

WIP_0	3/6/19	Initial draft – 31000 words - complete
WIP_1	4/6/19	Check & fix math on loan amounts

The Hot Shoe

Peter Quinn

The Meet

Martin walked up to the pink motel room door and knocked. The door was immediately opened by a tall thin guy with long braids. Like Martin, Jake was a professional thief. Jake said, "Hey dude, come in. It's way to hot out there to stand around." The motel room air conditioning unit was howling like a jet taking off from nearby McCarran airport.

Martin said "Thanks. How was your drive?" Jake had driven to Las Vegas from his home base in Humboldt County, California. It was a 14hr drive.

Jake said "Long. I got in late last night. But at least I got a chance to meet up with a friend in Berkeley the night before and split up the drive to two days. "

Martin got straight to the point, "So, who's this guy we're meeting?"

Jake replied, "His name is Austin Gilmore. I met him at a party a couple of years ago while I was working security for the growers. I've run into him a couple of other times since. He's got a shop where he buys and sells collector sneakers."

Martin looked at him "Sneakers? You mean shoes?"

Jake said, "Yeah, you wouldn't believe what some people pay for rare sneakers. Anyway, he has a physical store and website called 'Kicks on Route 66'. He's got an idea for a way for us to rip off a major collector and he'll resell the shoes."

Martin said, "Ok. I'm not interested in robbing on consignment. He'll have to have the cash before we do it. How much do you trust him? Obviously enough to drive 14 hours to get here."

Jake said, "Yeah, well. You know what they say. Trust, but verify. Let's talk to him and see what he's got. I wouldn't have dragged you down here if I didn't think he was serious."

When David Martin wasn't working, he lived on Vancouver Island in Canada. He carefully isolated his work life from his home life. His cover identity at home was that he was a mining engineer and flew to Las Vegas to work. He owned a small mining claim in the hills off I-15 that was a useful base of operations in the US and a way to keep his home life and work life separate.

It was a good cover because he really was a mining engineer. After graduating from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary, he worked at a mine in far Northern Alberta. The mine boss cut one too many corners and a laborer died while blasting. To keep from going to jail, the boss put the blame on the Martin, who was the FNG - short for the Fucking New Guy. Martin was fired and blackballed from any mine work in Canada. After looking for work for more than a year, he fell in with a ring of thieves who needed an explosives expert. Eventually he ended up with a loose collection of guys who pulled off heists from time to time. Jake was one of his frequent collaborators.

Martin said, "You know where we're meeting?"

Jake grabbed a straw cowboy hat with a blue paisley bandanna off the bed and said "Yeah, it's a locals bar not that far from here. My rig's out front. I'll drive."

The bar was a dive. As it was early afternoon on a weekday, it was deserted. There were a couple old guys at the bar arguing with the bartender. A TV hung above each end of the bar showing sports

highlights. This being Vegas, there were three slot machines bolted to the wall. Fortunately, they had the volume down low.

At the back, in a booth, there was a guy sitting by himself with a half-finished draft beer in front of him. Jake gave him a nod and asked Martin to get him a beer from the bar. Martin got a couple of draft beers and joined them.

Their contact was a white guy in his late 20s or early 30s with a scraggly beard. His thin bony arms were covered in tattoos.

Jake said, "Austin, this is the guy I told you about. We've worked together before."

Martin said, "Hi, I'm Frank. Why don't you tell us what you have in mind."

Austin said, "I don't know if Jake told you, but I buy and sell collector sneakers. Some of the top end shoes change hand for 25 grand. There's lots of money in it. Anyway, I was at a party at the Bellagio last month with some collector friends and Alexey Belkin, the billionaire, was there."

Jake said, "Who the fuck is Belkin?"

Austin chuckled nervously, "He founded a software company and sold it to Facebook for like 10 billion. I talked to him at the party and he said his only real vice is his shoe collection. He doesn't drive Ferraris or wear swiss watches like the other billionaires. He told me he still kept his collection at house in Palo Alto he bought when his company first took off. He's renovating a mansion but hasn't moved in yet. When he does he'll move his shoes."

He continued, "Here's what I'm thinking. We break in and I cherry pick the best of his collection. You ransack the house to make it look like a random robbery. You take whatever valuables he's got. I pay you half of what the shoes are worth and you keep whatever else you find."

Martin looked at him and said flatly. "No". To Jake he said, "Let's get out of here, we're wasting our time."

Jake gave Austin a wry smile – "How many break ins have you done? Leave this to the professionals."

Austin blurted out, "But how will you know which shoes are the good ones?"

Martin said, "We'll take them all. Forget about ransacking the house. It's too risky. It takes a long time and there's too much chance of leaving trace evidence. You've heard of DNA? Besides if he's not living there, why would there be anything else worth stealing. "

Austin said, "What are you going to do with the whole collection. I only want the top 10 pairs?"

Martin said, "You're going to fence the whole lot. Otherwise we're not interested."

Austin sat there for a minute looking shocked. He said, "The collection is worth something like 2 million. I thinking I'd get 10-20 pairs worth 500 grand to a million. This is much bigger."

Martin said, "Give me the details. How much is the collection worth? How many shoes are there?"

Austin said, "He used to keep a page on Facebook for his shoe collection. He hasn't updated it in a while, so it might have changed. The page shows he has about 200 pairs. They're all high-end sneakers too. I'd say, average of 10 grand a pair. "

Martin nodded. "So. 2 million. Let's say for the moment we stole the 2 mil worth of shoes and turned them over to you. How are you going to pay us? We're not exactly going to put them on consignment."

Austin looked down at his beer. "I figured that much. I guess this could work. I'll find a way to come up with the money. I have to."

Martin said "Let's say we go for it. We grab the whole collection that you say is worth 2 million. We'll have some expenses and we'll probably need a third guy. Usually expenses come off the top before any split. To make it simple, we'll deliver the shoes for 1.5mil to be paid upon delivery. "

Austin gulped. "The 2 mil estimate is only an estimate. I'm taking all the risk that he still has all his shoes, that they're in good condition and I have to hold them until I can sell them. I was thinking more like 1 mil. We split the profit 50/50 but I take the risk on what the collection is really worth."

Martin sat for a moment as if considering Austin's offer and made a move to stand up. Austin sighed, "Ok. I can be flexible. Meet me halfway. I'll pay 1.2".

Martin said, "I might be able to do that, but at that price, we need 100k off the top for expenses. I hate this haggling shit. Don't nickel and dime me. It's 1.3 mil or no deal."

Austin said, "Okay we have a deal. What else do we need to work out? I'll give you Belkin's address and what I know about where he keeps the collection. Jake knows how to get in touch with me."

Martin said, "We don't have a deal. We have an agreement on the price. I need to do some research on Belkin, and we need to work out how the payment works. I need to see the money up front. I don't expect to be paid until delivery, but I need to see that you have it. Jake and I will figure out something. Jake will get back to you within a couple of days. When we see the money, we'll have a deal."

Jake nodded. He and Martin got up and walked out.

When they got back in the truck with the AC going, Jake said, "So, what do you think? Is he for real?"

Martin shrugged, "He's an amateur, but we knew that. If he can raise the cash, then we'll do it. Let me check him out and you find out what you can about Belkin and his collection. I need to get my cover ID and stuff from my mine and then I'll check into a motel on Fremont, near yours. Drop me off across the street from Caesars, if you don't mind, and I'll send you a secure text tomorrow."

Jake dropped the truck in gear and started driving towards the strip. "Text me your burner number when you get it."

Martin said, "Okay". He noticed a pink hair tie on the floor. With his braids, it could have been Jakes, except likely not pink. "You bring a girl with you down from Humboldt?"

Jake grinned, "Yep, sweet little hippie chick from Sacramento. She was dying to see Las Vegas. We're cool. She's hanging around the Mandalay Bay pool in her organic hemp bikini, trying to land a high roller. I'll send her back to California if we decide to take this gig. "

Jake pulled into a side street behind the Flamingo and Martin jumped out.

Martin made his way over the elevated walkway and into Caesars. When he'd arrived from the airport that morning, he took a cab to there and dropped his backpack off at the bell desk. He travelled light. All he had in his backpack was a change of clothes, his Canadian smart phone and his laptop.

His laptop if booted normally would show nothing that you wouldn't expect to find on a mining engineer's laptop. There was a hidden and encrypted boot partition where he did all his real work. If you booted the hidden partition and knew the 40 character pass phrase, you had the keys to his kingdom. If you were a random US border guard and imaged his laptop, you wouldn't find much more than a browser with a bunch of Netflix movies in the history.

Martin went to the bell desk to retrieve his backpack. He gave the counter man his ticket and had a short wait for his bag. He tipped the guy \$5 and went out to the taxi stand. It was hot as only Las Vegas can be. Well over 100 degrees but at least it was dry. His wait at the taxi stand was thankfully short.

He told the cabbie to take him to the airport. He had a rental car reservation under his Canadian identity that he'd be using to get to his mine. In the cab he pretended to sleep to avoid chitchat with the cab driver.

Picking up the rental car was uneventful. He got a Kia something or other compact that actually was pretty nice. He drove south out of town on I-15 out in the desert. His mine was in the hills above the small town of Goodsprings, NV. It was about an hour's drive, most of it on good roads, but the last 20 minutes on a gravel road that ended at his mine site.

He had a little one room cabin. If you could call it a cabin. It was an overgrown steel lawn shed. No running water, no electricity, no cell service. He had an outhouse for a bathroom and an outdoor sink. He had a mini-bar sized fridge and microwave that ran off a gas-powered Honda generator. He seldom stayed here long enough to fire it up. Water was from a large plastic water tank that he paid a guy from Goodsprings to fill from time to time. It could get cold here in the winter. Not like Alberta, but cold enough that you'd want some heat. If he ever needed to spend the night here in December, he'd pick up a propane heater in town.

He had an old blue APL shipping container for equipment storage and a bit of indoor shop space. It was reasonably secure with a solid padlock.

His local car was a Toyota pickup with a camper shell that he kept under a tarp when he wasn't using it. He checked under the truck for rattlers and pulled the tarp off, stowing it in the camper shell. He hadn't been there for more than a month and the tires needed air. He didn't need to drag his air compressor out of the shipping container. He'd be able to get to the gas station off the interstate without too much trouble.

<<truck is legally registered to Frank Wallace and has Nevada plates>>

The mine itself was a drift that ran horizontally into the hill. There was a vein of gold in the rocks that was mostly played out before 1910. There was still a little here and there, but it was hard work to get to it and not worth the effort. It made a great cover for his real business.

Off the main drift there was a side gallery and near the back, someone had sunk a shaft – probably looking for a new vein. Martin had put in solid iron gate into the front of the mine and locked it with a stout lock and chain. Given the remote location, someone could bring up tools and cut the chain, but unless they knew something, it wouldn't be worth their while.

He used the side gallery for more secure storage. He unlocked the mine and got a flashlight from the shipping container. It was pleasantly cool in the dark mine. He went into the gallery and dragged out a larger Rubbermaid tub outside the mine where there was more light.

In the tub, he took out a Glock 17 9mm that was wrapped in an oily rag. He took the clip out, checked that the chamber was empty, racked the slide and dry fired it. His dad always told him that dry firing a gun could damage it, but he knew that was BS.

Not that firing a gun out here in the boonies was illegal or even that unusual. He had cleaned it before putting it away and didn't feel the need to test fire it. He pulled a ballistic nylon holster with a Velcro cover out of the tub. He slotted the clip back in the gun and inserted it in the holster. He carefully put the gun down on the tubs lid to keep it out of the dirt.

Martin next took out a wallet with a California driver's license in the name of Frank Wallace and Martin's picture. The wallet had \$120 in twenties and a Visa card in the same name. The Visa card was a valid card. Martin used it from time to time and paid the bill. Martin had stored another good set of IDs in the box for a rainy day and had several other more disposable IDs. He took out one of these IDs. Another California driver's license in the name of Roger Jones. This one wasn't in the state database and wouldn't stand up to too much scrutiny.

He had a couple of thousand dollars in cash stashed in the box. He took five \$100 bills out and put them in the wallet. Where it wouldn't stand out, he'd use cash. If he needed more cash in town, he'd go to one of the casinos that accepted Bitcoin and cash out some of his savings.

Lastly, he needed a safe cell phone. The box contained four unused prepaid cell phones. He took one and put it next to the Glock.

Into the box went his Canadian wallet and cell phone. As far as anyone tracking him by ID or by cell signal, his trail ended here. There was no cell reception here and with the phone off and locked up underground, there was no chance of it leaking his location. He picked up the gun, phone, and wallet, sealed the box back up and locked it back up in the mine.

He went into the storage container to get a folding knife to open the cell phone plastic clamshell. He slipped the knife in his pocket when he was done. He opened one of the drawers of a rolling tool chest and pulled out a small pouch. The pouch contained a lock pick, rake and torsion tool. He wasn't great at using them, but he could open most regular locks in a couple of minutes. Most residential locks were trivial to open with these tools. If necessary, they'd get an expert to handle the locks on the job itself, but he thought he might need his own tools before then. He stuck the lock picks in his backpack.

He liked to have a gun available, but didn't want to carry it. He opened the compartment under the back seat of the Toyota where the jack and tire iron went and stowed the gun. It wouldn't stand up to a serious search, but a casual thief wouldn't think to look there.

He plugged the new phone into the USB jack in the truck to charge when he drove back into town. He locked everything up and then started the truck. The battery was weak, but it started on the second try. Martin pulled out a well-worn mesh back ball cap with a truck stop logo from the door pocket, put it on, and drove away. He stopped by the gas station to top up his tires and gas tank before rolling out on the interstate back to Las Vegas. By this time it was late afternoon. He'd get a motel room and then see what he could find about Austin.

While he was driving, he thought about Austin. He wanted to know what was motivating him. Was it strictly greed? Did he have debts he was trying to clear? If so, who did he owe. Was he trying to feed a drug habit? If he was a drug addict, Martin would be especially wary. It would be just be a matter of time before he got busted and would rat Martin out. Martin was careful to keep Austin from knowing too much in any case.

Did he have a gambling problem? If he was trying to pay off a gambling debt, borrowing more money was going to be tough for him. But if he could pull it off, it would work for Martin.

With the traffic, it took him longer than usual to get back into the Fremont St area that suitable motels. Martin didn't want to stay at a casino hotel. There was too much surveillance. Cheap older motels were more his style. He had to show ID to check in and no one batted an eye if he paid in cash. Especially in Vegas.

Martin found a motel that looked decent and checked in. He told the clerk he'd be there for four days but might need it longer. The room was a twin of the room that Jake rented. Typical American chain motel room with two double beds. Thankfully it didn't smell like old cigarette smoke.

There was a meager desk area in the room and Martin plugged in his laptop and booted into the hidden partition. First order of business was to send Jake a secure text with his new cell number and then research Austin Gilmore. He started with a google search, paid for a personal background check, and for a report about his company from D&B.

The upshot was that Austin was 29 years old, never married. He never had been arrested. High school diploma and apparently no college degree. He owned a home in an older suburban neighborhood in Las Vegas worth about \$200k with \$170k left on the mortgage. His payments were up to date. He had minimal credit card debt. The background check also showed he had a year and half old GMC Yukon.

He had built an online business buying and selling sneakers. According to the business records, it was profitable but not hugely successful. It was successful enough that he had opened a small physical store.

He was able to make a decent living. So, it didn't look like he was a tweaker or a gambling addict. What was his deal?

Martin didn't think he'd be able to learn much more online. He looked at the street view pictures of Austin's home and at his store. According to the web site, the store hours were 11am to 5pm. He didn't make enough to have full time help, so Martin figured he would need to be at the store during business hours. He'd take a look at both places in person during the day tomorrow. He shut down the laptop and walked out into the hot night to the diner down the block.

The Fence

Martin parked his truck in a strip mall parking lot across the street from Austin's store where he could see it. It was in a small cinderblock commercial building between a nail salon and a discount tax prep service. 'Kicks on Route 66' wasn't exactly on Route 66.

The street was busy enough that he could sit there in the strip mall parking lot with the engine and air conditioning running without attracting any attention.

<<5130 E. Charleston ave>>

Martin had pulled up just before 10:30am. The store had the blinds pulled and the Closed sign out. He saw a black Yukon with tinted windows pull in the driveway at the side of the building and disappear in the back. Martin saw Austin open the shades, unlock the front door, and flip the Closed sign to Open right at 11am. Austin must have parked in the back and entered via a back door.

Perfect time to go look at his house. Martin couldn't rely on his smart phone and GPS to navigate to Austin's house. The phone was locked up in the mine. He had looked up the address and directions last night and wrote it down on a notepad. With the old school method, he only made one wrong turn in the mazelike subdivision. Soon he was parked down the block from Austin's house where he could see it.

