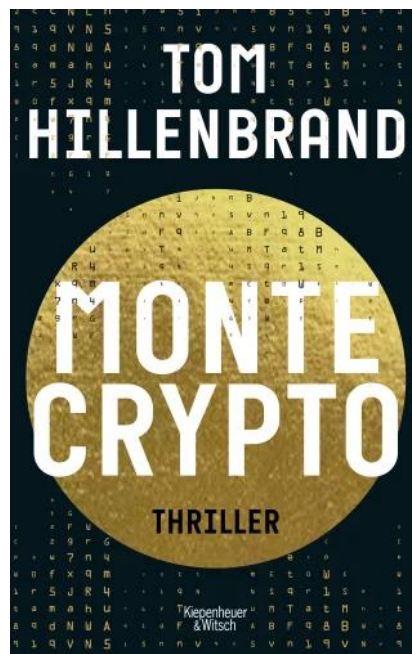


MONTECRYPTO

by Tom Hillenbrand

Sample Translation by Shaun Whiteside

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COOKIE MONSTER

If only this city didn't have such a nasty stench about it. In the summer the air is filled with the smell of exhaust fumes, in the winter it smells of smoke. Dante gets out of his ancient Acura and wrinkles his nose. It's like the aftermath of an Easter bonfire – not that they have those in California. They do, on the other hand, have countless millions of dried-up trees. And each one can hardly wait to go up in flames at last.

Dante walks around the car towards a large villa. The entrance is set some way back from the road and closed off with a double cast-iron gate. He can make out the house that lies behind it. It looks modern, clear lines, big windows. The owner has taste – or enough money to buy some. Judging by the ostentatious cars in the driveway it's more likely the latter.

Dante rings the bell and stares into the fish-eye camera. A man in a tight-fitting suit will appear in the LED display. Perched on his head is one of those narrow-brimmed hats that the English call a trilby. People sometimes assume that the head-covering is a throwback to the ska bands of the eighties or an attempt to introduce some British cool, Carnaby Street vibes, whatever. The truth is that Dante lost his hair prematurely. Compared to him Prince William has a great mass of curly hair. The purpose of the trilby is to protect his shiny pate against the searing Californian sun.

'Hello, who is it?' the voice comes from the intercom beside the bell.

'Good morning. Ed Dante. I've got an appointment.'

The gate opens. Dante walks up the drive, past a very large Cadillac 4 x 4 and a very low-slung Lamborghini. A muscular black man is waiting outside the front door. He is wearing one of those suits two sizes too big that the American seem strangely keen on. The man gestures to him to come in. Dante finds himself in a hallway.

'Can I take anything, sir?'

Dante shakes his head. He hasn't brought a coat. He'd rather hang on to his laptop bag, even though he's sure that the butler, bodyguard or whatever he is would love to look inside it. In any case the man is studying him as if he were looking for something. When Dante works out what, he shakes his head.

'Sir?' the man says.

Dante holds his jacket open. 'I come unarmed, chief,' he replies. 'I pack no heat.'

'But you do have a phone?'

'Oh, yeah.'

'Then could I have it for a moment, sir?'

Dante bares his teeth.

'It contains confidential information. I'm not just going to let you have my...'

The man in the suit smiles and makes a reassuring gesture. He takes something from the inside pocket of his jacket. It's a sheet of small black stickers.

‘You can keep your phone. But I must ask you to cover over the cameras. A security measure.’

‘Do you think I’m going to take pictures and sell them on to TMZ or Variety? It’s my...’

‘I’m sure you won’t, sir. But someone else might.’

Dante reaches for the stickers. After he’s picked them off and stuck them over the lenses of his iPhone the body-butler-guard points to a double door and opens one wing.

‘Ms Martel’s expecting you.’

Dante steps into a living-room that looks like something out of the *Architectural Digest*. Jacqueline Martel is lolling on an Italian leather sofa, more expensive than a small car. She’s wearing a onesie with a hood, shrill blue imitation fur, and a pink cap by Supreme. If the Cookie Monster ate too many hash cookies it would probably look something like this.

He’s not surprised by her outfit. Of course he’s googled her, the net is full of pictures of her. Jacqueline Martel alias Ada Swordfire, thirty-one years old, artist. Dante hasn’t quite grasped what kind of art it is that she does. She doesn’t seem to be a musician or an actress, at least not in the traditional sense. Martel’s speciality is costumes, she dresses up as figures from comics or computer games. Dante knew people did things like that. What was new to him was that you could make money out of it. His brief bit of web research taught him that Martel has about two million followers, on YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, whatever.

Before the previous day’s phone-call and his googling he had never heard of Ada Swordfire, nerd girl extraordinaire. He did, on the other hand, know about Martel’s brother. Gregory Hollister, peace to his extremely valuable ashes, is the real reason for Dante’s visit.

Cookie Monster nods to him from the sofa. Dante walks up to Ms Martel, Ms Swordfire, whoever, and shakes her hand.

'Good morning, ma'am.'

'Morning, Mr Dante. Please call me Jackie.'

'Ed.'

He joins her on the sofa. He's able to do that quite easily, without being intrusive. Not only is the sofa more expensive than a car, it's also almost twice as long.

'Coffee, tea, Red Bull?'

Dante asks for a tea, and Martel a dirty lemon, whatever that might be. The servant waiting by the door, whom his potential client calls Marcus, goes off and tends to things. From among the piles of magazines on the coffee table (Wired, Tattoo, Popular Mechanics) Martel fishes out a vaporiser. Without saying a word she takes a few drags. The room fills with the smell of pineapple.

The drinks arrive. Dante sips at his tea and studies Jackie Martel. She doesn't look like her brother. Perhaps that's because she's only his half-sister, different fathers. He notices that the mint-coloured hair poking out from under Martel's cap matches the colour of the curtains.

'My condolences, first of all,' he says.

'Thanks, Ed. We're managing.'

From the little research that he's been able to do on the fly, Martel and Hollister were quite close. They were both single, they both lived alone. Or maybe they didn't: this might be Hollister's villa, but his sister seems to feel quite at home here.

If the two were as close as the tabloids claim, and perhaps lived together in this house in Bel-Air, Jackie Martel must have got over it pretty quickly. After all, it's only been three days ago, yet she seems quite calm.

'The plane was practically new. And Greg was a decent pilot,' she says.

Hollister had been on the way to a conference in Veracruz. The start-up entrepreneur had his own jet, a Cessna Citation X that he used to pilot himself. For some still unexplained reason the plane lost altitude over the Gulf of Mexico and plunged into the sea. Presumably Hollister died instantly. Of the Cessna, only fragments were found, and of the pilot not even those. The authorities considered foul play, or murder to put it more bluntly, was unlikely.

‘You know what kind of private detective I am, Jackie?’

‘I think so.’

