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The Hot Shoe

Peter Quinn

## The Meet

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

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

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

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

Jake replied, “His name is Austin Gilmore. I met him at a party a couple of years ago while I was working security for the growers. He’s got a shop where he buys and sells collector sneakers.”

Martin looked at him “Sneakers? You mean shoes?”

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

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

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

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

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

Martin said, “You know where we’re meeting?”

Jake grabbed his hat, a straw cowboy hat with a blue paisley bandanna as a hatband and said “Yeah, it’s a locals bar not that far from here. My rig’s out front. I’ll drive.”

The bar was a dive. As it was early afternoon on a weekday, it was deserted. There were a couple old guys at the bar chatting with the bartender. A couple of TVs hung from the bar showing sports highlights. This being Vegas, there were a couple of slot machines bolted to the wall. Fortunately, they had the volume down low.

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

Their contact was a had a scraggly beard and arms covered in tattoos. His face had a baggy look, like he once was fat but was now was thin.

Jake said, “Austin, this is the guy I worked with before. We’ve worked together before.”

Martin said, “Hi, I’m Frank. Why don’t you tell us what you have in mind.”

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

Jake said, “Who the fuck is Belkin?”

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

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

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

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

Austin blurted out, “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 worth stealing. Besides the shoes, that is. “

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

Martin said, “Let’s talk about that. How much is the collection worth? How many shoes are there?”

Austin said, “He used to keep a page on Facebook for his shoe collection. He hasn’t updated it in a while, so it might have changed. The page shows he has more than 200 pairs. Guys like him just add to their collection. They don’t sell them. So, it’s at least 200. They’re all high end sneakers too. I’d say, average of $10K a pair.”

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

Austin looked down at his beer. “I figured that much. I’ll find a way to come up with the money. It was easier when we were talking more like 300 grand. It will be harder to get enough for the whole collection, but I’ll do it.“

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 100 grand off the top for expenses. I hate this haggling shit. Don’t nickel and dime me on this. We have a bunch of other stuff to work out. It’s 1.3 mil or no deal.”

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

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

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

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

Martin shrugged, “He’s an amateur, but we knew that. If he can raise the cash, then he’s for real. Let me check him out and you find out what you can about Belkin and his collection. I need to get my cover ID and stuff from my mine and then I’ll check into a motel 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 put 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 not pink. “You bring a girl with you down from Humboldt?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not that firing a gun out here in the boonies was illegal or even that unusual. He had cleaned it before putting it away and didn’t feel the need to test fire it. He put the clip back in it wrapped it back up in the rag and put it aside on the tub’s lid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He plugged the new phone into the USB jack in the truck to charge when he drove back into town. He locked everything up and then started the truck. The battery was weak, but it started on the second try. Martin pulled out a 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 tweaker, 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.

*<<Martin’s thoughts – work into the dialog later - He didn’t figure anyone would get too bent out of shape about stolen shoes. The local Palo Alto cops weren’t a serious threat after the fact. If Belkin had insured the shoes, the insurance company would have the most interest. But he figured it was unlikely.>>*

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 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 send Jake a secure text with his new cell #, and then research Austin Gilmore. He started with a google search, paid for a personal background check, and for a company report 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 $180k left on the mortgage. His payments were up to date.

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 across the street and two stores yards down the block from Austin’s store. It was on a commercial strip between a nail salon and a discount tax prep service. It was busy enough that he could sit there with the engine and air conditioning running without attracting too much attention.

He got there at 10:30am and it was already 95 degrees outside. Austin must have parked and entered via a back door. Or, perhaps he had been there already. Martin didn’t see him pull up and enter, but he did see him open the shades, unlock the front door, and flip the Closed sign to Open right at 11am.

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 and was soon sitting 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.

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.

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 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. 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 100 round box of Winchester 9mm luger ammunition that wasn’t quite full. But no gun.

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. Martin opened the medicine cabinet. Toothbrush, toothpaste. The usual. 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 of 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. But it was peanuts compared to the $1.3 mil he agreed to. There was still something missing.

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.

Next, go to the store and confront Austin and confirm the tax problem. How is he going to come up with 1.3 mill and why go through the trouble if he only owes $40K

Then, meet up with Jake and find out about Belkin.