Austin lived in a suburban neighborhood of tract houses built in the 70s or early 80s. His was a one story stucco ranch style house. From his online research he knew it was just under 2000 square feet and had three bedrooms.

<<3098 garnet ct>>

There was no movement in the house and no other cars out front. If Austin had a girlfriend, it didn't look like she was home. He hoped that Austin didn't have a dog. Martin took his lock picks out of his bag and stuck them in his back pocket. He put on his truck stop hat to help shield his face from any cameras or nosy neighbors.

He didn't expect anyone to be looking for fingerprints at Austin's house, but to be on the safe side, he pulled a tube of liquid gloves out of the console. Liquid gloves are used by mechanics to coat their hands before working on greasy engines. It puts an invisible coating on your hands that washes off with soap and water. The mechanics use it to avoid getting their hands filthy. Martin used it to keep from leaving fingerprints. It was less conspicuous than walking around with gloves on in 100 degree heat. He wasn't completely sure it worked. When they did the real job he'd use latex gloves too.

He stepped out of his truck and walked across the street over to Austin's house. There was a 6ft high wooden fence with a gate next to the garage. Thankfully he didn't smell a dog or hear it barking. The gate wasn't locked and Martin went in, past the recycling bins. The cheap lock on the garage side door barely slowed him down. It was a two-car garage with a motorcycle under a cover and the rest of the parking spot completely taken up by boxes. The other spot was empty. Probably where Austin parked when he was home.

The door between the garage and house was unlocked. The house was still. No dog. The air conditioner wasn't running, and the air was warm and still. Clearly no one was home.

The door from the garage entered directly into the kitchen/breakfast nook. Everything was put away. This wasn't the house of a tweaker. It was far too neat.

Off the kitchen was a family room with a couch and club chair facing a large screen TV. There was a video game console next to the screen. The drapes were closed along the back wall. He peeked at the back yard. Desert landscape. If you could call it landscape.

Martin thought he smelled a faint odor of marijuana. He didn't care if Austin smoked a joint or two as long as a drug problem wasn't motivating him. Even less of a problem now that weed was legal here.

There was a built in desk that was originally intended to hold a landline telephone. Martin looked to see if there was any mail. Nope. He checked the drawer to see if there was anything useful there. A golf pencil and a pad or paper from the Sands hotel. The Sands was imploded in the '90s and the pad was probably there when Austin moved in.

Off the family room was a room that was intended to be a formal dining area. There was a card table. On the table was a deck of cards and dented coffee can filled with poker chips from a casino that Martin had never heard of. Four or five folding chairs were scattered around.

Down a short hallway, there were three bedroom doors and one to a bathroom. Martin flipped on the light to the bathroom. Neat and tidy and from all appearances, seldom used. Across the hall was a bedroom made into an office. This is what he was looking for. He'd scope out the other rooms before digging in here.

The second bedroom door held the master suite. There was a double bed - unmade but the covers pulled back roughly in place. Martin checked the nightstand drawer. A half empty box of condoms. So, Austin wasn't completely hopeless. There was a small green plastic vial about the size of a roll of quarters half filled with marijuana. Lastly there was a 50 round box of Winchester .380 ACP hollow point ammunition that wasn't quite full. He must have a gun somewhere.

A door in the suite led to the second bathroom. This one was being used. An electric razor on the shelf. Men's shampoo and body wash in the shower. Martin opened the medicine cabinet. One toothbrush, toothpaste. The usual. A half used tube of athlete's foot cream. A couple of old prescription bottles from a Las Vegas pharmacy. One of the prescriptions was for generic Vicodin and had three pills left.

The last bedroom was empty of furniture and filled with more cardboard boxes. The boxes were stacked three or four high. Sitting on one of the boxes there was a blue paper mache mask that looked like Sonic the Hedgehog from the old video game. Weird.

There was a narrow gap between the boxes that allowed Austin to get through to most of the stacks. Martin pushed his way in and randomly opened a box. It was filled with a bunch of dolls, ok, "action figures" in their original packaging. He picked one up. It was a blue character called "The Tick". He'd never heard of it.

He put it back and opened the next box. It was filled with boxes of toy robots with Japanese writing on them. Austin was a collector. Martin had no idea if these toys were valuable or not.

Martin went back into Austin's home office. He didn't have to be that careful as he didn't really mind if Austin happened to notice that something was out of place. There was a spot on the desk for a laptop

computer, but it was missing. Probably with Austin at the store. He hoped there was some paperwork that would give him some clues otherwise he'd have to spend the rest of the day really digging into Austin's online life.

On the left of where the laptop would have been was a rough pile of bills. He still got paper bills in the mail but apparently paid them online. The coupons and return envelopes were all there. Water, Cable TV, garbage service, electricity. No outstanding balances. Nothing out of the ordinary.

On the right side was something interesting. There was a letter from the Nevada Department of Taxation from two months ago. They said he owed \$43,000 in back sales tax. There was another more recent letter saying they were going to audit his business and he faced criminal penalties. Ouch. This might explain his motive. He needed the money to get out from under the tax man. There must be more to it though. He would be able to swing a loan of 40 grand using his business as collateral. There must be something else driving him.

Martin had what he thought he could get from the house without completely taking it apart. He didn't want to do that, at least not yet. He thought he'd go have a chat with Austin and his store and see if he could get a direct answer.

He left the house same way he got in. Out through the side garage door. He'd have to leave the door unlocked. He had no way to lock it from the outside without a key. He peered out over the fence. The mid-day suburban streets were still empty. He got back to his truck without incident, started the engine, and cranked the air conditioning up to the max.

Time to go see Austin at his store and squeeze some answers out of him. Martin drove through the labyrinth of streets out to East Desert Inn Road, through town and over to Austin's store. This time he pulled around the back where there was a small parking lot. There was a dusty and dented Honda in a slot behind the nail salon and a clean black Yukon behind the door to the shoe store.

Martin parked next to the Yukon. He got out and opened the back door to the shop. He couldn't help but notice the security camera immediately inside the door. The back-door lead to a short hallway. Off to the left was a bathroom door followed by a small office. The hallway ended in a curtained doorway. He could see the shoe displays and the front counter through gaps in the curtain.

Austin was sitting behind a desk in the office and looked up from his laptop computer. Looking up he said "Hi, I didn't hear you come in. I'll be right with you." he said brightly. Recognizing Martin, he stood up and walked around the desk, "Hey, you shouldn't be here. Someone could see us together."

Martin took his ball cap off, "We need to talk. Now."

He continued, "Why are you doing this? The financials don't make sense for you. Are you setting us up?"

Austin said, "No! I need the money. I have some debts that I need to pay off."

Martin said, "Tell me about it"

Austin said nervously, "You don't need to know the details. I need 100 to 200 grand in the next few months. I don't make nearly enough here to cover it."

Martin said, "Is this to cover your tax debt? You only owe 43 thousand."

Austin was startled, "How do you know that! You've been snooping."

Martin said, "Damn straight, I've been snooping. You think I'm going into business with someone I don't know everything about? Now. Who else do you owe?"

Austin said, "No one. The 43 grand I owe the tax man is the tip of the iceberg. They're going to audit and find I owe three or four times that. I've been putting all my expenses through my business and used my reseller number to avoid paying sales tax. I didn't think they'd catch on. It's only a few bucks at a time. I'm looking for a way out from under that and make a few more bucks"

Martin slapped him hard across the face and said, "Don't lie to me. There's more too it."

Austin was more shocked than hurt. He said, "It's the truth, man. It's for back taxes. I talked to a lawyer, if I come clean and pay the penalties, I can avoid jail time. "

When Martin started to speak, Austin flinched and stepped back. Martin said, "Maybe."

Austin whined, "You didn't have to hit me."

Martin said, "That was nothing. What I want to know is - you're going to borrow 1.3 mil so you can get out from under a 200k debt? That makes no sense. Why?"

Austin said, "I can borrow the money to pay off the tax man, true. But then I'll be paying off the loan forever. I'll never get ahead of it. This way is a bigger risk but has a much larger payoff. I'll be able to pay off the tax man and have the capital I need to take my business to the next level."

Martin said, "Maybe. Let's pretend I believe you. Start finding the cash. We'll talk later. Oh, and before I go, you're going to wipe the security cam video from when I came in."

Austin said okay and sat down at his desk and started typing on his laptop. Martin walked around the desk and watched him erase the last hour's cam video and then he put his ball cap back on and walked out. He didn't care if it showed the back of his head as he left.

The Billionaire's House

Martin walked out to his truck and drove to a nearby diner. The lunch rush was just ending, and he had no trouble getting a table. He ordered a diet coke and burger from the waitress. While he waited for his food, he took out his burner phone and texted Jake that he had news and wanted to get an update on Jake's research on Belkin. A couple of texts back and forth and Jake agreed to meet Martin at Martin's motel room in an hour.

While he was waiting for his lunch, he thought about this job and his finances. He still had a good twelve to eighteen months expenses stashed away in various accounts. He didn't need this job immediately. He would want a gig in the next four or five months to keep to his financial goals. This job was looking promising, but he'd been down this road before. Even if it fell through, it was still fun to plan. It was intellectually satisfying to be presented with a puzzle and to come up with a solution. And even more fun when it came time to do it.

The waitress smiled at him as she brought his burger. He thought about his girlfriend back in British Columbia. He was used to spending time away from her. Unlike Jake, who could work and have fun at

the same time, when Martin was working, he was working. Full time. He wasn't interested in putting any effort to chasing women. He didn't know why. When he got done with work, he made up for lost time. It was like he was still working three weeks on, one week off, in the mine in northern Alberta.

He ate, left five bucks on the table, and paid at the register. He was back at his room with time to spare.

Jake arrived when he said he would. Martin let him in. There wasn't a lot of space in the room to sit. Martin sat on the spare bed and motioned for Jake to sit in the only chair. Jake took his cowboy hat off and got straight to business. He said, "The twerp's been lowballing us. He's sharper than he looks. The collection is worth more like 3 million than 2"

Martin said, "Yeah, there had to be something more to it. Let me tell you what I found, and you can fill me in about Belkin, the house, and the collection." Martin told him about Austin's tax problem and told him briefly about stopping in on Austin's store.

Jake said, "So that's it. For a smart guy, he's an idiot. He had to know that the sales tax people would catch up to him eventually. You know, they're worse than the mafia. You can't declare bankruptcy to get out of a debt to the state. Only way out is death and even then, they'll take it from your estate. "

He continued, "The math works out way better for Austin than we thought. He's paying 1.3 mil for a collection that's worth 3. He can afford to skim off the cream to repay his creditors, pay the tax man and roll the bulk of the collection into his regular business inventory."

Martin sat quietly, thinking through possibilities. They could squeeze another couple hundred grand out of Austin. Martin was sure that Austin had fully committed to the idea of a heist and wouldn't easily walk away. If they squeezed him too much, did he have the balls to try a double cross?

Jake eventually spoke up, "What are you thinking? You think we should get him to up the ante? It might take getting physical with him."

Martin said, "I think we keep deal as it is. I think it's 50/50 he can get the money as it is. We'll see. Tell me about Belkin and the house in Palo Alto."

Jake said, "Sure. Why don't you boot up your laptop so we can look at it online. "

<1050 Harriet St, Palo Alto. 3.5 mil 3bd built 1973. Off Middlefield>

Martin opened his laptop did the incantations to get it to load the hidden system and launched the secure browser.

Jake said, "The house is a one story Eichler style house. You know what those are? They're distinctive looking flat roof tract houses that were popular in the 50's, 60's and 70's. People call them 'Mid-century Modern'. Palo Alto is full of them. You'll see what I mean when you bring the picture up. The house is on Tubman St, off Middlefield."

Martin brought it up on Google Maps and then street view. It was one of those strange flat roofed California houses. You didn't build houses like this in back home in Medicine Hat. The snow load would crush it. On street view he could see it was in a leafy suburban setting. It was the kind of neighborhood that a strange car would be noticed if it parked in the same place too long.

Jake said, shaking his head, "Would you believe that these houses go for upwards of 3 million? Crazy. Anyway, I don't have floorplans for that exact house, but I found the plans for a similar one. Check your messages, I sent a PDF "

Martin opened up the PDF. The floorplan showed a central gallery with the kitchen, living room, and master bedroom/bath on one side. On the other side of the gallery was the garage, a bathroom, and two smaller bedrooms. The house in the street view photo looked like this from the outside. Might be different but not enough to matter.

Jake said, "I figure one of the smaller bedrooms has the collection. I read some online forums and it looks like collectors like to keep the original shoeboxes. Sometimes they put them in plastic bins. Guys like him build glass walled cases to show them off. I'm pretty sure he hasn't done that in this house. More likely in the new house he's building. He likely has them stacked up in their original boxes or similar plastic ones. You could easily store 200 pairs in that one bedroom. "

Martin said, "Are you sure no one's living in it?"

Jake said, "Not 100%. We'll have to look at it in person. There is a chance he has a caretaker. I know that Belkin and his wife are renting a larger place in Menlo Park while they finish the work on their Woodside estate. Their new pool house is bigger than the Palo Alto house.

Martin said, "Alarms?"

Jake said, "I would expect he's got an alarm. We won't know for sure until we check it out. It's an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood. I wouldn't expect he's got anything too specialized. It might be possible ignore the alarm, do it fast and get out of there before the police arrive."

Martin said, "Yeah. Maybe. It's going to take a few trips to and from the house to carry all those boxes. There's too much to carry to do the quick smash and grab. Originally, I thought we'd need a third partner to take care of the alarms. Now I think we can make due with a contractor who'll disable the alarms. It makes the math work much better for us too."

Jake said, "You got that right."

Martin continued, "I know someone who I can get to do it for a fee rather than a percentage. For a simple house burglary, I can probably get her for 50 grand. She's in California already, so it wouldn't be a huge investment in her time. Best case scenario, with no caretaker and without setting off the alarm, it will be days before Belkin knows he was robbed. Since he's a billionaire, the cops will make a good show of looking for us, but they won't really try. "

Jake said, "Perfect. I like it. The only other player would be an insurance company. You think he's insured the shoes? Personally, I doubt it. "

Martin said, "I don't know. It doesn't matter to me if he did or didn't."

Jake said, "No matter. Let me walk you through the spreadsheet I made of Belkin's collection."

Along with the PDF of the house, Jake had sent along a spreadsheet listing the shoes that Belkin had on his old Facebook page with high and low estimates of their value. There were 224 pairs of sneakers. The

total of the high estimate was \$3.5 million and the low estimate was \$2.6 million. The page was last updated six months ago, so Jake explained that this was his best guess.

Martin was satisfied with the accounting. It was Austin's problem not his. They were contracting to grab the collection and Austin was taking the risk on the valuation.

Jake said, "You know, once Austin gets the money, there's nothing stopping us from taking it off his hands and disappearing. "

Martin said, "Yeah. I thought of that too. It's an option. I hate to leave behind a live enemy who knows my face. If we crossed him, I'd want to drive him out into the desert and put two in the back of his head. All things being equal, I'd prefer to leave him alive and happy. You never know if he'd be useful in the future."

Jake nodded, "The job itself should be low key. Assuming he can come up with the money, it looks like a pretty sweet setup for all of us. Quick and quiet, and relatively low risk.'

Martin said, "Agreed. The last order of business is to decide on how to escrow the money. I did some investigation and there are companies that will escrow cryptocurrency. They're mostly set up for legal contracts and real estate transactions. I'm not sure they're the right thing for us."

Jake said, "We could always do it ourselves."

Martin said, "How do you mean?"

Jake elaborated, "You know how crypto currency works? You create a wallet which is just a pair of public and private keys. The public key is a bunch of what looks like random letters and number that you can freely give out. The private key is another longer list of letters and numbers that look random but have some mathematical relationship to the public key. I don't know how the math works.

With the public key, you can send bitcoin or whatever crypto currency you're using to the wallet, but you can't get the money out. You need the private key to take the money out.

So, here's what we do. We sit down with Austin in front of a computer we control and create the wallet. We put the public and private key on a USB flash drive. We encrypt the flash drive with a password that we know but Austin doesn't know. We give Austin the public key so he can transfer the money in. We can know it too, it doesn't matter."

Martin said, "Ok, so far"

Jake nodded. "Now, here's the tricky part. Neither of us can know the private key. We need to store it on the flash drive. It's a long enough string of characters that it's really unlikely that Austin will be able to memorize it. So we should be safe from him knowing it. Austin knows it's a long string that we haven't memorized so he knows we can't get at the money.

We give him the flash drive encrypted with a password he doesn't know. When we deliver the sneakers he gives the flash drive back to us. We know the password, get the private key, transfer the funds, and be done. "

Martin said, "Yeah that sounds like it works. What happens if the flash drive gets stolen or destroyed?"

Jake shrugged, “Real bad news. Without the private key, no one can get to the money. Not us, not Austin. It’s gone.”

