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Smokin' Hot Cash

by David M. Hamlin

Bart Booker wasn't the most sophisticated drug dealer in his neighborhood – maybe not even on his block – but he knew the lady was a cop the minute she walked in the door.

The sign taped to the storefront door window facing Washington Boulevard featured a small green cross – like the Red Cross only not – said:

Dr. Booker's Medicinal Marijuana

Shake & Vape, Oils & Edibles

M-F 11 AM to 4PM

Members Only – Buzz for Entry

If he had any doubts, they vanished when the woman flipped her jacket open to reveal the badge clipped to her belt next to a holstered silver revolver. She looked stern, she oozed authority and control and, although she wasn't notably large, she radiated strength. He quickly evaluated the reasons she might be in his shop, thinking, right off the bat, no way she's a new customer. She was carrying a battered brief case and somehow that eased his tension. Business, not crime, he figured.

Bart Booker had been an itinerate botany teacher, driving from one community college to another several days a week lecturing disinterested students, half of whom were gardeners trying to get a leg up on the thousands of competitors driving pick-ups all over greater L.A. His wife Brenda worked as a temp, usually catching assignments three, four days a week; their budget

was slim but not scary. He had liked his life when he didn't focus on the fact that all he ever wanted to do was nurture plants; when he thought about that, it made him miserable.

When California legalized medical marijuana, Bart Booker moved in a hurry. He spent most of their meager savings on the equipment necessary to create a grow room in the garage behind their rented Craftsman bungalow. He taught for one more semester while his crop matured and he established a rotating system for planting and harvesting. By the time the state's system for purchasing medicinal pot required took full effect, smart entrepreneurs were ready to go. Dozens of small shops, each with a steady clientele who "joined" a collective, allowed the proprietors to increase the volume they could produce and sell. When they opened their doors, Bart had product for them.

"Wicked fine weed," said the first co-op owner Bart contacted.

"Best grow I've sampled since we opened," said the next. "You got the touch, buddy."

Soon enough, pot stores all over L.A. were calling him and Bart had more demand than he had room to grow. He and Brenda discussed moving from the garage to a more expansive space until Brenda said, "Why don't we open our own shop?"

They rented a storefront, walking distance from their bungalow on all but the most inclement days. Brenda tidied the place up some and they spent a little on some display cases. Using black out curtains, low benches and a jerry-rigged ventilation system, Bart created a grow space in the back of the shop which greatly expanded his output. At the same time, he painstakingly completed every single form the state and the City of L.A. required and got one of his college pals – a guy who'd been in law school while Booker was earning his Ph.D. – to check and double check all of it.

His L.A. business license, his approved state application, his membership records and reporting system were all in place when the cop entered the shop, so Bart wasn't worried; perplexed, perhaps, but not worried.

"Hello, Officer. How can I help you?"

"It's Detective, sir. Detective Sandy Swift. I'm with LAPD's narcotics division."

"No hard drugs here, ma'am," said Bart, smiling weakly, "just pot, although technically, I guess the Federal government calls it --."

"I know, I know," she said. "I'm part of a Task Force, we're reaching out to all the collectives in town. It's part education, part enforcement. Do you have some time to talk with me?"

Bart smiled again, opening his arms, palms out, gesturing to the empty room.

"No need to take a number," he said.

"Good. Alright, then, let's start with the paperwork. I need to see your certificate, forms, DBA. You have employees?"

"Just me. And my wife, but she doesn't work here, she just bakes. All our forms, they're in a file in the back room," he said, "I'm happy to get them for you."

She didn't respond. Instead, she slowly surveyed the entire shop. She looked at the display case holding pipes, hookahs, roach clips, a collection of inexpensive plastic lighters and cardboard displays holding rolling papers and air fresheners. She shifted her gaze to the other case, examining the vapor paraphernalia, the small bottles containing various oils and creams and, sitting on a tilted display rack, six-packs of chocolate chip and "French Vanilla" cookies and a tray holding about two dozen brownies, one row slightly depleted.