‘Then it’s not really about the circumstances surrounding your brother’s death, is it?’

She presses her eyelids together, presumably to blink the tears away. But Dante isn’t entirely sure about that, because Jackie Martel has brought the vaporiser back up to her lips. Her face is swathed in thick billows of smoke.

‘You want to know if I think he was killed.’

‘If that’s what you believe and you’re looking for someone to pursue that hypothesis, then I’m probably not the right person,’ Dante replies.

She takes off her cap and runs her fingers through her hair.

‘No, no, that’s not what I believe. It was an accident, no doubt about it. I’m concerned about his finances. That’s your specialist area, right?’

On Dante’s business card it says ‘Financial forensics’. It’s printed in quite bold letters, but then understatement doesn’t get you a long way in Los Angeles. Forensics usually involves going through credit card statements or copies of invoices to prove that the villains, usually Hollywood assholes of some kind, have defrauded or otherwise cheated Dante’s clients, usually other Hollywood assholes.

'If you want me to go through his books, then I'm your man.
When's the reading of the will? Can I ask if you know what's in it?'

'No idea if he even had such a thing. Doesn't matter, though. Will,
tax declarations and so on, you can probably get your hands on all of that,
but they...'

'Aren't relevant?'

'Right.'

'I don't quite get it. According to my information Mr Hollister's
private fortune was over a hundred million dollars.'

'More than that, I think. A lot more. Given that rates have gone
through the roof over the last few months.'

Dante frowns. 'But the Dow recently...'

'No, Ed. Not stocks and shares. Crypto. I'm talking about
cryptocurrencies. Bitcoins and the like.'

Dante nods. Hollister got rich with a payment app called Juno,
which pretty much all millennials seem to use. Martel's half-brother was
considered a pioneer in the world of digital currencies. In that case it
doesn't seem implausible that he owned large amounts of Bitcoin,
Litecoin, Hotcoin, whatever.

'How much are we talking about?'

'I don't know exactly. A couple of billion perhaps?'

Dante tries to keep a poker face.

'Do you know your way around crypto, Ed?'

'A bit,' he lies

She smiles.

'I don't know much about it either. That was more Greg's thing, not mine. Cryptocurrency is digital, but at the same time it's like cash. Whoever has the codes has the Bitcoin.'

Dante thinks for a moment.

'So the assets we're talking about aren't in a bank account?'

'No. And anyway it's possible to hack digital banks too. Greg was a bit paranoid. He was always afraid that someone was going to steal his coins. So,' she exhales a cloud of steam, 'he hid the stuff.'

'Online?' Dante asks, wondering as he does so if it's even possible to hide digital money offline.

'No idea. Only one thing is certain: somewhere there's a huge treasure trove that doesn't appear in Greg's books. I want you to find it for me, Ed.'

Dante thoughtfully strokes his chin. In a former life he worked on Wall Street, and he still glances in the financial press from time to time, even though he hasn't a single share to his name. As a result he knows at least the basic features of the cryptocurrency phenomenon. Ten years ago a guy from Japan invented a digital currency called Bitcoin which manages without a central bank and is apparently impossible to counterfeit. At first not a soul was interested in it. But by now a single Bitcoin is worth several thousand dollars.

The principle was copied several times, and by now there are several digital currencies. A few people invested when the coins were still worth fragments of a cent. At the time a lot of professionals thought those early investors were complete idiots. Perhaps they were, but then again they're now rich complete idiots.

'What are you thinking about, Ed?'

'Why you asked me, for example. I'm the wrong side of forty, Jackie. I know my way around computers a bit. But cryptographic

procedures, presumably data that are encrypted a thousand times over – don't you really need a hacker?'

Jackie Martel unscrews her puffer-stick and brings out a small case. It contains matt black pods. They're fixed to the case with rubber bands like cartridges to a hunting jacket. She chooses one. A moment later steam is drifting through the living-room again. This time it smells of peach.

'You found the Sondberg fortune, didn't you?'

'That's true,' Dante answers.

'No one knew where the old fool had stored it all away – or that he'd stored anything away. Right?'

Dante shrugs.

'His foundation lacked cash assets, for years. It wasn't hard to find out if you knew how to read a balance sheet. But that was something else.'

'Why?' she asks.

'Because Sondberg was over eighty. The most modern piece of equipment he had on his desk was a Casio calculator. All the clues that needed finding were analogue. Accounts books, keys, files, handwritten notes.'

She smiles.

'You're making yourself sound even more like the man for the job. Although I don't quite get why you're being so stand-offish. We haven't even talked about money.'

Dante could tell her that he's essentially an honest joe; that he only takes on jobs when he sees a genuine chance of bringing them successfully to their conclusion; that his hesitation is by no means an attempt to wring more money out of her.

But who would believe that?

‘What,’ he asks, ‘makes you think I’m right for the job?’

‘Finding Sondberg’s money was an analogue treasure hunt, wasn’t it? Chasing clues?’

Dante nods and, against his better judgement, takes another sip from his tea. While Americans have made certain cultural advances where coffee-making is concerned, their tea is still wretched.

‘I have,’ she goes on, ‘little understanding of cryptocurrencies – Bitcoin, Blockchain and so on. But Greg basically helped to invent all that. Do you know what some people on the scene used to call him?’

‘What?’

‘His Hollyness. Because in their eyes he was the crypto-Messiah.’

Dante decides it’s best not to comment.

‘There may be a point on that... on that treasure hunt when you’re going to need a hacker. Then you can happily hire one at my expense. But for now it’s more important for me to have someone who’s capable of finding treasure. And I have a feeling a lot of the things we need to discover about Greg’s crypto-fortune won’t be found in computers.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Greg programmed his first computer game at eleven. At thirteen he built a robot and won the NASA junior prize with it. He was a hobbyist and a hacker. And he was paranoid, as I’ve said. You probably don’t get one without the other. He was well aware that it’s much easier to steal bitcoins than most people are aware. That’s why I think he hid the treasure offline.’

Martel gets to her feet. Pulling a cloud of peach behind her, she walks to a chest of drawers and takes out a small black object. At first Dante thinks it’s another vaporiser, but it’s too small for that. Martel comes

back and sets the object down on the table in front of him. It’s about the size of a zippo lighter, but it has a small monochrome display.

‘This is a secure wallet, a special container for crypto.’

Dante picks up the object. He can see two buttons set into the anodised metal. He presses one of them. The display springs to life.

‘Balance: 5.48 BTC.’

‘As I say, the stuff is like cash,’ Jackie Martel says. ‘Whoever owns the cryptographic key can spend it, hence these special USB sticks. You need a password for the wallet or else you can’t get at it.’

Dante is only half-listening, as he’s doing a calculation at the same time. Presumably the BTC on the display stands for Bitcoin. He doesn’t know exactly what the rate is, but it’s probably somewhere in the region of nine thousand. That means there’s about fifty thousand dollars in the stick.