Martin said, “Let’s not do that. Anyway, I think your scheme will work. I might have an idea for bit of a wrinkle to add later.”

Jake said, “Ok, I’ll set up a meet with Austin tomorrow. “

Martin nodded.

Jake said, “Well, I’ve got to go. My girl wants me to take her to see Circe de Solei tonight. I have to scare up some tickets. She never found her a high roller. She said that all the guys at the pool were frat boys and wannabes. So she came back to me.”

The Fence

Austin sat in his store office and tried to work on his web site. He was interrupted from time to time by people coming into the store. Almost all of them were looky loos. He sold more shoe cleaners and shoe laces than anything else out of his store. Occasionally someone would drop in and buy something out of his stock. Most actual sales came through his web site.

He also had an annoyingly high number of people calling and dropping by looking for regular running shoes. Couldn’t they see that he was a specialty shop?

The real thing that was keeping him from making progress on his web site was worry about getting the loan together. He thought about where to get the money. When he first got the notice from the Nevada Department of Taxation he looked into getting a business loan through his bank. After doing a bunch of paperwork, the bank was willing to give him a line of credit up to \$200,000. He might still go for it, but it wouldn’t be nearly enough.

His next best option was to try one of the short-term loan places. He had heard on the radio ads for business loans up to \$5 million. The interest rate would be horrible, but it wouldn’t matter that much in the long term. He’d only need the money for two or three weeks.

He searched online and found a full page of business loan places. He tried the first couple. They didn’t loan enough. The third one he looked at had a \$5 million limit. They needed him to have a revenue of more than \$100,000 and have been in business three years. He easily qualified. He filled out the online form. In case it fell through, he applied at two other sites. They promised answers within 24 hours.

If he couldn’t get a loan from these guys, he would need to look at the unsavory options. He might have a connection with the Satans, a local biker gang, that he could exploit.

He used to hang out and ride motorcycles with a couple of guys from high school. He still had his Harley, but didn’t ride it much.

His high school buddies told Austin about selling balloons full of laughing gas at music festivals for the Satans. His buddies technically were ‘hangarounds’ with the gang. These are guys who are associated with the members but aren’t part of the gang. If a hangaround was useful, a full member might sponsor them, and after a long initiation process, they could become a full member.

One of his old buddies, a guy named Guillermo, tried to recruit him to help out with the nitrous, but Austin turned them down. It was hard work standing out in the sun. They wanted to pay him minimum wage with all the profit going to the Satans.

He had heard the Guillermo had been sponsored a few years back and would have made full membership by now. If he was still with them.

If he struck out with the online loan places, Austin would see if he could find Guillermo and try to borrow from them. According to the news reports, they had a thriving drug business in the Las Vegas Valley . They might welcome the chance to launder their cash through him and make a profit. The downside with dealing with them was they had a reputation for being greedy and unpredictable.

As a last resort, he'd try the loan sharks. He knew he could find one by asking around at the casinos. They wanted outrageous interest – like 10% a week with a minimum of 6 months interest. Their business model was to get you hooked on paying interest forever and never having enough to pay off the loan amount. These guys weren't as unpredictable as the bikers but had a worse reputation for violence.

Just for the heck of it, he searched online for loan shark. The fourth item down was a listing on Craigslist. What do you know, there's shady lenders in the financial services section of Craigslist. Well, he'd try there if either of his first two opens failed.

He got back to and finished updating his web site. He was puttering around his shop when he got a text. Jake wanted to meet. Tomorrow at noon at a country and western bar in Spring Valley.

The next morning, Austin got to the store at 10:40. As was his habit, he had swung by Starbucks for coffee on the way. For some reason it had taken longer than normal today. No matter, he had a few minutes to fire up his laptop and check his business email before he opened the store.

Crap. He had answers from two of the moneylending sites. Declined. One of them appeared to be an automated response with no details. The other said that he was asking for too much compared to the value of his business. He hoped he'd get a positive response from the third before he went to meet Jake and Frank at noon. Given the two strikes already, he was afraid he'd strike out.

The meet was all the way across town in a strip mall on West Tropicana. Why did he have to pick a place half an hour away?

+++

Jake knocked on Martin's hotel door at 11:15. Martin was wandering around Belkin's neighborhood on Google maps on his laptop. When the time came to do the job, it could turn out useful to know the nearby streets.

When Martin opened the door, Jake said "You ready?". Martin nodded. He logged out and shut down his laptop. He grabbed his ball cap and sunglasses and left with Jake.

They got in the truck and pulled out. Martin said, "You know where this place is, right?"

Jake nodded, "Yeah, I looked it up. It's off Durango."

Martin had chosen this place. He'd been there once before.

While they were driving, Jake told Martin about the Circe show. Martin didn't say much and let Jake do all the talking. Jake was impressed by the acrobats. He'd never seen anything like them.

Martin said, "You never told me, how did you meet Austin"

Jake said, "Kind of a long story. You know I live up in redwoods in Humboldt County. I live in a cabin on some land that's owned by a big time weed grower."

Martin said, "Yeah, you told me that. And you did security for him in exchange for rent"

Jake said, "Right. One time I came down here with him. He was meeting with buyers and stuff. When his work was done we went to a party at some rich guys house on a golf course. I don't remember which one. That's where I met him. That security gig was easy money. I didn't have the patience to be a farmer. I would of killed off all the plants somehow. I'm better suited for looking tough and carrying a gun.

Martin said, "I guess it's over now with the legal weed."

Jake said, "It's over for most of the outlaws up in the hills. Used to be it was an advantage to being way off the main roads, deep in the hills under the redwoods. With legal weed, it's an advantage to be in the flatlands, close to transportation and near the customers. My guy filed for his permits and is going legit. He's trying to make a go at being a boutique brand. He can't compete on price with the big flatland growers."

Martin said, "So you're going to stay there?"

Jake said, "Yeah, he's letting me live there, though he's not paying me anymore. I get cheap weed, but that's not really my deal. I just love being up in the misty green woods. It's an amazing place. Besides, it's completely off the grid. No security cameras. Cell phone coverage is just about non-existent except on the main roads. None of the usual shit you have to put up with in modern America. "

Jake turned onto Durango and then into the parking lot. They got to the bar 20 minutes early by design. Martin liked a chance to scope out the place before a meet. Just in case. This place was a large country and western themed bar. They had three pool tables and a large dance floor with six or eight lunch tables around it. There were booths along the wall.

A sign hung on wall above the booths that said Karaoke every Sunday night. Behind the bar, the bartender was wearing a cowboy hat. Martin thought it was odd to wear a hat indoors. He had left his ball cap and sunglasses in Jakes truck.

They were the only people other than the bartender in the place. They picked out a booth in the back and this time Jake went to the bar. Martin asked Jake to get him a Diet Coke. Jake came back with a draft beer and Martin's soft drink. Martin tasted it. Diet Pepsi. But at least it was cold.

Jake asked Martin, "How do you want to handle expenses for the job?"

Martin replied, "Once we think it's going to happen, I'll wander over to the Fremont St casinos. One of them will take bitcoin. I'll cash out ten grand to use for expenses. Don't worry, I'll do it a little at time to avoid the federal paperwork."

While they were waiting for Austin, people started filtering in. Looks like they did have a lunch crowd after all. Austin came in a couple of minutes after noon, and swiveled around looking for them. He saw them in the back, gave a little wave and went to join them.

Jake had his back to the front door and didn't see Austin come in. Martin said, "Here he is. Not too subtle."

Austin came over and squeezed in the booth next to Jake. Austin didn't bother to get himself a drink. As he was sitting down, Austin said, "Hey guys. Why'd we have to meet all the way across town. We could have met at the same place as before."

Martin didn't bother explaining that they avoid going to the same place twice for a meeting. Bartenders and waitresses remember repeat customers. Instead he asked abruptly, "Did you get our money?"

Austin shook his head, "Not yet. I was declined by two online lenders and I'm still waiting on the third."

Martin said, "Forget the third one. We don't have forever you know. Belkin will be moving his collection any day now and it will take us some time to put the rest of the job in motion. Go find the local loan sharks. They'll lend it to you. The price will be steep, but they'll do it with a minimum of fuss."

Austin nervously fiddled with the cardboard PBR coaster in front of him. "I have a couple of other ideas before I go to those guys. Today is Wednesday, give me until Sunday."

Martin gave Austin a hard stare, "Saturday afternoon I'm leaving town. Either to do this job or to go home. You have until then."

Austin complained, "But what if I can't get it done by then? I won't be able to pay the state and I'll go to jail!"

Jake said smoothly, "Take it easy, Austin. It won't come to that. You can get it done in 24 hours no problem. Just take care of it."

Austin pulled himself together. He said, "I guess I can. I will. "

He sighed, "You know I've never done this before. I don't want to be walking around with a million in cash. But you want to see the money. How will that work? Do we meet in a bar and I show you a duffle bag full of cash?"

Martin said, "No. This isn't the 1980s. We'll use bitcoin. You get the money and convert it into bitcoin. Jake can help you with that if you need it. We make a bitcoin wallet and put it on an encrypted USB drive. I'll know the password to the USB drive and you won't. You'll transfer the money to the bitcoin wallet and we give you the USB drive to hold while we go off and do the job. We exchange the sneakers for the USB drive and say goodbye."

Martin continued, "There are some technical details, but that's the gist of it. When you get the money we'll go over it in depth. Just get it. "

Jake smiled at Austin, "I think we're done for now. Good luck. Text me if you have questions. Saturday we're out of here, one way or another. Ok? "

Austin nodded.

Martin said, "We're going to sit here for a couple of minutes so we're not seen leaving together. You should go now."

Austin got up and went out past the dance floor and out the front door.

Jake and Martin finished their drinks and left together. Outside, the sun was blinding after sitting in the cool, dark bar. Martin gladly put on his hat and sunglasses. Jake started the truck and cranked the air conditioning on max cool. Jake remembered his Dad had an old car with a setting for "desert only". He could use that about now.

The Bikers

Austin picked up some lunch from a drive through on the way back to his store. He opened the store and ate his burger and fries at his desk in the office. He had an email message from one of his local customers who had stopped by while he was out. He emailed him back that he'd be at the store all afternoon. He needed to keep his business going no matter what happened with the plans with Jake.

After he finished his immediate business, he thought about how to get in touch with his old riding friend. Austin knew that the Satans had a clubhouse in an old Quonset hut way out on East Vegas Valley Road. He also knew that showing up unannounced at the clubhouse would be bad news. He'd probably get beaten up, if not worse.

He no longer had a phone number for Guillermo, and he didn't know where he lived anymore. He tried to look him up online. There were two people with his first and last name in the Las Vegas phone book. He called both numbers. Neither were the right guy.

While he was digging, he remembered that Guillermo used to hang out with the members at a bar not that far from the clubhouse. He'd been there once or twice after a ride. He couldn't remember the name. He recalled that it was in a frontier themed strip mall on Nellis or maybe Bonanza. The mall had wooden statues of famous gunfighters and frontiersmen on the perimeter of a covered walkway. The Satans members would illegally park their Harleys haphazardly on the walkway in front of the bar and no one would ever think to complain.

It was years since he'd been out there. He wondered if it was still open. He checked online and found it. Yep, it was on Nellis. Now he remembered, the bar was called 'The Round Up'. After he closed up the shop for the day, he'd go home, get his bike and ride over there. Maybe he could find Guillermo and talk him into lending the money.

Austin checked his email every few minutes during the rest of the afternoon. The third loan place never even got back to him. The afternoon dragged on. He had one customer looking for game worn Kobe Bryants, which he didn't stock. He referred him to another local place that specialized in sports memorabilia.

Just in case he couldn't get a loan though the Satans, he looked online to see if he could find the loan sharks. He found a couple of leads through craigslist. At six, he closed up shop and drive home.

At home he carefully chose his outfit. He wanted to look like a biker but not like a club member. The Satans members viscosly guarded their image and territory. He had his old riding vest and decided not to wear it because it looked too much like a gang 'cut'. Even without any patches, a leather vest could

signify membership in a club and if worn by an outsider, deemed disrespectful. His best bet was to just wear jeans, boots, and a Harley branded shirt.

He considered bringing his pistol with him. He wanted to, but didn't have a good place to hide it on him when he rode. He didn't feel safe about stuffing it into his pants while riding. His bike didn't have saddlebags or any other good storage options.

After getting dressed, he went out to the garage and took the cover off the bike. It was a 1993 Sportster with a dent in the gas tank where the previous owner had dropped it. He bought it used seven or eight years ago and rode it on weekends. He didn't ride it much anymore, but made sure to start it at least once a month to make sure it still ran. In fact, he had ridden it around the block last month so he was pretty sure it would be fine.

He started the bike, rolled it out of the garage, and put on his helmet and gloves. The sun was starting to near the tops of the hills near Red Rocks but it hadn't started too cool down at all. It was still 103 degrees. When he was moving, the breeze cooled him down and it wasn't too bad. When stopped at traffic lights he felt like a steak in the broiler with the cars next to him dumping out even more heat.

He rode past a block that had used car lots on both sides of the street. He saw a shop that looked like it used to be a 7-11 but was now a payday loan place. Across the street was a sad looking RV park. As he remembered it, the bar was coming up on the right.

'The Roundup' looked worse than Austin remembered it. The frontiersman statues were mostly missing and the paint was peeling. There was now an empty storefront on one side of the bar and a barbershop on the other. One thing that was the same was the bikes parked up on the walkway. There were two hogs parked on either side of the front door.

Austin parked his bike in a legal spot near the front of the bar. There were plenty of empty spaces. The shops had mostly all closed for the day. He took off his helmet and locked it to his bike. He took a deep breath and went in.

Well, the insides hadn't changed since he'd been there last. Typical dive bar décor. Beer signs on the walls, a small coin op pool table, a jukebox, a cheap tables and chairs in the middle with three booths along one wall. The place smelled like spilled beer and cigarette smoke.

Two guys in leather Satan cuts were playing pool while the bartender polished glasses. There was one other guy with a long grey beard sitting at the bar with a whisky glass in front of him. One of the pool players broke to start a new game with a sudden sharp clack. Austin jumped a little.

Austin ordered a draft beer from the bartender. He watched the pool players for a minute. They weren't particularly good at pool. The guy who broke had a dagger tattoo on his forearm. He wasn't particularly large, but he looked fit and muscular. The other guy was a big bald dude with a goatee. Not tall, just wide.

The big dude was shooting so Austin walked over to the smaller guy with the tattoo. Austin said, "Hi, I'm looking for a friend of mine who rides with you guys. His name's Guillermo. Do you know how I can get in touch with him?"

The Satan scowled at him, "I don't know no one named Guillermo. I'm kinda busy right now."

The big Satan missed his shot and cursed, "You fuckin distracted me, asshole. Who you lookin for?"

Austin told him again, "A guy named Guillermo. I went to high school with him. Maybe he's going by Bill now. I don't know."

The Satan with the tattoo was leaning over, lining up his shot and looked up, "Dollar Bill?" He looked at the other Satan and said, "Do you know Dollar Bill's last name? Conan or something"

Austin said, "My high school friend's last name is Cooney"

The big guy said, "Yeah. That's Dollar Bill Cooney. I'll give him a message. Who are you?"

Austin told him and gave him his number. The Satan pulled an iPhone out of his back pocket and put in Austin's number. Austin said, "Tell him I have a business proposition for him. It's urgent."

The big guy said, "I said I'd tell him. Now don't fuckin bother us."

Austin got the hint. He finished his beer and left.

Later that evening, Austin's phone rang from an unknown number. He answered. Wow, it was his old friend Guillermo, or as he was called now, Bill. He told Bill about his shoe business and they chatted about people they used to know. After a few minutes they got to the point. Bill said, "So, you have a business proposition for me?"

Austin said, "Yeah, I have the chance to get a bargain on some inventory for my shop and I need financing"

Bill said, "Let's not talk about it on the phone. It doesn't sound like the type of thing that we do, but for old times sake, I'll hear you out. Can you meet me at the bar tomorrow afternoon around 4? The same place you met Jeff and Steve."

Austin said he'd be there.

Austin was a bundle of nerves in the shop on Thursday morning. First thing in the morning he usually checked his online shop for any overnight sales or messages he needed to answer. One of his repeat online customers bought a pair of Answer DMXs and a pair of Curry 4 NBA Jams. He found them in his inventory and prepared to ship them out. He filled out the shipping form and printed out labels several times a day. Today he kept screwing up putting the labels in the printer correctly.

When he was done with processing sales and online queries, he spent the quiet time in the shop doing marketing for his web site and browsing the sneaker forums looking for customers. Today, he alternated with daydreams of what he'd do with the extra cash after the robbery and angst about all the things that could go wrong and lead to him going to jail.