Detective Swift walked to the front door and carefully examined its three locks.

“You use outside security? A monitoring service, a private patrol outfit?”

“No, ma’am. Not yet, anyhow.”

She frowned. “Hmmm.”

“How about a security system, door alarms, motion sensors, like that?”

“No.”

“No security cameras.”

“Not yet,” said Bart. “We’ve only been here for a few months. Cameras are next on our list but we’re still building our clientele and we’re being careful with our cash until we can see how it goes.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’ll get the paperwork, okay?”

“I’ll come with you,” she said and she marched right past him and led him into the back room. There were two chairs in front of a desk and one behind it, but she by-passed them and went to the back door.

“This open on the alley?”

“Yes, but, as you can see, we’ve got a dead bolt and I put in those brackets holding that metal two-by-four. We never use that door.”

“Hmmm.”

There were two filing cabinets in the room and three rows of shelves on either side of them. The shelves held a sizable collection of tall glass jars, bigger than Mason jars with similar air-tight seals. They were all carefully labeled, August Sativa, April Indica, Booker Blend Shake and so on. Swift examined the canisters carefully and opened one to sniff it; she glanced at his doctorate degree, propped up on a corner of the lowest shelf, and nodded.

Then she did a thorough survey of the room and pulled back the black curtain surrounding the grow area to examine the benches, lighting, fans and the sizable number of plants in various stages of maturity.

“You don’t have a safe. No cameras back here, either.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Hmmm. We’ll need to talk about that.”

“Okay.”

Booker moved to one of the filing cabinets and extracted a folder from it.

“Here’s everything,” he said, “State, City, business license, the current list of co-op members – names, addresses, driver’s license copies.”

She took the file and rifled through the papers in it; Bart was surprised that she didn’t give the paperwork the same scrutiny she’d given the structure and its facilities.

“Okay,” said Detective Swift, “that’s the enforcement part. Let’s get to the education piece.”

While Bart took the chair behind the desk, Sandy Swift threw one leg over the other, reached down and opened the briefcase, pulled out a note pad, a pen and an official looking piece of paper. Bart couldn’t read it, but it looked like it contained a check list.

“So, here’s the deal, Dr. Booker. You’re way too vulnerable here. You don’t have a security firm, no alarms, you don’t have cameras. The back door’s good, strong and solid, it’d take a battering ram to bust through that metal pipe you got there. But any fool with a wrench can bust through the window in the front door and throw those locks lickety-split.”

“Well,” said Bart. She held up a hand to quiet him.

“And then there’s the cash,” she said.

“Cash?”

“Cash. One reason the Department created the Task Force, we figure all these new shops are that much more fodder for the bad guys. I blame the Feds.”

“The Feds? They don’t have anything to do with this.” He nodded to the jars and then the front room.

“Oh, yes they do,” she said, “and it’s not a good thing.”

“I don’t understand,” said Bart.

“I bet you do, Doc. You just haven’t thought about it.”

“Thought about what?”

“You know you can’t open a bank account, right?”

“No, I didn’t know that. I mean, we’ve been running the shop through our personal account, but we’re planning to take that DBA form in and open a business account, too.”

“Can’t do it.”

“We can’t?”

“Nope. Thing is, if the Feds say pot is illegal – doesn’t matter what California says – they’re gonna enforce their law. That makes shops that are legit here, like this one, subject to Federal prosecution. They bust you, they can seize your assets, shut you down.”

“But there are shops all over town,” said Booker. “I’ve never heard of a single one having trouble with the Feds.”

“So far,” said Swift, smiling just a little. “But that’s not really the point I’m making here. Point is, banks are way too skittish about getting tied up with drug money, so if the Feds say pot shops are illegal, the banks just say no to pot shops. You can’t open an account anywhere if you

tell them the business you're in and if you don't tell 'em, you're engaged in a conspiracy to conceal illegal profits."