‘Ed, what I’m getting at: finding Greg’s fortune is going to call for some detective work. Asking people questions, going through files, travelling around. And that’s why I think you’re the right man.’

Suddenly the stick feels very heavy. Dante sets it back down on the table

‘I have a few questions.’

‘So are you going to do it?’

‘First of all I’d like to discuss the terms. I’m to find your late brother’s fortune. I conclude from what you tell me that that digital wealth does not appear in his official list of assets.’ He looks her in the eye. ‘So we’re talking dirty money.’

‘So? Is that a problem for you?’

‘Not for me, but it could be for you. Let’s assume I find the money and also the passwords that are presumably needed to get at it. What if the stuff’s in the Bahamas or somewhere?’

‘You mean you don’t want to smuggle it into the United States for me.’

‘That’s right. You get a lot of jail for that kind of thing.’

‘Then just tell me where it is. You don’t need to worry about the rest of it.’

‘Ok, Jackie. One more thing. Why do you actually call it “treasure”? Because it sounds better?’

‘Better than what?’

‘Better than tax avoidance, accounting fraud, money laundering.’

She screws up her nose.

‘Because that’s what Greg called it. He didn’t tell me any details. But when he was stoned he’d sometimes talk about it.’ She leans forward, opens her eyes wide, folds her arms awkwardly and then exclaims in a throaty voice. ‘Myyyy preciousss!’

‘He imitated Gollum? From...’

‘Lord of the Rings, yes,’ she says.

‘But presumably not as well as you did.’

‘Charming, thank you. Compliment of the day.’

Dante is quite serious. Jackie Martel is a gifted actor, and he makes a mental note to that effect.

‘Ok fine,’ Dante says, ‘It’s agreed. I’ll look for your digital crock of gold. Should we discuss the fee?’

‘You could have a share, let’s say two percent of the whole sum.’

Dante shakes his head.

‘Sorry, Jackie. Cash talks.’

‘Crypto is cash.’

‘Cash with a highly unstable value and in this case also dirty money that might be abroad – and that I may never find. Just pay me my normal rate.’

‘How much would that be?’

‘Seven hundred and fifty a day,’ Dante says. ‘A success fee at the end: twenty-five. And expenses.’

‘Ok. But you only get the success fee when I’m holding the treasure in my hands.’

‘Done.’

They stand up. Jackie Martel walks over to the chest of drawers again and comes back with a patent key.

‘This is for his study. I don’t think you’ll find much in there, but I’m sure you want to see it.’

Dante nods. Jackie Martel walks along ahead of him, down a corridor and up a flight of stairs. She stops outside a door and puts the key in the lock.

‘I took the liberty,’ she says, ‘of leaving a few things out.’

Dante steps inside Gregory Hollister’s office. It doesn’t look as if the guy spent much time in there. The desk, the leather office chair and the shelves look like they come out of a catalogue, all the surfaces are clean as a whistle. There is no paper lying around, and there’s even a dearth of files. There’s a black-and-white photograph on the wall. It shows a slightly younger Hollister standing in front of a brutalist concrete building. Hanging in the background is a banner with the inscription ‘Pyongyang International Film Festival’.

On a side table there are two printouts and a USB stick in psychedelic colours. The printouts contain names and addresses. Dante raises an eyebrow.

'A few contacts I've thrown together for you. Royce Thurstow, Greg's lawyer. And someone at Juno, his former company.'

'What about his personal assistant?'

'He didn't have one. Greg always said secretaries were for softies.'

'Aha. And on the hippie stick?'

'His last three tax declarations. There are older ones too,' she points to one of the cabinets, 'in case you need them.'

'The last three should be enough for now, thanks,' he replies.

'And then there's another key for his beach house down in Zuma.'

'Did he go there a lot?'

She nods mutely, staring at a wall.

'Was it a kind of weekend refuge or...'

'A man cave,' she says.

Man cave – a woman-free zone, where a man can still be a man. In his mind's eye Dante sees untidy rooms full of pin-up posters, star-wars space-ships dangle from the ceiling, there are half-smoked joints and empty pizza cartons lying about.

She holds out a keyring. He takes it and puts it in his pocket.

'Ok,' she says, 'I've got to go now. I'm doing a show in San Diego tonight. Take a look around, even downstairs if you want to. Marcus is at your service if you need anything.'

Dante thanks her. She holds out her hand and says goodbye. She is already halfway out of the door when she turns round again. In her right hand she is holding the Bitcoin wallet from the living-room. Before he can say anything she throws him the stick. Dante catches it.

'I thought we'd agreed on hard dollars,' he says.

'Sure, but for the sake of security. When you're dealing with crypto you ought to have some, don't you think?'

'But this is... fifty thousand dollars. That's crazy.'

'It's fine,' she replies.

'At least I should give you a receipt.'

'I don't need one. By the way, the password's Pussypower666. So, Ed?'

'Yes?'

'Don't spend it all at once,' Jackie Martel says. Then she's gone.

ARMENIAN BREAKFAST

Two hours later Dante's sitting in his café. Of course it isn't really his, but he does enjoy certain privileges there. He goes there every day, after all. In old films private detectives like Sam Spade always had offices where they could enjoy a cigarette as they waited for mysterious blondes to come tottering in and asking for help in smoky voices. Dante hasn't got an office. And Sam Spade wouldn't have had one if iPads and Wi-Fi had been invented in those days.

The café is called Ararat, and it's on the stretch of Sunset Boulevard that runs through Little Armenia. The place is usually empty except at lunchtime, which suits Dante. He's reached certain agreements with the owner. Dante's allowed to use the non-public Wi-Fi, and gets Yorkshire tea, which is kept specially for him.

He goes through his notes on the iPad. The search of Hollister's office drew a blank. He hadn't expected anything else. No one keeps secrets in his office. Admittedly he has the stick with the financial documents on it, but he already guesses that those will prove to be worthless. With any luck the interviews he's setting up will bring more to light. He's already written to Hollister's lawyer Royce Thurstow. And then there's Hollister's former company Juno. The latter is quite a big fish. How

big? According to Google Finance Juno has a stock market value of two hundred and fifty billion dollars, with an annual turnover of about fifteen billion – so a pretty major-sized fish. Greg Hollister was Juno’s founder, head of technology and CEO. In 2017 he resigned from all his positions and left the company. He didn’t even keep a seat on the board.

Dante orders another Yorkshire tea. As he waits for it, he takes a look at Juno’s shareholder structure. Normally you would have expected Hollister to hang on to a healthy chunk of shares, like Zuckerberg at Facebook or Gates at Microsoft. But he’s not listed in the database of investors. Dante finds a brief Reuters report from June 2017 according to which Hollister sold the lot all at once.