In case Bill didn't come through, Austin looked up the Craigslist listings he was looking at yesterday. The most promising one was from a local company called Simone Capitol Partners. He checked out their web site. It looked like a legit place and they said they did loans up to \$5 mil with no collateral. They had a local number too. If he struck out with the Satans he'd call them next.

He felt a lot more relaxed driving out to 'The Round Up' today than he did yesterday. This time he was invited and was meeting someone he knew. He didn't bother to go home to dress up or get his motorcycle.

This afternoon there were four bikes on the walkway in front of the bar. There was a black Harley-Davidson branded F-150 crew cab in one of the car spots near the door. The truck had a Nevada Vietnam vet license plate and what looked to Austin like a military badge sticker on the back glass. The sticker was a yellow shield with a black slash. Above and to the right of the slash was a silhouette of a dog.

Austin parked a couple of spots away from the F-150, climbed out of his Yukon and went in. There were quite a few more people in the bar today than there were yesterday. There were three Satans in their gang cuts at the bar. Austin recognized the first guy as wiry pool player from yesterday. The second guy he hadn't seen before and the third guy was his old friend.

Sitting in the first booth were two middle aged guys. The first had a grey crew cut that was almost military short. He was wearing a sharply pressed logo work shirt, like he was the manager of an auto parts store or something. He was sitting next to a muscly guy wearing a black tee-shirt. They were both looking at a lap top computer screen. It looked to Austin that they were having a business meeting.

Bill looked up when Austin came in and smiled at him. Austin hadn't seen Bill for at least four years, maybe five. Bill had fine lines around his eyes from squinting in the bright desert sun. His hair was starting to recede too. Austin lied amiably, "Bill, you look just the same as you did last time I saw you."

Bill said, "You look the same too. Great to see you again. Do you want a beer?" Austin shook his head. Bill didn't bother to introduce the other two Satans.

Bill continued, "No? Then let's get a booth and you can tell me about your opportunity". Bill lead Austin to the booth furthest to the back of the bar. "So, what do you have in mind?", Bill said.

Austin told Bill that he knew about a multi-million-dollar shoe collection in Silicon Valley and was working with some heavy hitters to steal it. He was going fence it. The trouble was, he didn't have the cash to buy the collection up front. He explained, "Jake wants to see the money before they go and rob the place. I don't have to pay until they deliver the goods. I'm looking to borrow the \$1.3 million I need for the collection. I can sell the cream of it quickly – within a couple of weeks – and pay you back. Can you help me out?"

Bill thought for a minute, 'You're going to hang on to \$1.3 mil in cash while they go do the robbery?'

Austin said, "No, not exactly. They want to do it with bitcoin. The \$1.3 mil in bitcoin is going to go on a USB flash drive. I don't know how it works exactly. They will put a password on the flash drive and I'll hold onto it. I won't be able to get at the money. When they've done the robbery, Jake will text me with the time and place to meet. They deliver the shoes and I turn the flash drive over to them."

Bill said, "Ok. Interesting. It sounds like there's money in it for both of us. \$1.3 million is a lot of scratch, though. I'll have to talk to my boss. Hang on a minute."

Bill got up and walked over to the first booth where the two older guys were meeting. He talked softly to the guy in black tee shirt. The guy in the black tee shirt must have been Bill's boss. Bill's boss looked

quizzically at the guy in the pressed shirt who then said a couple of words. Bill's boss nodded and said a something more to Bill. Austin thought, too bad he couldn't read lips.

Bill came back from the discussion and said, "Sorry, Austin. We're interested but it's too much money. I trust you, but my boss doesn't know you. He doesn't want to risk that much cash."

Austin took the news gloomily. He sighed, "Ok. I guess I can understand." He got up shuffled out the door.

The Loan Sharks

Austin was depressed. He had pinned his hopes on Guillermo/Bill coming through for him. He moped around his shop for a couple of hours before closing up and going home. He knew he needed to try the loan sharks but he couldn't bring himself to make the phone call.

When he got up on Friday morning, he had a new resolve to get the money. He'd call on the moneylending company he found online. This was his last resort. It had to work.

First thing when he got to his store, he looked the place up again. He called their local number and talked to a receptionist. She told him that his best bet was to fill out the online form and they'd call him back. After he hung up, he opened his browser to their site, found the form, and filled it out. They wanted his name, contact info, social security number, driver's license number, parents' names, birthdate, as well as info on his business. How long had he been in business, what was his annual income, what debts did he have. If he wasn't so desperate, he would never would have filled out so much personal info in an online form.

He got an email back immediately promising a call back within 24 hours. He only had around 24 hours before the whole project was sunk. He got on with his daily business of fulfilling online orders and then doing online promotion of his web site.

After lunch, his phone rang. Caller ID said it was Simone Capital Partners. He eagerly answered the phone. A male voice on the phone thanked him for applying for a loan. He said that he preliminarily qualified for a loan. They always wanted to meet with their borrowers in person before making a final decision. Would he like to make an appointment to finalize the loan?

Austin eagerly said yes. He agreed to meet a Mr. Russo at their office at 4pm. The office was just on the other side of the 515 freeway, not far from his store. He thought about texting Jake with the good news. He decided to hold off until after he met with the lender.

At the appointed time, Austin closed up the store and drove over. The lending company was in an office park on Sahara. There were four buildings in the business park arranged around a central parking lot. They were identical oversized California Mission style buildings . Dark tinted glass windows sat behind three story tall pale stucco arches under a terra cotta roof. The overall effect was like a Taco Bell blown up on steroids.

Of the four buildings, one had a sign on it for a law firm and another was for a title company. The third was for Simone Capital Partners. Austin parked and went into the lobby. It turned out that the loan company was on the third floor with the other two floors occupied by other businesses. He took the elevator to the third floor and stopped at the receptionist. He told the receptionist that he had an appointment with Mr. Russo and was told to wait. He didn't have to wait long.

A couple of minutes later the door into the main office opened and a guy in a light gray suit came out. He said, "Hi, my name is John Russo. You must be Austin. Why don't you step into my office."

Russo held the door for Austin and ushered him into his office. As a shoe guy, Austin couldn't help notice Russo's fine Italian loafers. The office was a standard business office. A medium sized wooden desk sat facing away from the dark tinted window. On the desk there was a computer keyboard and a flat screen monitor off to one side.

There was a book shelf with framed business awards and family pictures. Among the pictures was a photo of a teen aged boy in a baseball uniform who Austin figured was his son. There were two guest chairs on the near side of the desk facing it.

Russo sat at the desk and motioned for Austin to take one of the guest chairs. He said, "So you run a sneaker business. My teenage son always wants me to buy him the latest ones. They cost a fortune. There's obviously some money in it."

Austin agreed, "Yes, some of classics go for tens of thousands of dollars. "

Russo continued, "I take it from your online application, you want to borrow a considerable sum of money. What was it". He glanced over at his computer screen, "Ah, 1.3 million dollars. What are you planning to do with the money?"

Austin said, "I have the opportunity to acquire some new inventory at, uh, a very attractive price. I figure I can sell off the inventory and pay back the loan within two or three weeks"

Russo smiled and winked at Austin, "I don't need to know where you're getting it from. Did anyone explain the terms of the loan?"

Austin shook his head and said no.

Russo said, "Ok, it's simple really. We charge 10% a week on unsecured loans. Three week minimum loan and you prepay the interest on the first three weeks. After that the interest is payable weekly. You can pay the principal back at any time. As long as you're making the weekly loan payments, we're all good. "

Russo paused for a second and continued, "Great news for you. We're running a special right now for new customers. It's 5% for the first three weeks and then it goes back up to the regular 10% rate. It's a smoking hot deal."

Austin knew it would be expensive, but not this expensive. This was his last option and he had to take it. He said, "Wait, three week minimum, and I have to prepay? What's that like 200 grand? If I had that, I wouldn't need the loan."

Russo smiled again, "Yes, typically people in your situation add the initial interest payments to the loan amount. Do you want to do that?"

Austin swallowed hard and said yes.

Russo typed some numbers into his computer keyboard and then said, "Ok. According to my figures, you'll be borrowing 1 million, 529 thousand. Prepaid interest is for 3 weeks at 5% is \$229,000. Your

available funds would be 1.3 million exactly. When the teaser rate ends, weekly payments will be 153 grand. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Austin's mind raced. This was better than going to jail for tax evasion, but it was going to be working his ass off if he was going to get out from under this loan. He sat there for a moment and then said meekly, "Ok. Yes. I do."

<<for reference

	10%	5%	3x
\$1,300,000	\$130,000	\$65,000	\$195,000
\$1,529,400	\$152,940	\$76,470	\$229,410
			\$1,105,000
			\$1,299,990>>

"There. Now that we have that out of the way, let me tell you about our business. We're a family-oriented business", Russo said, gesturing to his family photos. He continued, "Mr. Simone started this business lending money to family men who needed some short term help. We'll have a legal contract and such for you to sign, but what really matters for us is that a man is a family man and part of the community. Like you. You're a local guy. Your parents live in North Las Vegas in a nice retirement community. I'm sure that if you run into trouble making payments, they can help you out. "

Now Austin understood why they were willing to lend him the money. They figured they could suck his parent's retirement accounts dry if he couldn't repay. Austin's father had been a civilian employee at the nearby air force base before he retired. His mother was still working as an elementary school teacher. Actually, Austin didn't know if she was still working or not. He had a falling out with his folks when he had no interest in going to college. He hadn't talked to them in several years. His father was a cheap bastard who probably could pay off the loan. He'd made a small fortune in real estate and was smart enough to get out before the last crash.

Russo, picked up the phone and asked someone on the other end to bring in the paperwork for Austin to sign. A leggy young woman in a pencil skirt came in with a stack of papers. Russo said "Cheryl will walk you through the paperwork. I'll be back in a few minutes to discuss how you want your funds and to talk about payment details.

Austin numbly went through the paperwork signing and initialing where he was asked. When he was done, Cheryl picked up the paperwork and as she left told him she would leave a copy for him at the front desk.

Russo came back in. "Now, for loans of your size we typically do wire transfers. It's late in the day on a Friday, so we won't be able to do it until Monday. Don't worry, the clock doesn't start ticking on your repayment schedule until you receive the funds."

Austin said, "Oh no. Monday will be too late. I need to put the funds in bitcoin for a meeting tomorrow. Is there anything you can do? "

Russo said, "Hmm. Maybe I can help you out personally. With bitcoin, I can do online transactions on the weekend. Call me on Saturday during the day and I'll buy bitcoins for you." Russo was familiar with working with bitcoin. He told Austin that he needed the public key for the wallet he was using. Austin explained that he didn't have the wallet yet but he'd have the details on Saturday.

Russo walked Austin out past the receptionist. Austin was now completely committed. He texted Jake to tell him he had the money.

Leaving Las Vegas

Martin talked to Jake via a secure chat app on his laptop. Martin said, "Austin says he has the money?"

Jake said, "Yeah. He texted me a few minutes ago. How do you want to do this?"

Martin said, "I'd prefer to go someplace with a hardwired internet connection. I don't want to be doing bitcoin transactions like this over some dodgy coffee shop Wi-Fi. We could meet at one of our motel rooms, over at Austin's house or at his store. What do you think?"

Jake said, "The store. It's less likely that anyone would notice us going into a place of business. At his house there always could be a nosy neighbor. My girl's still here. I mean, she's out right this second, but I don't want to be doing business in front of her tomorrow. You want to do it at your motel?"

Martin said, "No. I'll be checked out by then. You're right the store is the best option. Tell Austin 10am, before the store opens."

Jake said, "Will do. I'll see you tomorrow."

Martin got a muffin and coffee at the motel's free breakfast. He checked out of his motel at 9:30 and arrived at Austin's store first. He parked his Toyota at the back of the shop. He was deliberately 15 minutes early to scope it out. If anything was out of the ordinary, he could bug out. He didn't expect any trouble.

There were no other cars in the front lot as he drove by, and none in the back lot. He sat in his truck and waited for Austin. He had checked out of his motel and had all his gear with him. He wasn't going back to that motel. If everything went right, Jake and him would leave town immediately. Come to think of it, if everything went wrong, they'd be leaving town immediately too.

Jake arrived five minutes before 10. He parked in the front lot and sat in his truck. He texted Martin that he was there and there were no obvious signs of surveillance.

Austin was right on time, carrying his usual go cup of coffee. He pulled into the back lot. Martin got out of his car and entered the shop with Austin. Martin asked Austin to let Jake in the front and to shut off the security cameras. As Jake came in the door, a couple of loud motorcycles rode by.

When they were all there, they gathered in Austin's small office. Martin said, "So you got the money. All of it?"

Austin replied, "Yes. \$1.3 million. Well, the loan company has the money. I just need to give them the bitcoin wallet address."

Martin said, "They can do it on today? On a Saturday?"

Austin said, "Yes. I call the guy and he'll buy the bitcoins for me."

Martin said, "Ok then. Let's get started. I'm going to need a network connection for my laptop." He pulled his laptop out of his backpack, put it on the table and booted up the secure partition. He also pulled out a brand new USB flash drive still in the packaging out of his bag. He typed in a few commands

in a command line window and closed it. Then, he broke the flash drive out of the package and plugged it in. He formatted the new drive and then ran his encryption software and typed in a long pass phrase.

He explained, "I'm running some full disk encryption on the new flash drive. While it's plugged in here, it's accessible. As soon as I take it out, you'll need to put in the password to be able to read it. It uses strong encryption with a long password that's theoretically uncrackable. "

Martin continued, "Next, we make a bitcoin wallet and put it on it." He ran the software to create the public and private keys directly on the flash drive. Austin was paying close attention. This was his life going onto that memory stick. Martin said, "Ok. It's created. You can see the public key. Call your guy and give that string of letters and numbers to him."

Austin called Russo. He told him he was ready. He read the key to him over the phone and then texted it to him to be sure he got it correctly. They would need to wait for confirmation. It could take anywhere between 10 minutes and several hours.

Twenty minutes later and they were done. They had confirmation that the money was there. Martin shut down the laptop and handed the flash drive to Austin.

Martin, "So we have a deal. You have \$1.3 million in bitcoin on the flash drive. Put it somewhere safe as if it was cash. We'll be back with the sneakers in a week or less. Jake will contact you when we're back in town with the goods. "

Martin said to Jake, "You know where my place is? Meet me there."

Road Trip

Jake didn't remember exactly where Martin's mine was. He knew it was off of I-15 but couldn't remember exactly where. They agreed to meet at the gas station/truck stop near the town of Jean. Martin got there first and saw Jake pull into the gas station in his dark green F-150 pickup. It had a locking diamond plate bed cover that he previously used to securely transport marijuana for the growers. This time it would transport the stolen shoes.

Martin rolled down his window and waved at Jake. Jake nodded and followed Martin up to his mine. Martin parked his truck next to the rental Kia and got out.

Martin got his backpack out of his truck and then retrieved his Glock from the hiding place. He took it out of the holster and removed the magazine. He knew that in California, he could be busted for carrying a loaded gun in a car. He was much less likely to have a problem if he was stopped if the clip was out and visible.

Jake said, ". Do you have a small pry bar? That might be useful. Or we can grab one at a hardware store."

Martin took the car cover out from under the camper shell and with Jake's help covered the truck. He unlocked his shipping container and took out a 9" stainless steel pry bar. He also dug around in his tools and found a small leather sap. It was a professionally manufactured sap like old time cops used. It was about 9 inches long, made of spring steel and had a beaver tail end that held a lead weight. The whole thing was covered in brown leather. It looked innocent enough unless you knew what it was.

Jake said, "We're going to need to buy some stuff like disposable gloves, shoes, duffle bags. We can get anything else we need on the way."

Martin said, "Don't worry. I have a list. Most of the stuff we can pick up anywhere. I've got a couple of places in mind for the duffels."

<noon on Saturday>

After securing his truck, Martin put his backpack on the tiny crew cab backseat and settled in. They got in the truck and drove off down the gravel road, onto the local road and then onto I-15 towards Las Angeles.

Traffic wasn't too bad on a Saturday afternoon and they made good time. The speed limit was 70mph. Most of the traffic was doing at least 80. Jake kept it around 75 to avoid sticking out. With plenty of people driving 80 plus, he didn't really worry about being pulled over.

Even making good time, it's a long and boring drive through the desert. They stopped near Barstow to get a sandwich and stretch their legs. Martin drove the next leg.

Merging back onto I-15 outside Barstow, Martin asked Jake, "So what happened with your friend?"

Jake said, "It was good to leave when we did. I think she was getting tired of me. Heck, I was kinda getting tired of her."

Martin chuckled.

Jake continued, "Anyway, we left on good terms. She's gone to visit a cousin, I think, in New Mexico. She was talking about taking a bus. Then she's going to go back to California. I could see her again. Or maybe not." He shrugged. "What about you? Got someone back home?"

Martin said, "Yes. She's a programmer in Vancouver."

Jake said, "But you don't live in Vancouver, do you?"