"I had no idea," said Booker. "I mean, it's true our members pay in cash – we don't take checks and we're not set up for credit cards yet – but when we make deposits at our bank, nobody says anything."

"How much?"

"What?"

"How much do you deposit? There's another problem there, you know."

"There is?"

"You deposit more than ten grand in cash, the bank has to record and report it. You walking in with that much cash?"

"Not yet," said Booker, frowning. "Some weeks, it's maybe six, seven grand, once we put in nine and change. We're doing quite well, all in all."

Swift chuckled.

"Chump change," she said. "I was in that big operation over on Pico yesterday, the one a couple blocks west of Roscoe's Waffles & Chicken, you know it? Got their own grow room, looks like a factory, in the back half of the building."

"I know them. They bought my stuff before we opened here."

"They're doing ten, twelve, fifteen grand every couple of days."

"Wow."

"Yeah. So, there's your problem, Doc. You can't open a bank account and you're an all cash operation."

"I see," he said.

“Not yet, you don’t. All that cash and you don’t even have a safe in here. Let me guess. One of the drawers in that desk of yours can be locked, am I right? And, to be safe, you don’t leave the key in the desk. It’s on your key chain or you got it hidden around here somewhere.”

Booker started to answer but she held up her hand, like a traffic cop, and silenced him while she looked around the room again.

“If it’s not on your key chain, I bet it’s taped to the bottom of the center drawer of your desk. Hidden in one of those jars?”

“No,” said Bart, “it’s – “

“Wait. Don’t tell me,” said Swift, her eyes darting around the room. “I’ve gotten pretty good at this; I can do it. How about this – the key is taped to the back of that hoity-toity diploma you got on the shelf there.”

Bart Booker instinctively glanced at the diploma; then he blushed.

“No tape,” he said. “It’s on a short chain, hangs on that pedestal thing the frame sits on.”

“I knew it! So, here’s the point of all this, Dr. Booker. LAPD wants to prevent crime, right? So, because of the Feds being out of sync with what California has done about pot and these crazy banking rules, there’s all this pot cash floating around. What we’re doing, we’re trying to get cannabis dealers to wise up. You put a sliding iron gate on that front door, get yourself a decent safe – they sell ‘em at those office supply stores, right? Also, you might want a big old light over that front door at night, motion activated. Burglars don’t much like bright lights.”

“Those are good ideas,” said Booker. “Thanks. We’re new at this, like I say, but I understand what you’re saying and it’s helpful. I’ll talk it over with the wife tonight, we’ll figure out how to get this all done. Very helpful, I must say.”

“I can’t tell you what to do about the banking thing,” said Swift with a shrug, “we’re not allowed to do that, it’d be like giving legal advice. But we can tell you about stronger security, so we’re doin’ that.”

Booker nodded.

“I must admit, I hadn’t thought about some of this – I just want to grow the best plants I can and this shop, it’s actually paying me to do that, a lot more than the teaching thing. I’ll get it together real soon, ‘cause I don’t want to go back to spending my life in my car.”

“You do that,” said Sandy Swift with a broad smile. “The sooner the better.”

She handed Booker the file folder, snapped her brief case shut and headed for the front door.

“I’ll let myself out,” she said over her shoulder. “Ten days, maybe a couple of weeks, I’m going to check back here, see how it’s going.”

“I’d appreciate that, Detective. Thanks again.”

Liz Beech sat on the hard metal bench attached to the dining table in the cafeteria in the Los Angeles County Jail. Her husband, in a jump suit which was at least two sizes too big for him, sat across the table.

“You telling me we ain’t getting evicted?”

“I just forked over five months’ rent, Jimmy. We’re current and we got three months pre-paid, which, genius, is a month longer than you’re gonna be in here. Unless you screw up, of course.”

Jimmy grinned.

