

How lucky can one guy be?

Jimmy felt lucky. And what better city to be lucky in?

The song played in a loop, like a skipping record. Jimmy couldn't care less. He felt like a million bucks. He felt better than he had in years. He felt... free. He walked with a Rat Pack bounce through the terminal, all the way to the goofball holding a handwritten sign that read 'Fortune Estates' and 'Romancelli' underneath.

Check this guy, Jimmy thought to himself. Only somebody truly living the good life could afford to look so stupid. First off, the guy was wearing a white linen suit that looked like he'd bought it for a nickel at Don Johnson's yard sale. His peroxide blonde coif was

moussed tighter than a Catholic girl's bra strap.

Actually, as Jimmy looked around, he was a little startled to see how much color everyone wore. Jimmy was the only person in the terminal wearing full New York black. Normally, wearing color was warning flag number one for spotting tourists. New Yorkers stuck to their black clothes like they were participating in a seven million-man wake.

The guy caught Jimmy's eye. "Mr. Romancelli?"

"Call me Jimmy."

The guy smiled with teeth whiter than nature ever intended.

Apart from the guy's skin, which was tanned a George Hamilton brown, everything else looked bleached to the bone. Jimmy shook his hand and smiled back, trying to make it look friendly, rather than the mocking smile he felt worming onto his lips.

"Norman Casey, sales manager for Fortune Estates. But please, call me Norm." Norm extended a pristinely manicured hand at Jimmy.

Jimmy, took it in his own, suddenly feeling self-conscious for the first time in his life about the state of his cuticles. "You got it, Norm. So, what's the deal?"

"Well, first we'll get your luggage. Then I'll drop you at the hotel. No hard sell tonight. Tonight, you get to enjoy Sin City at your leisure."

When they walked to the parking lot, the heat nearly knocked the breath out of Jimmy. "Jesus."

"Hot enough for ya?" Norm cackled at his own joke.

Jimmy couldn't believe that he actually asked that. "This whole place is like a big Tandoori oven."

"Blessing and curse. You'll notice that you're not sweating, though?"

Jimmy looked at his hands. Dry as a Saltine. "Well, I'll be..."

"Desert heat, my friend. It's not even as hot as it gets.

Tomorrow's supposed to hit a hundred fourteen."

"Degrees?"

"Yup. You're actually sweating, but the second it hits your pores it evaporates. Can be dangerous. I've got some spring water in the car. You'll want to make sure that you stay hydrated."

Norm drove himself a brand new Buick convertible. Not too bad for a real estate shill. Norm leaned over, popped the glove compartment and handed a bottle to Jimmy. "Here you are, pal." Norm started the car and Frank Sinatra sang 'My Way' in the car speakers. "Welcome to Vegas, Jimmy. Believe you me; you live the life for a while, you may never leave."

Funny that, Jimmy thought, I have no intention of leaving.

After he checked into his room, Jimmy went to the lobby and asked about rates. Two hundred a week. Unbelievable. In New York, Jimmy knew people who paid three times that to share a Bronx studio with a ten pound rat named Bruno. The complex was geared towards conventioneers, but what the hell. It had a friggin' *pool*. Jimmy paid the guy a month's advance and hit the tables, looking to build his kitty. That night, Jimmy gave up his first Vegas dream of becoming a career gambler. Three hours in the casino and his pot was already down four hundred between the craps and blackjack tables. Double-down against a six, my ass. Not long after, Jimmy was filling out an application in the casino bar for poker dealer. Work had never exactly been Jimmy's favorite four-letter word, but he was alive. And he was free.

"Rise and shine Jimmy," came Norm's cheerful voice from behind the door.

Jimmy felt like crap. He was hung over to beat the band, but he'd made progress at the hotel bar. First night in Vegas, Jimmy allowed himself a couple of drinks. The price was right. A couple turned into God-knows how many. Even skunk drunk as he was from the free table liquor, Jimmy managed to charm the phone numbers off

two women he'd struck up conversations with. He was too lit to entice them back to his room, but he'd be damned if the old Jimmy Romance magic wasn't still strong as ever .

Jimmy opened the door too quickly, then stumbled back as the heat and blinding sunlight smacked into him.