Martin said, "I'm there enough". He didn't elaborate and Jake didn't push him.

They didn't talk much the rest of the way through Victorville and up the pass that lead toward San Bernardino and Los Angeles.

As they were cresting the pass, Martin said, "The area around the Ontario Airport would be perfect to drop your truck and pick up a disposable car. It should be safe enough to park this thing for several days while we go north and do the job."

Jake said, "We can get the shopping done too. It's a good a place as anywhere."

Martin smiled, "That's the plan"

They started hitting traffic as they merged onto the San Bernardino Freeway. Jake said, "This is why I live in Humboldt. Good thing it's only a couple of miles to Ontario. Do you know where you're going?"

Martin said, "Yeah, there's a chain hotel with safe parking across from the convention center. I stayed there once before. They have somewhat secure parking. Do you mind using your ID to check in? They will be taking down your plate number in the parking lot anyway. I have the cash to pay for the room."

As they crawled along the freeway Martin got off as soon as he could and weaved his way along the surface streets to the hotel. It was one of the residence style suites motels made up of a dozen or so little two story apartment buildings. Each building had four units, two on the ground floor and two upstairs. The attraction to Martin was the secure parking lot, plus the fact that with the separate buildings, the management didn't see you coming and going.

They checked in and got their room. It was in one of the upstairs units. It had a double bed and a foldaway couch. Martin took the couch and let Jake have the bed.

Jake said, "Let's get some shopping out of the way this afternoon. We can buy the car tomorrow. It's kind of late to start car shopping now."

Martin agreed, "We can get most of what we need from the Target I saw as we came in. We need disposable shoes, shirts, and pants for the job itself. I want a roll of duct tape, just in case, and some disposable gloves. We also need a dozen or so large duffels. There's a place in Pomona that has them. It's an army surplus store that I found when doing my research. I called them from Vegas and they said they had plenty in stock."

Jake and Martin left and went to Target. They each bought some cheap Chinese knockoff Chuck Taylors and new denim jeans. Jake got a dark green long sleeve work shirt and Martin choose maroon. Both would be as good as black in the dark but would look a lot less suspicious in the light. They'd do the job in these clothes and then toss them as soon as they were done. If they left fiber evidence, wearing mass produced clothes from Target would make them hard to track. And, getting rid of the clothes would break any link back to them.

At the military surplus store, Martin had to keep Jake on task. He kept seeing cool things he wanted to look at. Old uniforms, ammo cans, survival gear, pith helmets, you name it. Martin wasn't amused. He said, "Let's just get our bags and get out of here. You can come back some other time and browse."

The duffels were new and not army surplus. They were black nylon, not olive drab cotton. It didn't matter. They would do just fine. The large ones they got would easily hold 20 shoe boxes. Ten would be enough, but just in case they bought twelve. At the register, he picked up two "tactical" LED flashlights and batteries. Jake couldn't resist and bought himself army surplus jeep cap. It was olive drab will with a small brim.

Martin asked, "What the heck do you need that toque for? It's summer time and we're in California."

Jake smiled, "It's a jeep cap, not a toque. Your Canadian is showing. Don't worry, you'll see".

Shopping done, they drove back to the motel. Traffic in this direction was still heavy but it least it was moving. Jake said, "I bet we could get some tasty Mexican food nearby. My girl in Vegas was a hated Mexican food. I wouldn't mind seeing if we can find a good burrito."

Martin said, "It's a little early, but sure. Mexican sounds fine. Let's hang out at the hotel a little while and then go out."

+++

It was Sunday morning. The breakfast buffet was full of people. There were two or three high school girls volleyball teams staying at the hotel. There must be a tournament nearby, maybe at the convention center. It was 11am before they were finished breakfast and out the door.

Martin had researched used car places while he was planning the job from Vegas. He had a couple of used car lots picked out. Jake was driving. He said, "Ok, where to first?"

Martin said, "There's a dozen used car lots in Pomona. Get on the freeway, I'll direct you." Martin directed Jake to the row of used car dealers. As they were driving Martin said, "We need something large enough to carry the shoes. I'm thinking a small SUV, like a Honda Pilot. We don't need anything fancy. Just something cheap and reliable enough to get us to Palo Alto and back. I don't want to spend more than six grand. I think we can do just fine for around five."

They got to the strip of car dealers. Jake asked, "So, which place?"

Martin said, "I don't know one from another. Pick one. If they don't have what we're looking for we can try the next place."

The first place they tried didn't have anything suitable. They tried to sell them a Mustang instead. They moved on to the place across the street. The sales guy smelled of English Leather aftershave with a hint of tequila. He said, "My name is Charlie, how you doin?"

Martin suspected his mother called him Carlos, not that it mattered. Martin told him they were looking for a inexpensive small SUV or minivan.

Charlie said, "I have just the car for you." He led them over to a row of minivans. He showed them a 10 year old Honda minivan. The sticker on it said \$4,975. "These babies run forever. They're solid. You can't do better than this."

Martin wasn't a mechanic but he knew a thing or two about cars. He looked under it and saw a small puddle.

Martin said, "I'll pass on this one. What else you got?"

Charlie said, "What about this one?". Pointing at a silver minivan. It had a sticker price of \$7995.

Martin said, "More than we want to pay."

Charlie thought a moment, "I have one more to show you.", and led them over to the next row of cars. These were mostly SUVs. There was a fifteen year old Toyota Rav 4. The sticker said \$5,495.

Martin walked around it and peered under it. Tires were worn but serviceable. The dark blue paint was faded with some white streaks in the clearcoat. He said, "This might work. I need to drive it".

Charlie said, "Certainly sir. Let me get the keys. I'll need to hold your driver's license"

Martin got out his wallet and handed him his license under the name Roger Jones. The salesman went to the office to get the key.

When he came back he stuck the key in the car and looked at the gas gauge. He said, "Should be fine for a test drive. I'll be in the office when you get back"

As Martin got in the drivers seat, he told Jake to stand behind it and look at the exhaust as he started it. He said, "We're looking for smoke. Blue most likely, but maybe black or white. Tell me if you see any". He rolled down the window and started the Toyota. It started right up.

Jake said, "No smoke. Looks fine." Then he climbed in the passenger seat. He laughed, "Someone had a dog in here once or twice. We're going to need one of those pine tree air fresheners."

The engine ran smoothly. The clock showed 120,000 miles though Martin suspected it had been rolled back. He said, "The engines in these things are the last thing that go. I'm more worried about the transmission, worn suspension and brakes. We're not looking to race the thing, it only has to be reliable enough."

He drove it off the lot and onto city streets. It shifted fine and the brakes worked. It wallowed a bit and the shocks were nearly shot. After driving a couple of blocks he had Jake get out so they could try the lights and turn signals. No point in doing the robbery just to get stopped for a bad taillight. Jake got back in and they took a spin on the freeway. Today the traffic was better so Martin could get it up to speed. At 60 it was fine. At 70 it was marginal. It pulled to right. It pulled to the right even worse under braking.

Martin said, "I think this one has been in an accident. I'm going to buy it if I can get the price down a little. Check the air conditioning, will you?"

Jake turned on the air conditioning. It blew cold. Martin exited the freeway, took the overpass, got on the other direction, and drove it back to the lot. They found Charlie there chatting with a saleswoman. Martin told him, "I'll give you \$4000 for it."

The saleswoman said she'd talk to him later and walked away. Charlie said, "I can't let it go for that little. It's in great condition for a 15 year old car. \$5000 is the best I can do. Plus tax and fees. I can get you a great rate on financing."

Martin said, "Look, I'm paying cash and I'm in a hurry. It pulls hard to the right. The paint is faded. You're not going to get more than \$4500 for it. Yes or no."

Charlie gave him a big smile, "\$4500? I'll have to see my manager, but I think he'll say yes"

Martin said, "No floor mats. No undercoating. No extended warrantee. \$4500 plus whatever taxes and government fees. Not one cent more. And it's cash. I'm not filling out a frikin credit application."

Charlie shrugged, "The credit department always asks. Just tell them no.". He handed Martin back his ID and walked away.

The sales manager did say yes. Martin avoided the credit check. The dealership did all the registration paperwork. The car was legally registered to Roger Jones. The final bill was a shade under \$5000. Martin counted out the \$100 bills. No one batted an eyelash.

Jake drove his truck back to the motel and Martin followed in the Rav4. Martin found a spot on the street close to the motel. After he stopped the SUV and got out he had a peek under the dash. There

was a small box zip-tied to the steering column and plugged into the diagnostic port. He cut the zip tie with his pocket knife and unplugged the little black box.

He locked up and met Jake on the walkway to their room. He tossed the little box to Jake. Martin said, "Just had to remove this little guy before we left."

Jake said, "What is it?"

Martin said, "GPS tracker. The finance companies put them on used cars so they can track them down and repo them. I bet Charlie's company has sold this car more than once and never bothered to take it off when I paid cash."

Jake said, "I would have never thought to look."

Martin said, "I think we're done here for now. Let's pack up what we need and head north. We can get eyeballs on the house tomorrow during the day. "

Jake said, "Sounds like a plan."

+++

They hit the road north around 4pm. LA traffic was heavy but moved along. It was a little slow through Pasadena. Otherwise, getting out of town was less of a headache than the drive in.

Neither had eaten lunch after their late breakfast. They stopped at a sandwich place in Santa Clarita before heading over the Grapevine and through the Central Valley. Martin had taken the first shift driving. He swapped with Jake for this leg.

Jake drove up the hill, sticking to the right to let the fast cars pass. The old Rav4 soldiered up the hill. Jake was worried about overheating, but it came through with no problems. He drove up and down the hills past Pyramid Lake, downshifting on the downslopes to keep the speed down. As Martin said, it got squirrely above 70mph and he could easily burn up the brakes if he wasn't careful.

He made it through the little town in the pass and down the steep Grapevine into the pancake flat Central Valley. From here, it was a long straight shot up I-5. Martin dozed as Jake drove. It was a long and boring drive. Not much to look at. The speed limit was 70 so he didn't have to worry about speeding. He wasn't going to be driving the crappy Rav4 much faster than that anyway.

The most interesting thing during the driving was seeing some yahoo in a Porsche went screaming by at what must have been 90 or more – dodging big rigs left and right. Half an hour later, he saw the car at the side of the road, pulled over by the CHP.

A couple of hours of this and Jake felt he'd earned a break. Martin sat up as Jake slowed down on the off-ramp. Kettleman City. Jake spoke for the first time in two hours. "You got yer choice of the finest establishments I-5 has to offer.", he said in a fake drawl.

Martin shrugged, "I don't care. All I want is a Diet Coke and to stretch my legs. I'll drive the rest of the way."

Jake pulled into a burger place and they both got out. The air was heavy with smells of cows and cow manure. Martin got his soda and Jake got a drink and some fries. After a quick pit stop they were on their way.

As Martin pulled back onto I-5, Jake half said, half sung, "Do you know the way to San Jose?"

Martin glared at him, "I think I do, but you can help me get on the highway to Gilroy. That's the only part I'm not sure about."

Jake said, "Sure. No problem. I was just teasing."

Martin said, "I don't want to go all the way to San Jose anyway. I want to spend the night tonight in Gilroy, check out the house tomorrow and hit it Tuesday morning just before dawn. Make sense to you?"

They saw the signs for Los Banos. Martin said, "I don't know much Spanish, but doesn't Banos mean bathroom?"

Jake said, "Funny you say that, we turn off there. Yeah, I can understand a little Spanish. I think it means 'The Baths' but it's kind of amusing. There's all kinds of funny Spanish place names in California."

Jake directed Martin to get off the interstate on to State Highway 152 towards Gilroy. After spending most of the day driving north in the flat expanse of the Central Valley, the highway turned west through the dry brown hills. They passed the San Luis Reservoir. Martin kept to the right while the faster traffic sped by. This was pretty country in the failing light, with big old scraggly oak trees dotting the hillsides. It was a welcome change after the flat straight valley superhighway.

At one point it became a single lane and the traffic backed up. Jake said, "Looks like people coming home to San Jose from a weekend in the mountains". It was fully dark by the time they got to Highway 101. Jake asked, "Do you have a hotel in mind here?"

Martin said, "Not one in particular. If I remember correctly there are several off the next exit off 101.". Martin took the exit and picked one of the motels.

It was another cookie cutter cheap motel. A Valu-Lodge. It was an L shaped building with two stories. Each room faced out towards the parking lot. There were stairs on both ends of the L and ice and vending machines at the vertex.

Jake checked them in and paid cash for two rooms for two nights. The clerk didn't have side by side rooms. Best he could do is have one room on the ground floor up the stairs on the second floor. Jake told him he didn't mind. Jake took Room 107 downstairs and Martin got Room 203 on the second floor.

It had been hot during the day here, but not nearly as hot it had been in Vegas or even or Ontario. It was turning into a pleasant night. After a long day in the car, neither Jake or Martin was interested in driving anywhere for dinner. They agreed they'd fend for themselves and meet up at 9am for breakfast. Martin crossed the road to a nearby fast food burger place and took his dinner back to his room.

After eating and cleaning up, Martin got on his computer and sent a message to his alarm contact. He knew him as RJ and he came highly recommended from someone Martin trusted. RJ got back to him immediately. He must have been online. They agreed to voice chat. Martin put a headset on.

Martin said, "Hi, RJ. Is my mic ok?"

RJ said, in a woman's voice, "Yes. It's fine. Tell me about your alarm situation"

Martin realized he didn't know if RJ was a man or a woman and went with it. Martin said, "I need to get into a house in Palo Alto. I don't know for sure, but I suspect there will be an alarm. I'm looking for someone to turn off the alarm for me. Can you do it?"

RJ said, "Probably. Give me the address and let me look it up. Most likely they use one of the local alarm companies. If so, I have a way find out what alarm system they have. If not, I'll have to go to the house in person."

Martin gave her the address.

RJ said, "I'll call you back in a few minutes one way or another".

Martin closed the chat app. He studied the map to learn the neighborhood. If there was trouble, he wanted to know two or three good exits. Embarcadero Rd to Highway 101 was the obvious choice, but Sand Hill or Oregon Expressway to I-280 were good secondaries. He didn't have local knowledge to know if there were any good ways to get out on foot or on public transit.

It didn't take long for RJ to get back to him. She pinged him on the chat app and they both got back on the voice channel.

RJ said, "Found it. It has an alarm. It should be easy enough to disable. Do you want the details of the alarm system?"

Martin said, "No. What I want is a contractor to turn off the alarm for a minimum of two hours while I go in."

RJ said, "I could do it or I could recommend someone else. Is this a simple burglary, or do you expect violence?"

Martin said, "No violence. We expect the house to be empty and we'll be in and out to take something of value. I haven't been able to confirm it's empty, but I will do so before the event."

RJ said, "When do you need this done?"

Martin said, "Tuesday morning, 4am"

RJ said, "I can do it. You're lucky, I'm not that far from there. I don't have to charge you for travel time. \$75k payable in bitcoin. Half before and half afterwards. And, I don't want to know what it is you're taking."

Martin said, "That's a bit steep for few minutes work with no travel. Would you do it for 40 grand?"

RJ said, "I could come down a little since you come recommended. Sixty-five."

Martin said, "Fifty. If it's a simple alarm as you say, I can probably bypass it myself."

RJ said, "I said it was easy to disable, not that it was a simple alarm. You gotta pay me to drive out there in the middle of the night. \$60k is the best I'll do."

Martin said, "Fine, I guess. Give me your bitcoin public key and I'll send you half just as soon as I have a look at the house. "

RJ said, "See you later"

+++

At the Satan's clubhouse in Las Vegas, Bill sat down with his boss, Cody and the Bruce, the chapter president. Bruce had a legitimate business owning several auto parts franchises in the Las Vegas valley. He made way more off the books with the Satans than with his legit stores. He had served in the army and was in Vietnam for a short time in 1972. He joined the Satans when he got out and made his way up the ranks by being meaner and smarter than his rivals. He took a bullet in the leg during a shootout with a rival gang in Laughlin and because it walked with a limp and carried a cane.

In a lot of ways, a motorcycle gang is nothing more than a multilevel marketing company. The gang had a pyramid structure. Bruce, the chapter president was at the top. Cody was a vice president and kicked up a percentage of his take to Bruce. Cody in turn, had Bill and three other members kicking up to him. Below the members, they had wannabees and prospects to do a lot of the grunt work.

Bruce said to Bill, "How do you know this chump. What's his name? Austin?"

Bill said, "I went to high school with him. We used to ride together when I was a hangaround. I hadn't seen him in years before he showed up"

Bruce said, "What about these guys he's hooked up with?"

Bill said, "I don't know anything other than first names. I've never met them or heard of them. I was keeping an eye on Austin's store and I saw one of them go in. Cowboy hat and long braids. He should be easy to spot. I know there's another guy, but I haven't seen him. "

Bruce said, "We should just take the cash off of Austin before these guys get back. Piece of cake."