He shakes his head. Hollister was, from everything he’s learned in the meantime, one of those freaks who invested in Bitcoin very early on and became millionaires as a result. It was only after Hollister’s departure that the shares really took off. If he’d held on to his securities he would have been even richer.

Dante sets his iPad down and looks out at the boulevard. It looks like almost all the boulevards in Los Angeles. If the city was dissected into its individual parts overnight and reassembled so that all the main streets and highway access roads, all the branches of Starbucks, 7-Eleven and In-N-Out were in different places – would anyone notice? Probably not.

When he crosses his legs he feels something sharp pressing into his groin. It’s the fifty-thousand-dollar stick in his trouser pocket. Nobody should be carrying that amount of money around with them, even if it’s in a digital Mickey-Mouse currency. Martel assured him that this so-called secure wallet was bomb-proof because it was password-protected and encrypted.

But such protective mechanisms are worthless in the end. When he was still working at the bank, one of the IT people once explained to him that no one was immune to five-dollar decryption: you kidnap the guy with

the password, go to the nearest hardware store and get hold of a monkey wrench for five bucks. Then you whack the guy with it until he comes up with the codes – efficient, cheap, no programming expertise required.

Dante decides to find out more about crypto-currencies. He picks up the iPad again and calls up a summary of the situation: Bitcoin, Bitcoin Cash, Litecoin, Ether, Tether, Feather, Cosmos, Tezos, but no Bezos. It goes on for page after page, with Funcoin, Porncoin and Piratecoin, the Tolkienesque medium of exchange Hobbitcoin and The One Coin, followed by Ultimate Coin and Final Coin.

He closes the page and calls up photographs of Gregory Hollister. With his shoulder-length hair and woollen beanie he looks like an ageing grunge rocker. Hollister has a Mediterranean look about him, a lot of stubble, dark complexion. Dante thinks he remembers reading somewhere that some of his forebears came from Southern Italy. Jacqueline Martel’s half-brother is gaunt, almost anaemic. Dante wonders which of the many idiotic diets that half of the West Coast subject themselves to Hollister might have followed – vegan, keto, warrior? At any rate the desired life-extending effect failed to materialise.

Dante tips a lot of milk and a small amount of sugar into his tea, then sips at the ambrosial brew. Nobody’s going to get at Hollister’s treasure using the five-dollar method. There’s nobody there whose fingers you could whack with a spanner. That means having to find the codes or passwords, which in turn means that they must be hidden away somewhere. But what if Hollister just stored them in his head?

And speaking of heads: Dante needs to find out more about the guy, discover what made him tick, establish his last movements. It’s not going to be easy. Not just because the object of his observation has been fish food for the last three days, but also because he needs the results of the police investigation in order to reconstruct Hollister’s final hours. Some private detectives have good contacts with the LAPD and the FBI. Dante

isn't one of them. As a former denizen of Wall Street, if he has any contacts at all they're with stock market supervisors.

Dante has already assembled a small Hollister file: press articles, blog posts, YouTube videos. But rather than pursuing that project he goes on to Google and enters the words 'Ada Swordfire San Diego'. He doesn't know why he does that. Perhaps to check that she was telling him the truth.

She was. She's holding an autograph session in a shopping centre. And she's also going to be taking part in a panel discussion on the subject female empowerment in manga comics. Dante doesn't really quite get what that's supposed to mean, but the pictures beside Jacqueline Martel's entry are already more interesting. They were taken at a trade fair. In the background he can make out a hall full of stands, peopled mostly by male nerds in Marvel and Star Trek t-shirts. Martel is in the foreground. She's wearing a kind of space-marine armour, very martial but at the same time very sexy, which doesn't make sense. Surely by definition sexy armour means armour with holes in it?

Dante closes the page and turns back to his dossier at last.

Gregory Patrick Hollister, born 1981, grew up in Seattle. Programmed his first computer game at eleven. Dropped out of college at nineteen to found SandWizard.com, an online sandwich-ordering service, with a few friends. Hollister wanted to have the sandwiches prepared automatically, by machines that he had developed specially for the purpose. Dante wonders how such a robot deli could work. The rest of the world appeared to have felt the same. SandWizard declared bankruptcy. Before the sandwich start-up ran out of mayonnaise, however, Hollister and his mates had already sold it to an investor and become very rich.

Over the next few years the newly fledged millionaire dealt mostly in cryptocurrencies. Hollister, known on the hacker scene as Sir Holly, was politically close to the libertarians, the American trend that saw the state as an insatiable monster, taxes as theft, schools as re-education camps and

guns as a human right. He dreamt of a digital currency administered not by a reserve bank but decentralised, on the internet.

Dante can't help chuckling. In his youth he too was a revolutionary, albeit in a different way from Hollister. At the age of seventeen he was handing out Socialist Worker, a Leninist rag, in the streets of Islington. Or perhaps it was Trotskyist, he can't really remember. If someone had prophesied that he would one day work for a US investment bank, 'Red Ed' would have told him he was off his rocker.

But that was how things were. Something similar seemed to have happened to Hollister. He had gradually shed his idealism. Still, he had hung on to it longer than Dante. In 2012 Hollister invented a digital currency of his own, called Turtlecoin. This Bitcoin 2.0 was supposed to be the last word in crypto. But nobody was interested in Hollister's terrapin zloty and the thing was a failure.

After this disappointment Sir Holly founded a new firm: Juno. Its homonymous payment app is now, according to Dante's information, used by several hundred million people.

A group of men in badly cut suits come into the Ararat. They are the advance guard. In half an hour it will be too full to do any kind of work. Dante shuts down his iPad and takes another two sips of luke-warm tea. He waves to the waitress.

Why is Juno so successful? Perhaps there's a reason for it, but then again perhaps not. It's possible that Hollister's payment app simply showed up at the right time. Or else the marketing was clever. At any rate, Juno turned into a big thing.

The bill comes. Dante gets to his feet and walks over to the till. He wonders whether Hollister's digital treasure chamber really exists. Martel firmly believes in it, but she wouldn't be the first by any means to grossly overestimate the fortune of a wealthy uncle, or in this case a wealthy

brother. After all, Hollister didn't make all that much with Juno, because he got out too soon. And he might simply have spent all his Bitcoin profits.

Dante takes out one of his credit cards and holds it against the reader till it beeps. At the same time his eye falls on a sticker underneath the till, with a list of possible payment methods. He sees the usual suspects, Visa, Amex, Mastercard, then ApplePay, Alipay, Freshpay. He also spots the Juno logo, the stylised profile of a woman's head, white lines on a black background. The image looks classical, like something on an ancient vase. Presumably the name Juno refers to the Roman goddess, the wife of Mars or Jupiter or whoever it was.