"Whoa," said Norm. "Looks like somebody tasted a bit too much of the Vegas high life last night." Norm cackled and Jimmy fought the desire to unpack his gun and put an end to the high-pitched torture. "Listen," he said, "I'll go get some breakfast and be back in an hour. You think you'll be ready?"

"Yeah," Jimmy mumbled through dry and cracked lips.

"Super."

Jimmy felt one level better after his shower, even if that level was still a step below dog shit. When he pulled a shirt out of his bag, Jimmy looked at the revolver he'd packed just in case.

Just in case of what, he couldn't really say. He thought about leaving it behind, but he didn't want any surprises between his doorstep and LaGuardia. The cabbie nearly pissed himself when Jimmy went to put in his bag, but Jimmy threw him an extra Hamilton to erase his memory.

He was heading out the door when he looked at it again. His

problems were gone. What the hell did he need the gun for now?

Jimmy stopped at the door again. Looked back at the gun.

Just in case.

The hard sell started the second Norm pulled onto the highway.

Jimmy had trouble keeping his eyes open.

"Fortune Estates is going to be the premier..." Jimmy's eyes drifted shut.

"...golf courses accessible from the property." Closing again. Asleep.

Jimmy jumped up with a start at the hand on his shoulder.

"Whoa, whoa, there cowboy. Didn't mean to scare you," Norm said, his hands held up in a mock-defensive pose.

"Where are we?" They weren't even on any road to speak of anymore. All Jimmy could see on three sides was desert. Directly in front of the car was a ramshackle construction site. A couple of empty bulldozers were parked at the lip of what looked like a half dozen empty foundations.

"The future site of Fortune Estates." Norm held his arms wide, like he was introducing Adam to the Garden of Eden.

"Nothing here," Jimmy croaked. His throat felt like it was full of dry ash. He went to get a bottle of water, but the glove compartment

was locked.

“Nothing yet,” Norm said, reaching into the back seat. He handed Jimmy a plastic jug. “Truth is, you’re the first potential buyer we’ve brought here. We weren’t going to be showing the site for another month, but your circumstances made us bump up the schedule a bit.”

Jimmy sucked hungrily at the water. His head pounded a rumba. This was why he didn’t drink.

“That wasn’t fair of you,” Norm said with a wink.

“What wasn’t?”

“Sleeping through my pitch.” Norm gave Jimmy another toothpaste ad smile. “C’mon. Let’s go see the construction.”

The desert wasn’t what Jimmy expected. The ground had a gravelly consistency, like the stuff they poured in the infield at Jimmy’s old Little League park. He was expecting more of a beach-type sand. There were no pointy cacti, just a lot of scrub. Scrub, gravel and not a hell of a lot more. Jimmy stared down into one of the eight foot deep foundations. His foot skidded in the sand and Norm grabbed the shoulder of Jimmy’s shirt.

“Don’t want to fall in there. It might be just sand, but that first step’s a doozy.” Norm laughed again.

Jimmy forced a smile. Yeah, a doozy. Me breaking my neck is

real freakin' funny, too. He started feeling surges of unease. There he was, literally, in the middle of nowhere. The old paranoia came creeping back under his skin. The sensation was somehow weirder in the desert. The sickness in the pit of his stomach was familiar, but the sweats were missing. Where were the sweats? Oh yeah. Sucked off by the hot air. Even his fear felt wrong.

He'd tuned out Norm as they walked around the big nothing. What was wrong? There wasn't anybody who knew he was there. There was no place for anybody to hide. It was just the two of them, the open desert and...

And...

And a lot of holes in the ground.

"...right back." Norm said.

"Huh?"

"I said I'll be right back. I want to go get something in the car."

Norm smacked Jimmy on the shoulder and trotted off.

It all came in a rush. Why the hell had this offer come just at the right time? Jimmy hadn't been offered any timeshare before in his life. The thoughts bounced around Jimmy's brain like a superball. Butcher Bass had connections. Connected connections. Connections to crime. Sin City.

Mean Gene. Mean Gene was getting a head start on his vacation

tan. In Paris? Who the hell went tanning in Paris?

In April.

There was a casino called Paris.

In Vegas.

Sin City, baby.