Bill said, "If Austin is telling the truth, we can't get at it yet. He will have an encrypted flash drive with bitcoin codes on it. We'll need the encryption key."

Bruce sighed, "It was easier in the old days when we could just beat him up and take the cash. You millennials with all your technology crap. Beat the encryption key out of him."

Bill said, "If Jake and Frank have any sense at all, Austin won't know it. We should see if we can find Jake and Frank and get them to tell us the password."

Bruce said, "How are you going to find them? You know shit about them."

Bill said, "I know that they've been in touch with Austin. Probably by text. Our contact at the phone company can get me the number. I assume he's smart enough to use a burner. I can have our bail bonds friend track the phone. They all have GPS in them for 911 calls now, even the cheap burners. They'll be somewhere between here and Silicon Valley. If they're in the Bay Area, we can have our San Jose or Oakland Chapter look for them."

Bruce shook his head and said softly, "More fuckin technology"

Cody said, "Go do it."

Bill got up and left. He called their contact at the phone company and got Jake's number via Austin's phone. He gave Jake's number to their bail bondsman and got a location. Gilroy, California. Plausible. He called one of the guys he knew from San Jose. He had some trouble convincing them to make the ride. They didn't want to spend their Sunday evening looking for someone based on a vague description. Gilroy wasn't that far, it was a nice night for a ride, and they really didn't have anything better to do. Might as well help out a brother from Las Vegas.

+++

<10pm Gilroy>

Jake saw the burger place but was in the mood for something else. He walked toward what he thought was downtown and saw a pizza place. DeRosa's Pizza. It was a family place and if it was a chain, it was a local one. It was empty that late on a Sunday. The waitress was dressed in a faux Catholic high school uniform. White blouse, plaid miniskirt, and chunky black mary jane shoes. The school girl look didn't do anything for Jake. The black lace bra and what was behind it, peeking out from under the blouse did though.

The waitress said, "Hi, what can I get you? We're closing soon."

Jake said, "I'll take a draft beer and a small pepperoni pizza."

She turned on her heel and Jake watched her walk away. He liked what he saw.

When she came back with his beer, Jake said, "Where can I find some excitement in town tonight?"

She looked at him and deadpanned, "San Jose"

She laughed. "You must be from out of town. Sunday night in Gilroy? There's nothing. Sure, there's a couple of bars in Old Gilroy. You want, I can give you directions. You can find the town skanks hanging out there."

Jake smiled, "What are you doing after you close? My name's Jake. Want to hang out?"

She smiled, "Nice to meet you Jake. My name is Diane. Where are you staying?"

Jake told her he was at the motel down the street. Diane frowned, "I can't go there. It's a long story. My ex is a cop. If he or his cop buddies, see me there I'll never hear the end of it. They'll spread rumors that I'm hooking. "

There was a voice from the kitchen. Diane said, "Hang on a second that will be your pizza. The cook will be wanting to clean up and get out of here."

She went away and got his pizza. She told him that she was the night and weekend manager. The cook would clean up and she'd close up at 11pm. If he could wait until she was done, they could go watch a movie at her place.

Jake ate his pizza while Diane was busy behind the counter. She came out and put the tables up. Jake was done by then, so he helped. Diane told him that thankfully she didn't need to mop that night. The lunch crew would do it the next morning. While he was helping her, she told him that she was a single

mom. She had a son who was with his dad, the cop, that week. She worked as a receptionist at a medical office in Morgan Hill and was learning bookkeeping there too.

She ushered him out the door and locked up behind them. Before they go into the car, Jake leaned over to her and kissed her on the mouth. She kissed him back and then pulled away. She smiled and touched his face, "Have some patience, big guy". She drove a Honda civic or something. There was a child seat in the back. The car smelled like stale cheerios.

Jake didn't have to wait long. Diane lived in six-unit apartment building that looked like it was built in the 70s or 80s. He wasn't paying that close attention. It wasn't very far. They parked in front and walked in. He put his arms around her and kissed her again. This time she didn't pull away. Jake reached under her blouse and expertly unhooked her bra with one hand. With the other he held her close by the small of her back and ran his fingers under her skirt, down between the cleft of her tight ass. She came up for air and slipped her bra off. She took his hand and lead him to the bedroom.

+++

A member and a prospect from the San Jose chapter of the Satans rolled into Gilroy. All they knew was to look for a guy with long braids named Jake. If they found him, they were to call their captain and he'd take care of getting some people to pick them up and take them to San Jose. It should be easy, really. There were only half a dozen motels or hotels in Gilroy all clustered around one exit off of US 101. They'd go around to each one and talk to the night clerk and see who checked in.

The Hampton Inn was a bust. Nothing but families checked in that evening. No one named Jake or Jacob or anything similar and the clerk didn't remember seeing a guy with long braids.

No luck with the second motel. The clerk tried to brush them off but a little intimidation worked wonders. Still, he didn't remember no guy with braids. And no one named Jake checked in.

Third stop was the Valu-Lodge. The Satan member and prospect rolled up and parked near the office. The office was empty when they got there with a sign on the counter to ring the bell for service. They rang the bell and waited thirty seconds and then rang it again. They heard someone call out from behind the door behind the counter to hold on.

The clerk was a skinny young man with short brown hair. He looked like he had been asleep, or at least lying down. His hair was sticking out and his uniform shirt was untucked. He hustled out of the door and asked, "What can I do for you?"

The Satan member said, "Hi, I'm looking for a friend of mine. His name's Jake. He told me he was staying here but he didn't tell me what room. He is about average height and has long braids.

The clerk's eye lit up with recognition, "I think I remember that guy. I can't give you his number but I can call him for you."

The Satan said to the prospect, "Why don't you wait outside and look after our bikes". The prospect went out and had a good view of the front doors of all the rooms.

The clerk pulled up the guest register on an old green screen computer. The Satan couldn't read the screen upside down and at an extreme angle. But he could see the number that the guy dialed when he called the room. 107.

The phone rang a dozen times. No answer. The clerk smiled tentatively, "Your friend doesn't appear to be in. Do you want to leave a message?"

The Satan member said, "No. I'll try calling him here a bit later." And then he went outside.

Outside, the Satan member said to his sidekick, "Did you see the lights turn on or any movement in Room 107?"

He said he hadn't seen anything. Just to be sure, the Satan knocked on Room 107. First quietly and then forcefully. Nothing. He picked up cell phone and called his boss to tell him that he'd found Jake, that he checked into a Valu-Lodge in Gilroy, but he wasn't there. His boss told him to wait there until he showed up.

The Satan member said to the prospect, "They want us to wait on him. This is bullshit."

The Satan prospect said, "Yeah, I guess"

The Satan said, "It was kinda fun to track the dude down, even if it was easy. But sitting and waiting. Fuck. I hate waiting. I didn't sign up for waiting."

The prospect said, "What do you want to do?"

The member said, "Pissed as I am, I can't ignore a direct order. We'll sit an wait. But if it's too long, I'm out of here. You can do what you want."

It was a boring wait. Around midnight a car came into the lot and some people got out. Not Jake. At 1am the Satan member had enough. He and the prospect both left.

+++

Jake woke to the sound of shower running and the smell of coffee. He momentarily didn't know where he was. Ah yes. Diane. He grinned and joined her in the shower.

When they were both clean, she told him that she could drop him off back at his hotel. It was another bright warm morning but too early for Jake's tastes. She had to be at work at 8am. They didn't have much time. Jake quickly got dressed and they rushed out the door together. Diane drove into the motel lot. A quick kiss and they said goodbye.

Jake jumped out of the car. He felt like he was forgetting something. He checked. He had his wallet and his room key. His car keys, clothes, and doppel kit were all in his room. Ah yes. He must have dropped his burner phone in her car. Or maybe it was still in her apartment. He didn't care, it was about time for a new one anyway.

He laid down for an hour or so before he had to meet up with Martin.

Martin pounded on Room 107's door. He said through the door, "Damnit Jake, you're late". He had already been to the little breakfast area and skipped the stale donuts and muffins that they passed off as breakfast. He wanted to stop at a Starbucks and get something better on the way.

Jake opened the door, sleepy, in his clothes. He said, "Sorry dude. I had been up but fell back asleep."

Martin said, "Cmon, let's get some coffee. The breakfast here is a joke."

Jake said, "If we can, I'd like to stop somewhere and get a new phone. I dropped mine somewhere yesterday."

Martin said, "I might as well get one too. Can't be too careful"

Martin drove. They stopped at a Starbucks in Morgan Hill next to a CVS that sold prepaid cell phones. Martin tossed his old one in the trash. Traffic was slow into and through San Jose and then really slow through Mountain View. While they were driving, Martin told Jake about RJ handling the burglar alarm.

Martin relayed some of his planning, "We'll leave the motel no later than 3:15am. It should take 45 minutes at that time of night to get to Palo Alto. We do the job and head straight back to Southern California. I see no reason to stop back at the motel."

Jake said, "That means we take everything with us, including ID."

Martin said, "Yep. I know it's a risk, but if something unexpected comes up, I want to have options. If we get stopped by the CHP on some random sobriety checkpoint, not having ID would be a big problem. I thought about leaving some stuff at the motel, going back there and changing clothes, and checking out in the morning as if we had been there all night. But, I like keeping our options open better."

Jake said, "Ok. I can go with that."

By now it was 11am. Too late for commuting and too early for lunch. Where were all these people going? They crawled past the NASA Ames airfield and finally exited onto Embarcadero Rd. Martin said, "Who designed this exit? It's a mess. If I hadn't studied the map online I would have gotten lost for sure."

He drove around the cloverleaf and over the overpass. He said, "I'm going to stop at a gas station so we can stretch our legs before driving past our target".

He found a Shell station and filled up the RAV 4. After taking care of business, they drove the mile or so to the target house. As they had seen online it was on a leafy street. They could see that there were no cars in the driveway and no pedestrians on that block. The house was pretty close to the floorplan that Jake and Martin had looked at in Las Vegas. It had a two car garage on the left side, a central gallery with an A-frame roof in the middle and a small window to the right of the main gallery. The floor plan showed two small bedrooms that would be behind the garage. Presumably the master bedroom, kitchen and dining room were on the right side of the main gallery.

They kept going past the house and parked two blocks away.

<<1070 Harriet St is the target house>>

Martin said, "Doesn't look occupied. There's parking right out front. I think we park and go knock on the door. I can see if there is an alarm pad there and if the locks are decent. All things being equal, I'd like a look around the side of the house. Tonight, I'd prefer to get in through a side door into the garage rather than the front."

Jake said, "Right. Though we'd want to carry the goods out through the front door. It would be faster. I agree that we want to avoid visibly damaging the front door to delay someone detecting the break in."

Martin said, "The nice thing about these modern style houses is they don't have big front windows. The neighbors, even if they're home, won't see us on the street. You might as well stay in the car. I'll only be gone a minute."

Martin drove over and parked. Seeing no one on the street, he got out and walked up the driveway to the front door. The house had no lawn. The front yard was dominated by a large redwood tree surrounded by low evergreen shrubs. It looked like it was being taken care of.

The door was an odd shade of turquoise that seemed out of place with the brown earth tones of the rest of the house. There was an alarm pad to the left of the door. The door had a good quality deadbolt. He could pick it if need be, but it would take far too long to be a good bet.

He knocked on the door and looked through the frosted sidelight. No movement inside. He knocked again and waited. Nothing. There was a mail slot in the garage door. Martin opened it up and peered in. The garage was empty and there no visible mail.

There was a 6 ft high wooden fence past the garage. Fortunately for Martin, there was another large redwood on this side of the house too. Its low branches shielded him from any prying eyes. He unlatched the unlocked gate and looked in the side yard. Large plastic recycling bins. Empty. There was a locked door into the garage. No deadbolt. He retraced his steps and got back in the car.

He started the car and drove off. He said, "It should be easy to get in. A pry bar to the side garage door will do it. It looks unoccupied, but someone has been coming by and getting the mail. There is an alarm pad by the front door, but RJ will take care of that."

Jake said, "Sweet. It should be fast getting in and out. We park in the driveway, get in through the garage, find the shoes, put them in the duffels and make two or three trips out the front door. "

Martin said, "One more bit of preparation. Let's try a couple of the exit routes just in case. Then, I think we find a place for lunch."

+++

Shortly after noon in Las Vegas, Bill rode up to the Satan's clubhouse. He parked his bike out front and went in to talk to his boss, Cody.

Cody was sitting down on a couch in the lounge area talking on his cell phone. He motioned to Bill to sit across from him. After he hung up, he asked Bill, "So what happened with the shoe thieves? Did we get 'em?"

Bill shook his head and grimaced, "No. The San Jose crew found the motel where Jake was staying, but he wasn't there. They waited a couple of hours but he never showed up."

Cody said, "What a bunch of fuckups. They should have waited all night. Where's Jake now?"

Bill said, "Not sure. We tracked his phone again and this time it's near downtown Morgan Hill. The San Jose dudes say there's nothing there but doctors offices, a bank, and insurance companies on that block. They won't ride out there to look for him unless we give them something more solid."

Cody said, "Fuckers. They shouldn't of fuckin fucked it up in the first place."

Bill said, "If they're in the area, they're probably out doing the job. We'll get them when they get back into town here. They won't be back until tomorrow at the earliest. I'll have a chat with Austin to make sure we don't miss them.

The Job

Martin got a little sleep between midnight and 3am. He woke up every hour on the hour and checked the red digital clock in the motel room. At 2:52 he rolled over and checked the clock again. His alarm was set for 3am. He might as well get up now.

Before he went to bed, he meticulously set out everything he'd need in the morning. His knock off chuck taylors, maroon shirt and new jeans. He had his holstered gun, sap, flashlight, disposable gloves and pry bar in a separate pocket of his backpack. The duffel bags were all stuffed into one duffel bag on the second bed.

After taking a quick shower, he put on his new clothes. He took his cell phone and compulsively triple checked that he had RJ's burner number in it. He put it in his backpack with the other tools. In the main compartment, he had the clothes he would change into when he was done, his laptop, the roll of duct tape, his wallet, doppel kit, mine keys, a multi-tool and various charging cables.

He looked around to make sure he everything. He left the motel card key on the table, picked up his backpack, duffel of duffels and the RAV 4 keys and went out into the early morning. The fluorescent lights above the stairway were buzzing and annoyingly bright as he walked down and over to the car. He opened it and put his bags behind the driver's seat. He'd folded down the rear seats last night so they'd have the extra space.

The light was on in Jake's room and Martin could see movement behind the curtains. Good. He wasn't going to have to wake him up this time. Martin walked over to Jake's door and knocked softly. Jake opened the door and didn't say a word. He was wearing his new watch cap with his braids tucked under it. He grabbed his travel bag, left the card key and was out the door and into the car.

Martin drove. He got on 101 and went north to Palo Alto. There was very little traffic when they got on the freeway.

Martin said, "Now I understand the hat. Anyone sees you, they remember it and not the braids. Clever."

They rode in silence for a while. As they approached San Jose, Jake pointed over to the right, "Hey, a good omen. Phosphoros, Apisirahts, Venus, the morning star." Martin took his word for it. He couldn't really look for it while he was driving.

Jake said, "Well, it's gone now. It disappeared behind the fog."

Martin said, "Fog? But it's completely clear"

Jake said, "Ok. Fine. Technically it's the marine layer. It's clouds that come inland from the Pacific. The locals call it fog. "

Whatever it's called, the clouds thickened and reflected light from all the ambient light sources. It was almost as bright as a half moon.

They made excellent time and got to the house a few minutes before 4. Timing was good so far. They drove past the house and parked in a spot on the street half a block down. Martin got his phone out and called RJ.

RJ answered, "Hi there. I saw you drive up."

Martin said, "Ok. What's the status of the alarm?"

Martin heard the clattering of laptop keys.

RJ said, "It's a cellular alarm that calls the alarm company. I'm in their system and I've bypassed it. If it went off, my bypass would cancel it. If you give me a minute, I can use the smartphone app to turn the local system off so nothing is sent to the office at all. Give me a sec."

Martin waited and listened to a bit more clattering.

She said, "That's funny. It was already off. Well, you're all set. I expect the second half of my fee sometime tomorrow. Have fun!"

Martin said, "If you don't mind, wait 10 minutes and make sure the system stays down before you drive off."

RJ said, "You worry too much, grandma. I got this. But since you're paying, I'll stick around just in case."

Martin hung up. It was finally time. He got his pry bar, sap, gloves and flashlight out of his bag. He left the gun. Any scenario where he needed it would be very bad news. Gunshots in this neighborhood would bring the cops in a hurry. He put on his latex gloves and Jake did the same.