Dante steps out into the boulevard. For a moment he is wrapped in the midday heat, and the smell of burning fills his nostrils. He walks over to his Acura, which he has parked in a side street. As Dante walks, he reads his mails through narrowed eyes. Most of it's junk, not actual spam but stuff that he doesn't feel like dealing with, including a message from his cousin Alan in Cardiff, two bills and an irritating former client. Hollister's lawyer hasn't contacted him yet, and neither have the people from Juno.

He gets to his car, baking in the sunlight, and gets in. Dante is about to pull out into the traffic when his phone rings.

'Dante Investigations, Ed Dante speaking.'

'Good morning, Mr Dante. My name is Sheryl Kowalski. I'm calling you on behalf of Ms Yang.'

It takes Dante a second to place the name. Alice Yang is the head of the Juno board. He hadn't expected that his mail would be answered so quickly, or that someone right at the top would get back to him.

'Ah, thanks for returning my call so quickly.'

'I'm Ms Yang's personal assistant. In your mail you said you were calling on behalf of Greg Hollister's sister?'

'Jacqueline Martel, that's correct.'

'Everyone here is very sorry to hear about Mr Hollister's death.'

Dante can't think of a cliché to use as a reply to her platitude, so he says:

'I'm investigating the circumstances of Mr Hollister's passing. It would be very helpful if I could talk to one of his former colleagues.'

'I understand. Is there anything in particular that you'd like to know?'

'No, for now I'm just interested in reconstructing his last days...'

'You know,' Sheryl Kowalski cuts in, 'that he hadn't worked here for some time?'

'Of course. But since Ms Yang knew him well, I hope that she or another of his colleagues might be able to give me some clues.'

'Clues for what, Mr Dante?'

'For his... behaviour over the past few weeks.'

'Was it unusual?'

'It looks that way.'

Dante is improvising like mad. He's not particularly good at that. His ex-wife would say that a number-cruncher like himself lacked the imagination for lying and indeed for everything else. The truth, in fact, is more that Dante doesn't actually like lying. But he can hardly tell this office girl that he's looking for a few billion dollars that the founder of Juno has stashed away somewhere.

'There are indications of certain financial irregularities.'

'In Mr Hollister's private assets? Or do you mean it has something to do with our company?'

‘At this point in time I can’t rule anything out. I’m at a very early stage in my investigations. But to be quite honest it’s something that I’m reluctant to discuss on the telephone.’

‘I understand. Listen, Mr Dante, I’ll make some internal inquiries and get back to you very shortly, ok?’

‘That’s very kind of you, Ms Kowalski. Many thanks.’

She says goodbye and hangs up. Dante turns up the air conditioning and takes off his jacket. He pulls out into Santa Monica Boulevard, heading west. To get to his apartment he would need to be driving in the other direction, but he doesn’t want to go there. So where? He’s not quite sure, and just drives. When Dante is still about ten blocks from the beach it occurs to him. The obvious destination, both geographical and investigative, is Hollister’s man cave. It’s on Zuma Beach, beyond Malibu. Dante goes on driving and joins the Pacific Coast Highway. Apart from the smell of smoke, the murderous traffic, the twinge in his back and the gaping hole in his bank account it’s a glorious day. The sea glitters in the sun, Pacific porn at its finest.

He wonders whether he’s ever driven to Zuma – probably not. The beach is far to the west, some distance beyond that collection of overpriced boutiques and fish stalls called Malibu.

It takes Dante almost an hour to get there. He turns off at the public car park for Zuma Beach and grabs a coke at the beach kiosk. He sits down with it on a low wall and looks out at the sea. A few minutes later he takes out Jacqueline Martel’s piece of paper and enters the address of the man cave into Google Maps.

Since Martel described her brother’s place as a beach house, Dante expected something like the celebrity shacks near Malibu that run straight down to the sea. But as the map reveals to him now, Hollister’s refuge is much more exclusive. To the left of Zuma there’s is a promontory that looms into the Pacific. Point Dume. It’s full of rich green vegetation and

villas. The houses soar a good thirty metres over the sea; the view must be fantastic.

Dante finishes his coke and gets back into the car. A few minutes later he is winding his way up a twisting road. Awaiting him at the top is a confusion of little streets. Hollister's man cave is situated on one of them, the middle of three small houses on this side. He stops and looks across. A garden wall, with a dense collection of cypress trees behind it, obstructs his view of what lies behind it. Hollister's villa has a dark wood double gate.

Dante takes out the keyring that Martel gave him. Buildings of this size usually have an electronic gate opener, but there isn't one hanging from the keyring.

He drives on a little to the next crossroads and parks there. Then he walks back to the gate, key in hand.

MAN CAVE

The very first key fits. Dante steps into the courtyard and shuts the gate behind him. By his estimate the beach house, the man cave, whatever, dates from the thirties. White walls, ochre-coloured clay rooftiles, a hint of Spanish colonial architecture – stylistically it’s what’s known on the West Coast as Mission Revival. In the courtyard there’s a collection of exotic plants in pots. They’re all bursting with health, so presumably ministrant spirits of some kind are taking care of them.

There are also two garages in the courtyard. Dante tries one of the closed gates. They’re locked, but are opened with one of the keys. In the garage on the left Dante finds an elderly Porsche 911, air-cooled, frog-green customised paintwork. The number-plate is MALIBUM. The garage on the right obviously serves as a workshop. Martel said her brother wasn’t just a programmer, but also a tinkerer and a handyman. Even so, Dante is amazed at the scale of his hobby. There are several work benches in the garage, as well as enough tools to maintain the old Porsche next door, or bicycles, boats and model planes. It looks to Dante as if Hollister actually did all of these things. The place is full of clues to half-finished projects: lying about all over the place are dismantled drones, remote controls and

motherboards, as well as a whole heap of other things whose functions he can only guess.

Dante leaves the garage and walks to the front door. He notices a fish-eye lens above the lintel, probably not the only one. He's aware that in such instances some of his colleagues would be careful to avoid being recognised. On the other hand he parked close by, and neighbours would be able to record his registration. The camera may already have recorded him for posterity, not to mention the fingerprints that he's just left on the doorknob. But after all this isn't a murder investigation. Dante isn't looking for a motive. He's looking for bank statements.

The key turns, the door opens. Once again Dante finds himself in a corridor. This one is painted white, there's a sideboard and a few empty coat-hooks, as well as a full-length mirror. He looks at his reflection. He's obviously of Celtic stock, with that almost milky complexion. His clothes only add to his pallor. His jacket and trousers are black, and he's wearing a white t-shirt. All in all quite a monochrome type.

Two doors lead off the corridor. Behind one of them there is a fitness room with a rowing machine, kettle bells and a barbell bench. Dante opts for the other one and finds himself in an enormous living-room glazed on the south side. But rather than the Pacific there are only lowered blinds to be seen. For a moment Dante is worried that a super-techie like Hollister would be bound to have a smart home that can only be operated by a mobile app. But then, next to the door frame, he finds a boring old rocker switch and up go the blinds. The view of the sea is breath-taking. Because the coast bends a little further to the east, Los Angeles is completely out of sight. That in itself pleases Dante almost as much as the sight of the bright-blue Pacific.

