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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 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 didn’t like making small talk, but sometimes it was necessary to be sociable. “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. 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 - short for the Fucking New Guy. 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 arguing with the bartender. A TV hung above each end of the bar showing sports highlights. This being Vegas, there were a 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 worked with before. 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 5-10 shoes worth 500 grand to a million. This is much bigger.”

Martin said, “Give me some 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’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, 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 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, 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 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 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 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 wrapped it back up in the rag and put it aside on the tub’s lid.

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. A Nevada 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. A pocket knife was part of his everyday carry but he left it out today because he didn’t want to lose it to the TSA. 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 pretty trivial to open with these tools. 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 but it wasn’t there.

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 him.

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 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 and 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 if 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 for a fee. It makes the math work much better for us too.”

Jake said, “You got that right.”

Martin continued, “I know someone who I think 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 thumb drive. We encrypt the thumb 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 thumb 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 thumb drive encrypted with a password he doesn’t know. When we deliver the sneakers he gives the thumb drive back to us. We know the password, get the private key, transfer the funds, and be done. “

*<<there’s a hole here – if Martin keylogs the session, he can retrieve the bitcoin without ever delivering the shoes. Also they have to check to see that the money’s there before they go off and do the job. They need the private key for that>>*

Martin said, “Yeah that sounds like it works. What happens if the thumb 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.”

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.

*<<Guillermo, aka Crazy Billy. >>*

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.

Jake got into his current business via the marijuana trade. When he dropped out of community college, he took a trip up to Humboldt County, California to help a friend out with his marijuana farm. Jake found out that he didn’t have the patience to be a farmer. He had the personality more suited for providing security. He never was much into the drug itself, but he loved the lifestyle up in the hills.

He made his living providing security for one of the illicit growers deep in the redwoods. After harvest, he provided security while the weed was in transit to out of town buyers. During one of these trips he took some side jobs that eventually ended up with him meeting Martin.

Now that weed was legal in California, the Humboldt growers were in decline. The former advantages of being way off the main roads, deep in the hills amongst the redwoods flipped to being disadvantages. They couldn’t compete on the basis of price with the larger operations in the flatlands near the highways and the big cities. Sure, there were boutique growers and some stubborn outlaws, but the days of the big outlaw farms was coming to a close.

The grower dude who paid Jake for security had filed for his permits and no longer felt he needed the same level of security. He let Jake still live rent free in a cabin on his property, but no longer paid for his time. He loved living in the misty green forest and stayed. Besides it was almost completely off the grid with none of the pervasive surveillance you got in most of America. It was a good base of operations, but it meant he needed to do more jobs like this one to put cash in his pocket and food on the table.

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.

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. 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 Thursday, 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. 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 before you go. How does 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. We know the password to the USB drive and you don’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 here. 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 can go now.“

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

Satan’s clubhouse is a Quanset hut in an industrial area way out on E Vegas Valley Road. The bar they hang out is in an old frontier themed strip mall on N Nellis . Motorycyles parked on the sidewalk in front of the bar even though there are plenty of car parking spaces. It’s next to a barber shop and a tile store. <<Kracker Boxx Bar>>. Down the street from used car lots and payday loan storefronts, past a depressing RV park.