Martin turned off the headlights and opened the driver's window. He pulled the RAV4 out of the parking spot and into the driveway. He turned off the engine and took the keys out. All was calm. The house looked the same as it had the previous morning. No lights were on. He got out of the car and quietly closed the door. While Jake waited in the passenger seat, Martin went into the side yard.

Now he needed his flashlight. The tree branches that shielded him from the street made it truly dark. Martin had put electrical tape over the lens of the flashlight with a small slit to let some light out. He briefly turned it on at low brightness so he could see where he was going. He didn't want to be tripping over trash cans now.

He stepped over to the side garage door and inserted his prybar. The jamb was almost 50 years old and exposed to the weather. Even with the California climate, it had gotten wet enough times to be soft. A little pressure and Martin had the door right open.

He turned the flashlight on once again for a split second. The garage was empty and the door to the house was a few steps straight ahead. Martin held the door closed and turned the nob. No sound. He slowly and gently eased the door open, using all his senses to tell if there was anyone there.

Once he had the door partially open, he had his answer. There was a caretaker. He could smell garlic and spices from a takeout dinner. He could hear snoring. Good. The dude was still asleep.

Martin had no illusions that they could go in and take the shoes without waking up the caretaker. He needed to be dealt with first. Martin entered the central gallery. There was enough light from the

windows set in the upper part of the A-frame that Martin didn't need his flashlight. The original plan was for him to open the front door for Jake. But he had to take care of the schnorrer first.

The snoring was coming from the master bedroom. Across the gallery and to Martin's right. The door to the master was ajar. Martin quickly crept through the door. There was a guy sleeping on his back in the master bed. Martin gave him a solid whack on the forehead with the sap. The snoring stopped. Martin hesitated for moment and then relaxed a bit when the guy started breathing again. He seemed out, but who knew for how long.

Martin quickly moved to the front door, unlocked the deadbolt from the inside and let Jake in.

He said quietly, "There's a caretaker in the master bedroom. I gave him a tap on the head and he's out for now. We're going to need to restrain him before we get the shoes. Go back and get the duct tape. It's in the outside pocket of my backpack."

Jake dropped the duffle bags inside the door and went to get the roll of tape.

Martin went back into the master bedroom. Jake came in with him.

Martin rolled the guy over onto his stomach. He was naked and very hairy. Martin taped his wrists together behind his back. He taped his ankles together and hogtied the ankles and wrists together.

Martin said, "I prefer using zip-ties, but I didn't think to bring them. Tape will do. We shouldn't be long. Help me roll him back over and let's get moving."

They pushed the guy over onto his back. Martin put a piece of tape over his mouth.

The caretaker moaned and eyelids fluttered. Suddenly he jolted awake. He struggled in his bindings. Martin said calmly and quietly in a soothing voice, "Don't worry. We're not going to hurt you. Go back to sleep and it will all be fine in the morning."

The caretaker tried to speak. Jake said, "If you promise not to scream or do anything stupid, I'll remove the tape. Nod twice if you agree."

The guy nodded twice.

Martin shrugged, "Ok. What do you have to say?" and pulled the tape off his mouth.

The caretaker said in a thick eastern European accent, "I am in much trouble. This is cousin Alexey's house. He doesn't know I stay here. Rent is too much in Silicon Valley, so I borrow house. I don't hurt anyone. No one lives here, house is empty. If you rob him and they find me here, they think I was involved. He disown me."

Martin said, "You'll have a good lump on your head in the morning. Trust me. They find you with tied up and they'll believe you."

Jake said coldly, "And if you cause us trouble it will be much, much worse for you. So pretend you never saw us and go back to sleep."

Martin put the tape back on his mouth. He didn't struggle.

Martin said, "Let's move it. We can't be here when it gets light. Early risers will notice the car in the driveway"

They left the master bedroom and walked across the central gallery to what they assumed were the two bedrooms next to the garage. Martin walked into the first one and flipped on the lights. He said, "No point in skulking about in the dark." The bedroom was furnished but was not currently in use. More importantly it didn't have the shoes they were looking for.

The next room did. There was no other furniture in the room, only stacks and stacks of shoe boxes. Martin opened the nearest box. It was a black box with a large red Nike name and logo. There was a pair of black and red basketball shoes. He put the box back and opened another. It was a black box with a red silhouette of a basketball player. Black basketball high tops inside.

Martin said, "This is it. Let's load up and get the heck out of here."

Jake pulled two duffels out of the bag and handed one to Martin. They started loading shoes. They were able to get twenty shoeboxes in each bag. Martin did a quick estimate – there were more shoes here than were going to fit in their dozen duffels. Way more.

Martin said quietly, "Take these into the car and I'll keep loading."

Jake made a trip out the blue front door and loaded the first two duffels into the back of the RAV4. They were bulky but not heavy.

He could see the clouds starting to lighten in the east. It was still dark, but dawn would be soon. They'd have to worry about a jogger or early morning dog walker in a neighborhood like this. He moved quickly.

Martin had another bag packed and was working on a second. Jake got a bag and filled it. He took both duffels and loaded them out. They repeated the process until they loaded the first ten bags full of 200 shoeboxes.

When Jake returned after dropping off the ninth and tenth bags, Martin was dumping the shoes out of the boxes and just taking the shoes. He said, "There are way more shoes than we can carry if we take the boxes. Let's just cram as many shoes as we can in the remaining two bags and let Austin sort it out."

Jake took the last bag and started doing the same. This was taking longer than just loading the boxes. Perhaps it just seemed longer. Jake said, "Fuck it, let's just take what we have and get out of here. Austin can take what we have or leave it. Not like he has a choice. We've been here too long let's go."

Martin said, "Ok. Let me take one last look in at the hairy guy and I'll be right out."

Jake took his last duffel out to the car, loaded it and got in the passenger's seat. It was seriously starting to get light and he didn't like it.

Martin turned the lights off and took his last duffel. On the way out he peered around the doorframe into the master. The cousin was still there. His eyes were closed, but Martin could tell he wasn't sleeping. He told the guy, "We have another ten or fifteen minutes work to do here. If I hear anything out of you, it will be bad for you. Sit tight and I'll untie you before we go."

He got a mumbled answer that he took for a yes.

Martin closed the bedroom door, walked out and firmly closed the front door and tossed the last duffel into the car. So far so good.

He started the car and backed out. Halfway down the block he turned his headlights on. You could clearly see the sky brightening in the east. They got out in time – before the neighborhood started waking up and anyone noticed them. Two blocks later they saw their first pedestrian – a jogger in reflective gear. These people were nuts.

He took off his latex gloves while he was driving. Jake had already done the same. Jake took off his army hat and pulled his braids out. Jake said, “That was kinda uncomfortable”.

Martin was surprised by the volume of freeway traffic. An hour ago it was pretty empty. It was still moving fast, but there were lots of people out and about.

He said to Jake, “Does rush hour start at 5am here?”

Jake said, “And you wonder why I live way up in Humboldt. The Bay Area is madness.”

Martin said, “Once I put Palo Alto ten miles behind us, I’ll be able to relax a bit. I’m still keyed up.”

Jake said, “Me too.”

Martin said, “I’ll need some coffee and a bathroom before too long. I figure we stop in Gilroy. There was a shopping center where we get off the freeway. Undoubtable there will be a Starbucks or McDonalds there.”

Jake said, “Let me know when you want me to take over driving”. While Martin drove, Jake changed out of his temporary clothes and balled them up. He stuffed them in the footwell and put on his own shorts and tee shirt. “Ah, that’s better”, he said.

Martin flipped on the radio and tuned to a news station. Mostly he wanted to hear about traffic info. He drove south. Traffic was light going south. No issues. He could see the headlights of the heavy traffic coming into Silicon Valley on the other side of the freeway.

It was fully light by the time they got to the Starbucks in Gilroy. The fog had dissipated somewhere behind them between Palo Alto and Morgan Hill. Jake ordered coffees for both of them and Martin changed in the bathroom. Jake got a muffin and Martin an apple fritter thing for breakfast. They gassed up the Rav 4 and they threw out their clothes at the gas station before getting back on the road.

They drove over the hill to I-5 in the bright early morning sunshine. Jake dozed. Once past the reservoir, it was easy enough to navigate onto I-5. You didn’t need a smartphone to read the signs that said I-5 Los Angeles. Martin turned off the radio. He was getting mostly static on the news station. The only other options were Spanish language music or Christian talk. Neither appealed to him.

He took the entrance onto I-5. It was the same drill as it had been on Sunday evening. Slow trucks in the right lane. Slightly faster trucks passing in the left lane. Idiots in fast cars scooting by in the right lane trying to squeeze in as the trucks passed each other. Martin didn’t care. He wasn’t in a hurry. He just wanted to get safely to Ontario and out of this piece of crap Toyota.

Martin woke Jake up as he took an exit for a truck stop.

Jake said, "Where are we?"

Martin said, "Somewhere in the middle of nowhere on I-5. The signs say the nearest town is called Coalinga"

Jake said, "Yeah. You said it. Middle of nowhere."

Martin said, "I want a soda and to stretch my legs. Do you mind doing some driving?"

Jake said, "No problem."

Martin got his soda and they switched off driving.

As they got back on the road, Jake said, "Coalinga. There's another weird California name. It's not Spanish though."

Martin said, "Kinda sounds like it though. What's weird about it?"

Jake said, "I don't know if this is true but I heard that the town started out as Coaling Station A on a railroad line. There would probably have been a Station B and Station C too. Somehow the name got shortened to Coaling A and then Coalinga. "

Martin, "Your right, that is odd."

They drove in silence down through the heart of California's Central Valley. Green farmland on either side of the long straight highway. Golden brown hills past the farmland to the right. Totally flat cropland to the left. You could barely make out the white peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains in the far distance on the left side.

Martin said, "We've been driving for just over two hours. Another four or so puts us in Ontario. Depending on LA traffic. "

Jake said, "Yup. Provided this bucket of bolts holds together."

Martin said, "Looks like we'll be there in the early afternoon. You don't need to push it. "

Jake said, "What do you want to do with the car when we're done with it?"

Martin said, "I think we just leave it on the street in a lousy part of town with the keys in the visor. Someone will steal it."

Jake said, "Ah. The classic. We could park it at the mall and let them tow it? A week of towing fees will be more than it's worth and they'll auction it off."

Martin said, "That works too. Or we could skip the middle man and sell it to a junkyard ourselves. It's worth more in parts than as a driving car. They'd take the valuable parts and crush it into a small steel cube. "

Jake laughed, "Someday, I want to abandon a car by setting it on fire in the middle of a freeway during rush hour."

Martin chuckled, "Not this time. Unless you object, I think we stick with dropping it off on a side street with the keys in it. Let the cops pick up some poor sucker joyriding. The funny thing is, I think we should drop it off in the same neighborhood that we bought it in. "

The drive south was pretty much a mirror image of the drive north. Long and boring, but uneventful. Jake was careful driving up and down the Grapevine and they only hit minor LA traffic on the 210 in Arcadia.

They pulled into the lot at their motel in Ontario as close as they could to their room. It took three trips to unload all the bags full of shoes. Next task was to dispose of the car. They carefully went through the glove box, console, cup holders, door pockets to remove anything that could tie them to the car. A receipt from gas station with a time stamp could lead to security cam video and who knew what else. Better to take five minutes and be sure.

Jake drove his truck and Martin the RAV 4. They drove around for a while. Martin picked a side street about a mile from the strip with the car dealers where they bought it. It was one street back from the main strip in front of an apartment building. There was a middle school a block away. Some kid would spot it, boost it, and have fun for a while.

Martin hopped into Jake's truck and said, "Much nicer in here than that piece of crap. Glad to be rid of it."

Jake said, "Yep. Let's get out of here."

The Handoff

It was midafternoon by the time Jake and Martin arrived back at the motel in Ontario after abandoning the Rav 4. They were exhausted after the excitement of the early morning and the long drive. They decided to have dinner and spend the night there rather than immediately get back on the road to Las Vegas. Martin took a shower and Jake texted Austin to let him know the job was done. He texted "Job done. No problems. Be ready to meet tomorrow evening."

Austin texted back that he was relieved and asked where and when. Jake texted, "I'll let you know where tomorrow".

After Martin was out of the shower and dressed, Jake asked him if he had a place in mind to trade the shoes for the flash drive.

Martin said, "I have some ideas. I want a place that's out in the open where we can see who drives up. Preferably one that doesn't have too many security cameras. Also, I'd like for it to have good freeway access in case there's trouble and we have to get away. I was thinking about one of the big outdoor parking lots like at the Target or TJ Maxx on Flamingo. At the edge of the lot where there will be fewer cars."

Jake said, "Are you expecting trouble?"

Martin said, "Not really, but you never know. I don't expect Austin to try anything, but he might have told someone."

Jake said, "Yeah. Better to be safe. Traffic can get bad around Flamingo. How about the outlet mall south of the airport? It has good access to I-15 and 215. It also doesn't get caught up in the strip traffic."

Martin said, "I haven't been there. Let me look it up online. Sounds promising."

Martin looked it up and agreed they'd tell Austin to meet them in the northwest corner. Martin said, "You can text him from the road tomorrow."

+++

After getting the text from Jake, Austin felt relieved. It would all be over soon. He sent an email to a couple of his best customers letting them know he had some hot new inventory. He'd give them the details in a day or two.

He closed up the shop at 7pm and drove home. He was mentally spending the money that he was going to make selling the shoes. He noticed two motorcycles in his rearview mirrors. One of them kinda looked like Guillermo.

As he pulled his car into the garage, the two bikers pulled into his driveway. Austin got out of his car and walked to the bikers. It was Guillermo and one of the other Satans he had seen at the bar. The big bald guy. Austin said, "Hey guys, how are you doing?"

Bill said, "We're ok. Why don't you invite us in. We have some things to talk about."

Austin said, "Well, I wasn't expecting company, but come on in." The three went through the garage and into Austin's house. Austin dropped his car keys on the built-in telephone desk. There wasn't any good place to sit except the folding chairs around the card table. The card table and chairs hadn't moved from where they were the week before. Austin said, "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink? All I have is beer or water."

Bill pulled out a folding chair and sat down. He said, "We're good". The big guy didn't say anything and remained standing.

Austin took one of the other chairs and sat down.

Bill said, "We've been thinking over your business proposition and have another idea. You help us out and everything will end up the same for you. If not, there could be trouble."

Austin gulped, "Okay..."

Bill said, "You tell us how the transfer takes place and we'll be there to take the memory stick and this guy Jake and his partner. They can't be allowed to do business in our territory without paying us a tax. We'll be reasonable with them."

Austin said, "I don't know how the transfer will go down. I just got a text from Jake that it would be sometime tomorrow"

Bill smiled, "They'll tell you tomorrow and then you'll call me. Don't worry we'll be watching you. If you rat us out we'll know it. For insurance, we'll take the flash drive with the bitcoin with us. "

Austin said, "The flash drive is in a cash box in my spare bedroom. I'll get it. "

Bill said, "In a minute. Why don't you tell me you know about these two guys. What was it Jake and Frank?"

Austin said, "Yeah. That's their names. I don't know their last names. I met Jake a year or so ago at a party. He was working for a weed grower in Northern California. He kind of looks like a young Willie Nelson, with long braids and a cowboy hat. The other guy, Frank, I don't know at all. He doesn't say much and he's mean. He's about 6 ft tall and medium build. Brown hair and maybe 30 years old. I don't know how else to describe him."

Bill said, "Ok. Go get the flash drive now."

The big guy followed Austin as he went to retrieve it. Austin picked up his keys from the desk and went to the spare bedroom. The flash drive was in a grey metal cashbox in the top cardboard box in the first stack of boxes. Austin took the cashbox out of the cardboard box so he could open it. He took his key and started to open the fireproof box. He kept some important papers and now the flash drive along with his 380 Smith and Wesson pistol in the cashbox. As he opened the lid, the big Satan saw the pistol and clouted him across the side of his head. Austin fell on top of the next stack of boxes. The Satan palmed the gun, put the cashbox under his arm and dragged Austin by the arm back down the hallway to the dining room.

The big Satan finally spoke, "This asshole has a cute little gun" and handed it to Bill. He pushed the coffee can of chips out of the way and put the cashbox down.

Bill chuckled, ejected the clip and cleared S&Ws chamber. He put it down on the table. Bill said, "What, you were going to plink us?"

Austin cried, "You hurt me. I wasn't getting the gun. Honest! Its just where I keep it locked up. There. Take the flash drive. It won't do you any good. It's encrypted and I don't know the password"

Bill said, "We'll check on that. I prefer to hold it anyway. Call me as soon as you know when and where you get the goods. I'll give you back the flash drive before you meet with them. See you tomorrow."

Austin said, "Guillermo, we used to be friends. Why are you doing this to me?"