He sees an ample sofa corner, a projector and screen, a cocktail bar and a car in the middle of the room. It's a DeLorean DMC. The characteristic wing doors are open.

Dante steps closer to it. He wonders how they managed to get the car down the corridor. The answer is, of course: with money. He walks around the car. It isn't an ordinary DeLorean, but the film version from *Back to the Future*. Plutonium reactor, flux capacitor, time-travel navigator, it's all there.

Dante runs his hand over the unpainted bodywork. He drove a DeLorean once years ago, one of his New York banking colleagues had one. It was a great disappointment. The films make you think it's going to be a nippy sports car, but it's all Hollywood fiddle-faddle. The DeLorean has the appropriate exterior, but inside there's just a scrawny Renault engine and an antiquated two-gear automatic transmission. There are more powerful ride-on lawnmowers. So using the DeLorean as an item of furniture makes perfect sense.

Dante goes on looking around. Hollister plainly had a weakness for this kind of retro gear. Dante sees an old record player and a record collection. A Star Wars toy from the eighties is displayed in a glass case, and in another there are painted fantasy pewter figures – orcs, goblins, wizards. In yet another there are coins. Was Hollister a coin-collector on top of everything else? Some of the coins are very old. Dante identifies Spanish *pesos de ocho*, German Talers, English farthings. Other items, on the other hand, seem to be new. One coin bears the double-stroke B of Bitcoin. Some don't look like anything that was ever used as a means of payment, more like the kind of commemorative coin that are advertised late at night on cable tv.

One shows a woman with a Spartan helmet. The coin rests on a small velvet cushion, leading Dante to conclude that it held particular importance for Hollister. At first he assumes the woman is the goddess Juno and the coin is some kind of promotional joke from Hollister's old firm. But then he spots the inscription on the rim. 'Republic of Minerva' it says, and below that: 'South Pacific Ocean'. There's no denomination, but coordinates and a year: 1973.

Dante can't make any sense of it. Next he investigates the bookshelf. It's full of comics, including a lot of manga. Some are pornographic. After flicking through a booklet entitled 'Bondage Faeries', which seems to be a cross between 'The Adventures of Tinkerbell' and 'Fifty Shades of Grey', he turns his attention to two busts on the shelf. One shows a bald man with a piercing gaze and a pince-nez, the other with a full head of hair and deeply relaxed facial features. Mahler and Beethoven? Turing and Gates? Tango and Cash? Unfortunately it says nothing on the plinths.

He goes on. Hanging on the back wall is the framed, enlarged cover of a book: *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, presumably the first edition. Dante pulls a face. He's never read *Atlas*, but he knows that it's popular with conservative intellectuals. In her tome Rand preaches a world in which all rules are determined by the economy and the state has no say.

Clearly Greg Hollister was also a fan of Ayn Rand. That's hardly a surprise. According to Dante's experience it's mostly very affluent and successful people who tend to fall for Rand's pseudo-intellectual babble. The author not only preaches laissez-faire capitalism, but also elevates entrepreneurs to a kind of master-race without which civilisation would immediately collapse. This, of course, goes down well with self-appointed masters of the universe.

While it's no more surprising to find Rand in the home of a dyed-in-the-wool capitalist than it would be to find de Sade in an SM fetishist's pad, the picture frame next to it gives Dante pause. It's a pen-and-ink drawing. It shows a man standing with his arms spread. Dante is reminded of da Vinci's Vitruvian man. But this man is missing a head. He holds a dagger and a flaming heart, and there is a death's head level with his privates.

Dante scratches his chin and turns towards more tangible things. He opens all the drawers and finds a few drugs – grass and some pills, presumably opioids. He walks over to the cocktail bar. It contains few

useful clues, but he's personally interested in it. Dante is a big cocktail fan. Too big, some might say.

Hollister's bar equipment would keep a professional bartender happy. Dante is almost tempted to mix himself a drink. It would have to be something light, a working drink, maybe a cape cod or a mimosa. In the back of his mind he hears his ex-wife grousing about people who start drinking before lunch. He shouldn't really care about Rachel's tirades, ten years after their divorce, but somehow they still rankle. To keep from yielding to the shadow of his ex, he takes a ginger beer out of the fridge, some exotic brand that he's never tried before. With a tumbler full of ice and the gingery soda Dante goes on strolling through the man cave.

There are more framed pictures along the stairs and on the upper floor. Not more Ayn Rand covers this time, thank God, but holiday photographs. At least that's what Dante assumes they are. In the pictures Hollister and his mates are wearing clothes that look as if a Mexican carnival organiser has designed costumes for a remake of Mad Max – brightly coloured feathers, chrome, leather, more feathers.

A salt desert stretches behind the cyberpunk Aztecs. Dante makes out strange vehicles, avant-garde sculptures, scantily dressed girls with dreads and a huge wooden statue. Now he guesses where the photographs were taken at the Burning Man Festival, an annual Woodstock of the tech branch in the Black Rock Desert. The statue in the background, the eponymous Burning Man is set alight at the end of the bacchanal lasting several days.

Dante compares the photographs, looking for recurring faces. A kid with babyish features and native American braids appears several times, along with an older man who looks particularly strange in his Indian Priest from Space outfit. Dante takes snaps of everything with his phone.

Up on the first floor he finds himself a room that at first he takes for another workshop. Studio might be a better term; dozens of small pots

decorated in acrylic paints stand on a desk, as well as a stand with a watchmaker's magnifying glass. Half-painted pewter figures stand around – skeletons, hobbits, dragons. In the middle of the room a large board rests on trestles. It looks like a model railway diorama, without platforms and trains. There's grass, hills, a river. On either side armies are lined up, on the left the hordes of darkness – trolls, orcs, demons. On the right wait the powers of light – elves, angels, humans. Dante looks in some of the boxes on the shelves. They contain still more pewter figures, models of medieval castles and catapult.

He carries on, reaching a room with a desk and a reading chair that must have been Hollister's study. On one of the shelves is a laptop, a MacBook. Dante wonders for a moment whether he should turn it on. But without a password it's not much use to him.

With a sigh Dante sets his glass down and kneels on the floor. Starts creeping over the stone floor. From experience, many people write notes with their passwords on them. Particularly unimaginative contemporaries use post-its and stick them under the desk. Dante doesn't actually believe that Hollister was one of those, but you never know. He looks under the table and the chair, he feels the undersides of the drawers.

When Dante is finished he has nothing to show for it but dusty fingers. Groaning, he straightens. He goes into the bedroom and repeats the procedure. When he finds something under the bed he's almost a bit disappointed. A folded piece of paper peeps out from behind the slatted frame and the mattress. Dante pulls it out and unfolds it. On the piece of paper there's a twelve-digit alphanumeric password including special signs and upper-case letters, as decreed by the gods of IT.