Jimmy watched Norm open the passenger door and lean down.

He was unlocking the glove compartment.

Jimmy didn't think Norm was getting gloves in the 114 degree heat.

For the first time since he'd arrived, Jimmy felt sweat on his neck as the rest of his body went numb. Jimmy pulled his gun and fired a single shot into the windshield. Norm's outline bucked once and slumped over. Jimmy sucked the furnace air in rapid gulps. A couple of breaths later, his throat was squeaking dryly.

He started shuffling over to the car when the engine turned. Jimmy started running (to hide where exactly?) and emptied the gun at the Buick as it surged forward. The windshield exploded. The huge car didn't get far. It rolled into one of the empty foundations with a boom. The car's rear wheels kept rolling even though they had no ground to roll against anymore.

Jimmy jumped into the ditch, gun ready. He didn't realize that it was empty, but it didn't matter. "Kill *me*, huh? You think you're

gonna sucker Jimmy Romance? *Fuck you!*" he screamed maniacally at the disabled car in panicky rage.

Jimmy opened the door. Norm's body lay still in the wheel well. Jimmy's shot hit in the neck. Blood gushed all over his nice white suit and the sizzling hot windshield. Jimmy rolled him off the pedals onto the hard clay ground. Once his body was off the accelerator, the engine slowed, coughed once and died.

Norm was crying and moving his mouth like a dummy who'd lost his ventriloquist. Then he was still.

Jimmy once-overed the car's interior. No gun.

With a loud crack, the wall of the foundation gave under the Buick's weight and came crashing down. The car rolled over Norm's body onto its roof with a wet crunch.

Good thing he's already dead, Jimmy thought. Now it was his turn to laugh, even though the sound of it was alien in his ears. Jimmy carefully climbed into the compacted Buick and looked in the glove box.

Jesus, it was stifling.

He found blueprints, a contract and a smashed bottle of sparkling wine. Cheap bastard couldn't even spring for the good stuff, Jimmy thought. On the roof of the car (now the floor) were two jugs of water. One of them was empty, a neat bullet hole through the

plastic. The other was intact, but more than half empty, since Jimmy had greedily drank from it only recently.

No gun. No knives. Hell, there wasn't even a toenail clipper in the car.

How do people live in this heat?

Jimmy climbed out the car and considered his options. They weren't bad. Yeah, he'd killed the guy, but it already looked like an accident. It wouldn't take much to torch what was left and let any evidence burn up.

The feeling of freedom washed over Jimmy again. He would get away with it. Sorry Norm, but there just wasn't any motive. Jimmy grabbed the bottle of water and walked over to the collapsed wall. He could follow the Buick's tracks, flag a car and sob his story to the cops.

As he climbed up the collapsed wall, his foot sunk into the sand. Falling backwards, more desert slid into the foundation. Jimmy fell over and wound up with a mouthful of bitter grit.

Dammit! Jimmy rinsed the dry earth from his mouth. So the collapsed wall was a bust. No biggie.

Jimmy went to another side and tossed the jug over the edge ahead of him. Jumping up, he grabbed the wall and scrabbled to get his leg over. The rim came free under his shoe, sending Jimmy tumbling onto his back, clutching two handfuls of cheap concrete.

Looked like the people building Fortune Estates were going to make their fortunes cutting back on materials.

Third and fourth sides, same damn thing.

He couldn't get out.

Damn, it was hot. Jimmy looked at his arms, which were already going a dangerous shade of red. He checked his watch.

11:42 a.m.

It was only going to get hotter.

Jimmy climbed on the overturned Buick, tried to get up speed and jumped off at the edge. He hit the side halfway over and slid back slowly into the hole, scrabbling his fingers on the too yielding ground. The fingernail on his left pinky ripped out and Jimmy cursed off. Too bad you're dead, Norm. I could have used the number for your manicurist.

Almost made it.

The second time, Jimmy tried to psyche himself up. This was the only way he was going to get out. Do or die. Now or never. The old Brooklyn try.

On the second step of his second attempt, Jimmy's ankle caught under the muffler. His shin snapped like a chopstick as he face-planted into a muddy pool of Norm's blood.

He howled in obscene pain at the merciless sun.

Nobody heard.