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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 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 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. 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 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. 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. 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.”

*<<The wrinkle is Martin keylogs the session and 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>>*

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?

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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.

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 viscously 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 it.

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 bartended 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, “Crazy Billy?” He looked at the other Satan and said, “Do you know Crazy Billy’s last name? Conan or something”

Austin said, “My high school friend’s last name is Cooney”

The big guy said, “Yeah. That’s Crazy Billy 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, Billy. He told Billy 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”

Billy 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 Billy 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.

Billy looked up when Austin came in and smiled at him. Austin hadn’t seen Bill for at least four years, maybe five. Billy 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.”

Billy said, “You look the same too. Great to see you again. Do you want a beer?” Austin shook his head. Billy 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”. Billy lead Austin to the booth furthest to the back of the bar. “So, what do you have in mind?”, Billy said.

Austin told Billy 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 and Frank, the guys I’m dealing with, want 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?”

Billy 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 deliver the shoes, I turn the flash drive over to them.”

Billy 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.”

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

Billy 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/Billy 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. 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 $1,105,000*

*$1,529,400 $152,940 $76,470 $229,410 $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 bag, 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.

*<at Jean, they tossed out their old cell phones and switched to new burners, just in case. They talk about Jake getting tired of his girl and he was pretty sure she was getting tired of him. They left on good terms. She was going to take the bus to visit a cousin in New Mexico before heading back to CA. Maybe write about how the Satan’s tried to track Jake by getting Austin’s phone records and looking at the phone numbers. They had to buy 12 large duffle bags at an army surplus store. They figured that 10 would be enough, but bought 12 to be sure. They bought new jeans and new dark colored long sleeve shirts to do the job in. They would toss these clothes out at a gas station when the job was done so there would be less chance of fiber evidence being linked back to them. They bought a well used Toyota Rav 4 from a secondhand dealer. The Rav 4 had 120,000 miles on the clock and Martin suspected it had been rolled back. In the test drive, it pulled to the right at 65mph and the shocks were shot. The tires needed replacing but would last the trip. The paint was faded with the clearcoat mottled and bleached in the sun. It was perfect for their needs. It smelled faintly like dog and a lot like air freshner>*

## The Job

## 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.”

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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?”

Billy 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.”

Billy 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.

Billy 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…”

Billy 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”

Billy 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. “

Billy 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.”

Billy 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 Billy. He pushed the coffee can of chips out of the way and put the cashbox down.

Billy chuckled, ejected the clip and cleared S&Ws chamber. He put it down on the table. Billy 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”

Billy 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?”

Billy 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. “

Billy and the big Satan left through the garage.

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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 duffles 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. He had a nylon and Velcro holster where he could attach to his belt in the small of his back. He put it back in the holster.

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.

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Austin got the text and immediately called Billy. 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.”

Billy 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. Billy and the big Satan from the other evening came in the front door. This time, Billy 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.

Billy 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, “Okkay”

Billy said, “Do you have any questions?”

Austin said, “Not really. I just never did anything like this before. I’ll try.”

Billy 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.”

Billy 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.

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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 behand 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.

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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 to 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. 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 travel bag were 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 has his shoes, they probably drove 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 music playing they can’t hear anything.”

Martin said, “They’re going to kill me and Jake just as soon as they torture me for the password”

Austin was shocked, “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 said, “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.

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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 smiled, “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”

<<I could have Martin SWAT the Satan’s clubhouse, but I think I’ll just end it here.>>