In the study he turns on the computer and enters the password in the log-in window. The mattress code works. Uncomplainingly, the computer reveals the desktop, whose background picture shows a nameless beach. But before Dante can look through the directory, an unornamented window opens. Some text appears.

Last login: Nov 3 11 : 57 : 42 on console

Greg-Hollister's-Macbook-Air-Deux: - hollynew\$

Dante has just enough time read the text before it disappears, to be replaced by a stream of computer gibberish that darts across the window. He is helpless. Is this some kind of security measure? Is the hard disk being erased? Or is this just a system update? Dante tries to click the window away, but the rain of letters has already stopped. In the last line it says ‘Complete’.

Dante clicks on the terminal window and copies the whole data stream on to the notepad. Then he adds it to a word document and stores it. Perhaps later on someone who knows more about IT will be able to tell him what Hollister’s Macbook was doing. Dante takes out a USB stick and copies everything that looks interesting – above all the Excel files.

One thing strikes him: Hollister’s computer does have an email programme. But it’s not set up, there are no messages in the inbox. Presumably this isn’t carelessness, but Hollister being calculatedly secretive. He will take the computer with him, but there’s one thing that he immediately wants to check because it’s often helped him in the past. He opens the web browser and clicks the blank address bar for the pages that Hollister visited most frequently. They include the usual suspects: L.A. Times, Twitter, YouTube, Pornhub, but also some addresses suggesting cryptomania, such as Coinmarket, a platform on which digital currencies can be traded. There is also an entry called ‘Tales from the Crypto’.

The pun is a bit crap, but even so Dante can’t help chuckling. He clicks on it. The page is revealed as a kind of financial blog dealing exclusively with things like Bitcoin and Blockchain.

But Hollister seems also to have been interested in the good old stock exchange. One other frequently accessed page is eToro, a trading platform for shares, loans and currencies. For a moment Dante finds himself hoping that Hollister might still be logged in and he can take a look in his share portfolio. But of course he finds himself confronted with a log-in window.

Dante turns the laptop off and puts it in a rucksack. Shortly afterwards he's back in the living-room and slumps in the passenger seat of the DeLorean.

'Fuck,' he says. Dante is still at the start of his investigations, but he's already managed to plunder Hollister's laptop and his password. That should have put him in a good mood. Instead he feels downcast. The guy was smarter than all that childish decor suggests. Probably his really interesting data aren't on the laptop at all. Dante doesn't set too much store by forthcoming witness statements, particularly those with the lawyer and the boss of Juno. The only professional group with more eel-smooth slimeballs than the world of jurisprudence is the top management level of the big companies. It's unlikely that he's going to get much out of those people. Dante looks through the windscreen and rebukes himself for his defeatism. What he needs is a bit of optimism. What he needs is...

His eye falls on the bar.

A few minutes later he's sitting in a designer armchair next to the projector, with a glass of liquid optimism in his hand. He takes a sip. His sidecar contains a touch too much Cointreau, but there's no one he can blame for that. He takes another sip and looks at the blank silvery-white screen in front of him. What film or series di Hollister watch last? Probably *Game of Thrones* or the extended version of *Lord of the Rings*. He turns to his right and looks for the power switch of the projector. It's only now that it occurs to him that it looks a bit odd. It looks old-fashioned and he...

It's not a film projector. It's a slide projector. Dante sits up in a flash as if his sidecar had contained rocket fuel rather than brandy. He fiddles around with the slide projector. There's an opening on the back and a fold-out carriage into which a tray full of slides could be placed.

An image forms in his mind. He sees one of those seaside piers with an ice-cream parlour and amusement arcades. It's not Santa Monica Pier, which would be obvious, but one of the ones on the English North Sea coast. He knows those resorts from his childhood. Gravelly beach, freezing water, overcooked food. What makes him think about that right now?

After another sip it occurs to him. It's probably the fact that the last slides he saw showed one of those beach holidays that he endured with his parents, sometime in the 1980s – in Eastbourne, the southern English geriatric paradise. Why don't the Inuit have a word for Eastbourne? Because they'd rather leave their old people out in the blizzard.

He probably still has the slides. Yes, they're in some drawer somewhere. Dante dismisses the idea and starts systematically taking Hollister's living-room apart. It's always easier if you know what you're looking for.

He is searching for plastic boxes about twelve inches long and four inches wide. He actually finds one, under the folding top of the coffee table. When he was looking before he mistook it for a video cassette box. There would be room in the box for two slide trays, but there is only one in it. Dante carefully takes it out. It contains about thirty slides.

He puts the tray in the projector and picks up a little remote control. It's impossible to make out all the details; he would have to lower the blinds. But Dante hasn't the patience for that.

The first slide feeds in with a click.

It shows a man on a ski slope.

Dante curses.

‘No one’s interested in your shitty skiing holidays.’

He clicks on. Snowboarding, presumably in Colorado. The pictures look relatively new, which is strange because nobody make slides any more. Hollister was clearly fond of retro-technologies.

Further slides follow, even more snow. His intuition clearly deceived him, or perhaps it was the sidecar. The pictures are unimportant, and yet Dante wants at least to click through them. However the projector is driving him round the bend. Click, click, click – he’d like to go through the slides at a gallop, but analogue technology likes to take its time.

Rak-a-chak a slide feeds in. Rak-a-chak it returns to the tray, which now moves a few centimetres forwards on the carriage. Then comes the next one.

Halfpipe. Après-ski. Hunks in lederhosen. A piece of paper with the word ‘FIRE’ written on it.

Dante pauses. The photograph shows a sheet of lined paper in that poisonous shade of yellow of that American college notepads are made in. Someone has put it sideways, written the word with a felt-tip pen and then taken a photograph. Apart from the sheet of paper and a bit of table-top there’s nothing else to be seen.

Dante presses the button. Rack-a-chak. Rak-a-chack. Rak-a-chak.

SCORPION

It goes on like that.

WATER

UNDER

MOUNTAIN

WITH

WALNUT

SHRIMP

LUXURY

HAIR

MARBLE

INHERITANCE

When he clicks again the screen goes white. The page bearing the word 'INHERITANCE' was the last one. Dante sits there motionless for a moment. Then he raises his glass and drains it in one. He lets the slides run through one more time before getting up and lifting the tray out of the projector. He carefully removes the slides with the words on them, making sure that they stay in sequence. It may be important. He takes two rubber bands from his rucksack and uses them to fix the stack in place.

He packs the slides away in his rucksack, washes the used glasses and checks that everything else look the way it did before. After that Dante leaves the house and walks to the gate. He's about to open it when his phone rings.

'Dante Investigations?'

'Hello, Mr Dante. It's Sheryl Kowalski from Juno again.'

