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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 braid. 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 didn’t like making small talk, but sometimes it was necessary to be sociable. “So, who’s this guy we’re meeting?”

Jake replied, “I met him at a party a couple of years ago while I was working security for the growers. 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’s 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, he put the blame on the Martin, who was the FNG. Martin was fired and blackballed from any mine work in Canada. He fell in with a ring of thieves who needed an explosives expert and eventually ended up with a loose group 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 his hat, a straw cowboy hat with a blue paisley bandanna as a hatband 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 chatting with the bartender. A couple of TVs hung from the bar showing sports highlights. This being Vegas, there were a couple of 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 had a scraggly beard and arms covered in tattoos. His face had a baggy look, like he once was fat but was now was thin.

Jake said, “Austin, this is Martin. We’ve worked together before. 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.”

Martin said, “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 more than 200 pairs. Guys like him just add to their collection. They don’t sell them. So, it’s at least 200. They’re all the top shoes too. I’d say, average of $10K a pair. A couple of million dollars at a minimum.”

Martin nodded. “Let’s say for the moment we stole 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. If you go for it, I’ll find a way to come up with the money. “

Martin said “Ok. Let’s say we do 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 their 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 100 grand off the top for expenses. I hate this haggling shit. Don’t nickel and dime me on this. We have a bunch of other stuff to work out. 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 the mark and we need to work out how the payment works. I need to see the money up front, but don’t expect to be paid until delivery. 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 he’s for real. 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 off Fremont, near yours. Drop me off across the street from Caesars, if you don’t mind, and I’ll text you tomorrow.”

They used Signal for text and burner cell phones for security.

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

Martin said, “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 tribal 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 the Caesars. When he’d arrived from the airport that morning, he took a cab to Caesars and dropped off his backpack. He travelled light. All he had in his backpack was a change of clothes, his Canadian smart phone, his laptop, and a cheap digital camera. The camera itself was just cover for the encrypted SD card where he stored his crypto keys, bitcoin wallet, account numbers, and other important data.

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 an old blue APL shipping container for storage and a bit of indoor shop space. He had a generator when he needed electricity and if he wanted to turn on the lights in the mine. Water was from a large plastic water tank that he paid a guy from Goodsprings to fill from time to time.

He had a Toyota pickup with a camper shell under a tarp. 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 compressor out of the shipping container. He’d be able to get to the gas station off the interstate without too much trouble.

The mine itself was a shaft 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. He went into the gallery and dragged out a larger Rubbermaid tub.

In the tub, he took out a Glock 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 put the clip back in it and put it aside.

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. Martin had stored two more sets of IDs in the box for a rainy day.

Also in the box was four unused prepaid cell phones. He took one and put it aside with 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. He sealed the box back up and put it back into the mine and locked up.