Bill said, "We're not in high school anymore. I have obligations to my brothers in the Satans. When you came to me asking for money, my boss had the idea to rip off the thieves. He wanted me to kidnap you and torture you for the password. I told him that I believed you when you said you didn't have it. If it wasn't for me you'd be spending the week locked up in our clubhouse. I stood up for you to make sure you don't get hurt. You'll still get the sneakers and pay back whoever you borrowed from. Jake and Frank will pay us our tax. If they refuse, they will be just two more holes in the desert. No matter what, it won't come back to you. "

Bill and the big Satan left through the garage.

+++

Jake and Martin checked out after a leisurely breakfast. They were in no hurry to sit in the car again for another four-hour drive. They lugged the ten large duffels full of shoe boxes into the back of Jake's truck and locked down the covers. Then they hit the road.

They drove up I-15 through Victorville and hit some construction traffic around Barstow. Miles and miles of dead straight desert freeway. Martin mostly dozed while Jake drove. The hit a bump which woke Martin up for a minute. Next exit, Zzyzx Rd. If this wasn't the middle of nowhere, it was close by. He went back to sleep.

Martin woke for good as Jake pulled off the highway at Jean on his way up to Martin's place. He directed Jake off the highway to the gravel road that lead to Martin's mine site. After bumping around up the gravel road, they got to Martin's place.

Martin got out and stretched. He got his bag and car keys out of Jakes truck. He said to Jake, "You won't have cell coverage until you get back to the interstate. When you get coverage, text Austin and tell him to meet us at 6:15. It will give me a chance to get there early to keep an eye on the place. You show up on time and I'll appear when I see you and Austin. I'll help you two lug the duffles into his Yukon. Sound good?"

Jake agreed. He was tired of driving so he walked around and stretched his legs.

Martin went over to his truck and got his Glock 17 out of the tire jack compartment. He double checked that the magazine was full and racked the slide to load it. The Glock famously didn't have a manual safety to bother with. His holster had a clip that would hold it secure to his pants at the small of his back.

Jake said, "Is that really necessary? Austin isn't going to rip us off."

Martin said, "Agreed. He doesn't have the balls. But you can't be too careful. Someone else might try."

Jake said, "Are you leaving town right after?"

Martin replied, "No. I don't think I can manage to get a flight out. I'll spend the night here. I'm sick of motels. What about you?"

Jake said, "I'm sick of motels too, but I'm even more sick of driving. I'm going to spend tonight and maybe tomorrow night in a nice casino hotel. I'll see how I feel tomorrow. I am not looking forward to driving back up to Northern California again. I could use a day by the pool before I make the trek home. In fact, I think I'm going to take off now try to get a room before we meet with Austin. Don't worry, the goods will stay locked up tight."

Martin said, "No problem. I'll see you at outlet mall parking lot. 6:15 work for you?"

Jake said, "Yep, I'll text Austin from the gas station before I get on I-15. See you." At that, Jake got back in his truck and drove down the gravel road away from Martin's mine. He stopped at the truck stop/gas station at the interstate and texted Austin with the time and place to swap the shoes for the memory stick.

+++

Austin got the text and immediately called Bill. He told him, "I'm supposed to meet them in the north west parking lot at the Outlet Mall south of the airport at 6:15."

Bill said, "I'll be over to your store in 20 minutes with the memory stick. I can fill you in on the plan there. By the way, you were right. Our guy couldn't crack the memory stick. It's locked up tight"

A little later, Austin heard the rumbling of two Harleys arrive. Bill and the big Satan from the other evening came in the front door. This time, Bill introduced the other guy. He said, "Austin, you've met Steve. The three of us will be working together. "

Austin said, "Nice to see you again, Steve"

Steve glared at him and didn't say anything.

Bill said, "Ok. Here's the plan. You take your Yukon out to meet with Jake and his buddy like everything's fine. Steve will be crouched down in the cargo area in the back. When you open the lift gate to load in the shoes, he'll surprise them. He'll get them into your truck and you'll drive to the clubhouse."

Austin stuttered, "Okay"

Bill said, "Do you have any questions?"

Austin said, "Not really. I just never did anything like this before. I'll try."

Bill said, "It will be easy. You'll be fine. I have to run and take care of something else. Steve will stay here with you. Oh. You'll need this."

Bill handed Austin the flash drive and left the store. Austin heard his bike roar off. Steve sat in one of the chairs that Austin had for customers to try on shoes while Austin went into his office. He tried to post some of the inventory he was about to acquire in his online store. It took him forever to do anything. He kept making mistakes.

Austin didn't know how long it would take to this parking lot and find Jake. Around 5:15 he said to Steve, "I don't know how bad traffic is going to be. Let's get going now, just in case."

Steve got up without saying anything. Austin flipped the Open sign to Closed and locked the front door. Steve followed him out the back door. Austin opened the back lift gate of his Yukon and Steve climbed in. Traffic was lousy on the freeway. He was glad he left early. He'd make it right on time.

+++

Martin was happy to be driving his own truck after driving the crappy Rav 4 and riding in Jakes. He got to the outlet mall an hour early. He drove through the parking lot where the exchange was due to take place. Looked clean. There were acres of empty parking this time of day. He drove his car over to the next lot and parked it close to the shops where there were plenty of other cars. He took his Glock out of the truck's console and clipped it inside his waistband at the small of his back. His untucked t-shirt was long enough to hide it from a casual observer. He was even legal. He had a concealed carry permit under his Frank Wallace identity.

He walked over to the shops and then out across the lot where the exchange would take place. Nothing but empty spots and little scrawny trees in the way of landscaping. On the far corner, there was a gas station and a Starbucks. He could sit in the Starbucks and see who came in. He got a coffee and sat where he could see the lot.

Jake drove up and parked at 6:10. He sat in his truck waiting for Austin. He parked out not that far from the edge of the lot where there were no other cars. His F-150 stuck out and Austin wouldn't be able to miss it.

Austin was right on time too. He saw Jake's truck and parked next to it, a couple of spaces further from the shops. There were no other people in the lot. They were facing away from the coffee shop so Martin could approach from behind. With 50 yards of empty space between the Starbucks and their spot, he couldn't exactly be stealthy, but at least he'd be approaching from behind.

Jake got out of his truck and so did Austin. Martin left the Starbucks and headed to where they parked. Martin could see Jake and Austin chatting and walked over to them. They moved over to the bed of Jake's truck to start unloading the shoes. Austin saw Martin coming and gave him a wave.

Austin said, "Hi, Frank. I guess it went well?"

Martin said, "Let's get this done. The flash drive?"

Austin handed the flash drive to Martin. Martin nodded to Jake. Jake unlocked the bed of his truck and popped open the cover. He reached up into the bed and took out two duffle bags and handed them to Austin. He took out two more and handed them to Martin and finally took out two more for himself. The bags weren't heavy, but they were awkward to carry.

Austin chattered excitedly, "I'm going to make so much money with these sneaks. It's going to be awesome."

The three of them walked the few steps to Austin's Yukon with Martin trailing and off to the side. In the bright sun you couldn't see anything inside behind the tinted windows. Jake stood next to Austin as he put down one of the duffels and opened the lift gate.

Steve sitting in the floor of the cargo area with a pistol. He said, "Freeze you assholes." Jake was directly in front of him. Martin could see into the back from his spot behind and to the right. He was clear of the gun from that angle. He dropped the duffels he was carrying and moved away.

He pulled his Glock from his holster. He didn't have a shot on the dude in the SUV. Now there was a biker on a Harley riding in across the lot. No good. He stepped behind one of the scrawny trees. Not much in the way of cover. He took aim at the guy on the bike. He heard one shot, slightly muffled, from coming inside the SUV. Jake was hit. Before he could get off his own shot, he felt movement from behind him and the lights went out.

+++

Water splashed on Martin's face. He groggily opened his eyes. He had a splitting headache. And was tied to a chair. There was a biker standing in front of him with a plastic bucket. The biker yelled to someone, "Hey, he's coming around."

Martin was in some kind of garage space. It had a concrete floor with oil stains on it. At least it looked like oil. There was a workbench along the wall with a large vise bolted to it and various wrenches hanging on a pegboard. Otherwise the space in front of him was empty. Martin looked up. The garage was a cylindrical shape like one of those World War 2 surplus buildings. He couldn't turn around to see what was behind him.

The garage wasn't air conditioned. Martin didn't know what time it was, it was probably after dark by now. It was still very hot and stuffy in here. There was a wall fifteen or twenty feet in front of him that

went up to the ceiling. The wall had a window, sloppily painted over with a brush, and a door to the side. A biker went through the door. A few minutes later two guys came out.

The first guy was evidently the boss. He was an older guy with a grey crewcut. He walked with a limp and carried a sliver topped walking stick. The second guy was a bruiser. Bald, with a goatee. Not tall, but stout with gorilla arms.

The boss-man biker said, "Hi there, Frank. We have some business to take care of and then I can let you go. Southern Nevada is our territory. We provide protection for small businesses, legal or illegal. The fee is twenty percent for a one-time job like yours. We came to an agreement with your man Austin."

Martin said, "Fine. You have an agreement with Austin. You can take your twenty percent out of his end."

The boss said, "Well, that's the problem. I can't exactly take 20% of a bunch of shoes. It would make more sense to take 20% out of the \$1.3 million in bitcoin on this flash drive." He showed Martin the flash drive.

The boss biker continued, "Why don't you tell me the password and I'll take my two hundred and sixty grand and you can be out of here."

Martin said, "What happened to Jake. I saw him get shot."

The boss biker smiled, "Yes, Steve was a little impatient. Jake's still alive but unconscious. The bullet went through him. He's stopped bleeding, mostly. You need to get him a medic. When you give me the password, you can take him. "

He paused for a second and then continued. "We had to get you two out of there. I don't think anyone heard the shot but we didn't want to hang around. Austin's here. He has his sneakers. The only thing left is for you to give me the password, I'll take our cut and you can be on your way."

Martin knew that the password was the only thing leaving him alive. The bikers wanted the money. Once they had it, they'd take all of it and he'd be dead.

Martin said nothing. He couldn't think of anything to say that would make the situation better.

The boss biker said, "I was afraid you'd want to do it the hard way. I could have Steve here beat it out of you. He'd like that. But have a better option. I have a specialist coming in. He's an ex MP who served in Iraq. He knows how to get information out of people like you. You can save yourself a lot of pain if you just tell me now."

The boss said to Steve, "Keep an eye on him. I'll be in the club until Jason gets here. It's too hot out here." Then, he walked through the door, back into the main part of the clubhouse.

A few minutes later the door opened again. This time two bikers came out, carrying Jake. One had his arms and shoulders and the other his feet. They laid him down next to the workbench. Martin could see that he was still breathing. He had a bloody wound in his mid-section. The boss man told the truth, he was still alive and mostly stopped bleeding. He could still be bleeding internally. Whatever the situation, Jake needed a doctor. He wasn't going to last long without attention.

Martin didn't know how long it was going to be until the specialist got there. He had no illusions that he'd be able to stand up to torture. Especially by an expert. He had to find a way out before the torturer got there.

His hands were securely tied together. His legs were tied to the chair legs. It was a sturdy aluminum chair, probably military surplus. There was no way he was getting out without help. Especially with Steve watching him.

There was nothing that he could do but wait. He thought about what resources he had. He lost the Glock in the parking lot before he was brought here. He could see his wallet, cell phone and car keys sitting on the workbench. His pocket knife was probably there too. He could feel that it wasn't in his pocket anymore. His truck was probably still back at the outlet mall. There would be no reason that anyone would have moved it. His laptop and other stuff in his backpack should be still in his truck.

If they got out of there fast, that meant they probably put him and Jake in the back of Austin's SUV and drove him here. If Austin had his shoes, they would have driven Jake's truck over here to complete the transfer. It would have been faster and safer than doing it right in the parking lot after shots were fired.

After what seemed like an hour, Steve left the garage through the door in the wall in front of Martin.

Shortly after Steve left, the door to the clubhouse opened tentatively. Austin stuck his head out and furtively came through the door. He had a beer bottle in his hand. He said, "You're ok! I was worried"

Martin said, "Keep it down, they'll hear you."

Austin said, "Nah, It's too loud in there, with the AC cranked up and the death metal playing they can't hear nothing."

Martin said, "They're going to kill me and Jake just as soon as they torture me for the password"

Austin went pale, "They told me they were going to let you go as soon as you paid their tax! I would have never gone along with them if they were going to kill you."

In the background, Jake stirred and moaned softly.

Martin shook his head, "Don't be naïve. What benefit would they have leaving me and Jake alive and angry. They'll take all the money dump us somewhere."

Austin dropped his head, "I'm so sorry. I never should have talked to Guillermo. He's not guy I used to know."

Martin said, "Stop being sorry. You can help us get out of here."

Austin said, "I'm scared they'll kill me too!"

Martin said, "Suck it up. You got yourself into this mess."

Austin visibly straightened, "Ok. What do you need?"

Martin said, "First, I need information. Where are we? Other than the door you came through, is there another way out of here? How many guys are here? Make it quick, we don't have much time."

Austin said, "We're in the Satan's clubhouse way out on East Vegas Valley Drive. There's a roll up garage door behind you. The door in front goes to the main clubhouse bar area. There are maybe a dozen Satans in the bar right now. The boss guy – I think he's the chapter president – is in his office further back. "

Martin said, "I'm not going to get far by walking, especially carrying Jake. I need wheels."

Austin said, "Jake's truck is parked out front. The keys are sitting on the bar inside. I might be able to get them without anyone paying attention."

Martin said, "Forget that, we'll take your SUV. It's here, right?"

Austin said, "Yes, but I need it when I leave."

Martin said incredulously, "You're staying after I escape? You're nuts."

Austin, "I live here. My parents live here. I have to pretend I'm still with them. I'll get Jake's keys. I can't get the memory stick though."

Martin said, "Fuck the money. I just want out of here. Go get the keys. There's a knife on the bench. Cut the rope before you go."

Austin got Martin's pocket knife and sawed through the rope binding his hands and left Martin to cut the rest off himself. Austin went back inside the main part of the club.

Martin quickly cut his legs free. He looked at the roll up door at the front of the Quonset hut. It wasn't locked. He pushed it up until it was open about five feet. Jake's truck was outside, along with Austin's SUV, another dark F-150 and six or seven bikes. It was fully dark now, and cooler outside than in the hot garage.

He went back and put his wallet and car keys in his pocket. He didn't really need the Frank Wallace ID, but all things being equal didn't want to leave it either. He picked up Jake in a fireman's carry. Jake groaned. He half carried, half dragged him to Jake's truck. He sat him up against the front wheel on the passenger's side. Jake was breathing normally, if a little fast. Maybe he'd be ok.

As he came back inside the door in the garage opened again and Austin came out. He handed him the keys. Austin said, "Go. I heard the guys saying the torture dude is going to be here in a minute. Steve will be coming out to check on you."

Austin scurried back inside.

Martin didn't need a second invitation. He went out, pulled down the rolling door and went out to Jake. He got Jake more or less sitting in the passenger seat, climbed in the driver's side and started the truck. The bikers were going to be totally pissed when they found out he was gone. They'd take it out on Austin. Not much he could do about it.

He dropped the truck in gear and got the hell out of there.

+++

As Martin drove back towards town Jake's eyes fluttered open. "Where the hell am I?", he said.

Martin told him, "Austin's buddies, the Satans motorcycle gang, jumped us. I just barely got away. You got shot."

Jake said, "I noticed that part. What about the money? It would suck to go through all of that for nothing"

Martin said, "I didn't get the memory stick back, but I took your advice and had some insurance"

Jake said, "Insurance?"

Martin grinned, "Remember when made the bitcoin wallet on the flash drive? We did it on my laptop. I made a secret copy. We could have taken that fool Austin's money from him and split without going through with the job."

Jake said, "Damn. An honest thief"

Loose Ends

Jake called the casino where he was staying and told the concierge that he was going to need some medical attention. Martin didn't know how he pulled it off, but somehow he was taken in a wheel chair up to his room and a doctor brought in. Martin managed to slip away to the taxi stand while this was going on.

<<Write this out in detail>>

He took a taxi back to the outlet mall where his truck was still parked. He had one more thing to do before he left town - He had to make sure the Satan's didn't come after him. He figured the Satans would expect him to come back and try to get his money. They could be riding around searching for him, but he didn't think that was likely. Or at least, the head guy might send some of his troops out to find him while keeping the majority of his forces at the clubhouse.

Martin got his backpack out of his truck and walked back over to the Starbucks he was at earlier. He started his laptop in secure mode. There was a guy he knew who on the Dark Web who specialized in "SWATting". This is calling the police and claiming there was a hostage situation. It's a nasty prank to pull on someone. It would be even nastier to do to a motorcycle club that was already on edge. He instant messaged the guy, paid him a small amount of bitcoin, and gave him the address. The guy did the rest. The police would send the SWAT team and take care of Martin's remaining problem.