That went quickly. Very quickly. Interesting.

'Mr Dante, I don't know how your diary looks. But perhaps you would have time tomorrow?'

'In principle yes. Where?'

'At our company headquarters if possible.'

Juno's based in San Francisco, where else?

'I can do that. what time?'

'Eleven thirty'

'Great, I'll be there.'

As he's talking to Sheryl Kowalski Dante hears the crunch of tires on sandy ground. A car is approaching, it must be just on the other side of the wall.

'Will there be anyone there apart from Ms Yang? The head of finance, perhaps?' he asks the Juno secretary while looking for a chink in the gate or the wall.

'That's Ms Yang too, because Hugh Blakely, our head of finance, recently left the company and she's temporarily taken over his job. But our head of communication will be there at any rate. And maybe someone else.'

By 'someone', Sheryl Kowalski probably means a lawyer. He would be very surprised if the head of Juno spoke to him without a lawyer present.

Through the small chink between the wings of the gate Dante thinks he can spot something moving.

'Fine, Ms Kowalski. Then I'll be with you early tomorrow.'

They say goodbye and Dante hangs up. He peers again through the chink but can't make anything out. He doesn't much feel like running into somebody's clutches, but he doesn't want to spend the winter in there either. And if he's supposed to be dancing into the offices of Juno tomorrow, fresh as a daisy, he's going to have to take a plane tonight.

He takes a deep breath and opens the gate.

On the other side of the road a woman leans, arms folded, against a Prius. Dante had expected people in FBI jackets. But the women

presumably works neither for the cops nor for the tv news. She's in her mid-thirties, and she's wearing a grey workman's shirt, black jeans and red Vans. Her black hair is short and untidy, shaved at the sides. Her eyes are covered with a pair of Ray-Bans. Tattoos creep out of the short sleeves of her shirt.

Dante ignores her, turns away and shuts the gate. When he turns around again and walks towards the main road, she watches after him. He marches on, running through various options in his head. Apart from policewoman and reporter he can also rule out lawyer, curious neighbour... what other possibilities are there? If anyone had hired hitmen to stop his investigations, they would have turned up in a gang, first of all, and secondly they would have been male. Maybe an ex-girlfriend of Hollister's?

Dante hears a car door slamming shut. Without giving it much thought, he turns on his heel and walks towards the Prius. Because the sun is glaring off the windscreen he can't make out the woman's reaction, but at least she doesn't speed off. He walks over to the passenger door, opens it up and gets in. Skater girl looks at him. She's still hiding behind the Ray-Bans and looks surprised but not frightened.

'Hello,' Dante says.

'Hi,' she replies.

The stereo is on. He knows that guitar riff. It's an old punk song, 'Sonic Reducer' by the Dead Boys. At least that's what Dante thinks at first, before he realises to his disappointment that it's a rap song whose composers have simply ripped off the 'Reducer' riffs.

His disappointment seems to be written on his features.

'Something wrong?'

'The song. Nothing against the... is that the Beastie Boys?'

She nods.

'I like the original better.'

To his surprise she nods again. Who remembers the Dead Boys these days?

'Aren't you too old for that?'

'For punk rock?'

Dante likes punk rock, always has done. He's never stopped listening to the stuff, not even when he was an investment banker. There's a certain contradiction in ruining the world with derivatives and subprime mortgages while listening to 'Kill the Poor' by the Dead Kennedys, but it's probably not the biggest one in his life.

'Too old for the lyrics. Defiant. Childish. It's for kids, not grown men. But you didn't get into my car uninvited to chat to me about punk, did you?'

Dante sees that she's crammed her left hand into her trouser pocket. She's probably clutching a can of pepper spray. He hopes so. When dealing with crazy Americans with their gun fetish, you've always got to be prepared for the worst.

He shakes his head slowly.

'You watched after me with such interest. And I thought you might be,' he suddenly corrects himself to avoid coming across as too pushy, and points at the property, 'here about Hollister.'

'Greg Hollister is dead.'

'No doubt,' Dante replies. 'But my advice is still: leave it.'

'What do you mean?'

'You were wondering how risky it might be to take a look inside. There isn't a soul in the street, after all. And you could get over the wall if you wanted to. But the place is bristling with cameras. That's why I'd be inclined to leave it.'

‘And who are you?’

‘Ed Dante. Private detective.’

‘Who hired you? How did you get hold of the keys?’

‘That’s confidential. I don’t suppose you’ll tell me your name?’

‘Mercy Mondego.’

If you hear a name like that in Britain you’ll think somebody’s making it up. But it’s quite possible in California. The Spanish surname also matches her complexion.

‘And how about telling me your job?’

‘Journalist.’

Certainly not at the *Wall Street Journal*,’ Dante thinks. She takes out a business card and hands it to him. ‘Mercy C. Mondego, editor-in-chief’, it says. And below that: ‘Tales from the Crypto’.

‘Ah, right, that blog,’ Dante says and puts the card in his pocket. ‘I think I’ve heard of it.’

Mercy Mondego has deep-black eyebrows which almost meet in the middle and which stand out even more clearly when she frowns.

‘You’re interested in crypto?’

‘Would that be unusual?’

‘You actually look like a no-coiner.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like someone who doesn’t invest in crypto.’

What she probably means is that Dante looks too much of a fuddy-duddy to know anything about this groovy funky Bitcoin shit.

She takes off her sun-glasses. Big dark eyes look at him.

'Could we talk, I mean about Hollister? All in confidence, of course.'

'I'll think about it. But for now,' Dante opens the door, 'I've got to go. I have an appointment.'

'Might you let me have your card first, Mr Dante?'

'You can google me.'

'Probably not your cell number,' she replies.

'Calls are automatically transferred. Don't get me wrong, but I don't want the LAPD to find my card on you if,' he points to the back seat, 'you get arrested.;

Of course she knows what there is back there, but she still can't help looking. On the seat there are a black balaclava, gloves and a jemmy. Next to them are a crumpled woollen blanket that was presumably spread over the burglary tools only a few minutes before.

'Believe me. It's not worth it.'

She looks at him with a mixture of scorn and mockery.

'Oh, it really might be,' Mercy Mondego says.

'Only if you're not seen. And if there's something interesting in there.'

Dante nods to Mercy Mondego one last time and gest out. Without turning around he walks to his car. He lays the rucksack on the passenger seat and puts his phone in the satnav holder.

'Siri, play "Sonic Reducer" by the Dead Boys.'

The guitar riff sounds again. But this time there's no hip or hop. Instead a man's voice belches:

I don't need anyone

Don't need no mom and dad

Don't need no pretty face

Don't need no human race

I got some news for you

Don't even need you too

Dante starts the car. Mercy Mondego's right, those lyrics are really childish. He turns the radio up and puts his foot on the accelerator.

[END OF SAMPLE]