“That’s cool, baby. Thing bothers me most about being in this lousy excuse for a jail, I can’t be out there makin’ coin. It’s all on you. Ain’t the way it’s ‘posed to be, you know?”

“Tell me about it. You think I like pullin’ double, triple shifts slingin’ burgers and fries at them snooty high school punks from Hamilton High? You think I like bein’ dead on my feet all-a time?”

“Course not, baby. I ain’t kiddin’, I tell you it eats me up every day.”

“Yeah? Gee, Jimmy, that makes it so much better.”

“Baby, don’t be raggin’ on me. You gotta admit, ‘til we got busted, me ‘n’ Donny had a good thing going – we was bringin’ in some serious cash, right?”

“And now you’re not bringing in jack,” said Liz. “So I am.”

“Yeah, so tell me ‘bout that. I mean, we both know counter work at Burger King isn’t exactly a license to print money, even with double shifts.”

“Triple.”

“Even with triple shifts, then. Where’d you come up with so much rent money?”

Liz grinned.

“Oh, no, baby. Don’t tell me that. You been trickin’? That’s where the cash’s coming from, I don’t wanna hear it. Bad enough, I can’t get any – it’d kill me, somebody else doin’ my girl.”

“I love you, Jimmy, but not that much.”

“So?”

“You remember, last Christmas, we gave my sister’s oldest that cop kit?”

“Nope.”

“Sure you do. We gave the little guy a gold badge, a phony cop revolver, a pair of plastic cuffs, right? You thought it was a hoot, turning one of our own into a cop.”

“Right, I remember now. The kid got cop gear ‘bout the same time Donny and I got popped and ended up doin’ time. What’s that got to do with our rent, though?”

Liz glanced at the tables surrounding them. At one, a woman and her two children were all crying while the man facing them buried his face in his hands. At another, a young inmate was having a quiet but intense discussion with a woman who was probably his mother; she was lecturing him and he was deeply embarrassed. Even though she was convinced nobody at the nearby tables could hear her, Liz still leaned in and lowered her voice.

“You’re gonna like this, Jimmy. First thing, right after they slapped you with six months, guy and his wife, livin’ on the other side of Washington where all the yuppies are moving in, opened a medical pot shop.”

“Weed? Really? Just down the street from us? That’s way cool.”

“Well, it’s certainly convenient.”

“Can’t wait to get outta here, check the place out.”

“Too late, baby. Somebody busted out the front door window, cleaned all the cash out of a desk drawer. Walked away with almost ten grand. Place hasn’t opened since.”

“Bummer.”

“Not exactly,” said Liz. “Turned out to be a very good thing for us.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lord, Jimmy, you can be as slow as cold molasses. Think about it.”

Jimmy Beech’s face clouded over and his gaze went vacant. Liz waited.

“You aren’t making any sense, baby. You tellin’ me about some dumb Christmas gift and then this pot shop gets knocked over – “

“Keep going, darlin’. You’re almost there.”

His face remained blank.

“Man, there are days I wonder how you remember to breathe.”

“Hey, that hurts, Lizzie. I’m as smart as the next guy.”

“If the next guy’s sitting in this room with us, you probably are.” said Liz. She swept her arm around the room. “All these chuckleheads didn’t have the smarts to pull off a simple misdemeanor without ending up in a warehouse full of losers.”

“Huh?”

Liz sighed.

“Jimmy, Jimmy, think about it. If you wanted to break into a storefront and grab all the cash, what’s the first thing you’d do?”

“I’d open my trunk and grab a tire iron, I guess. Maybe my tool box, get my hammer out.”

“How do you know there isn’t an alarm system? And, even if there isn’t one, how do you know where the cash is?”

“Um – I don’t know.”

“So maybe, just maybe, you’d want to case the place first? Check out the security system, figure out where the cash stash is, how to get to it with no hassles. That way, you know what you’re doin’ and you’re in and out before anybody notices the front door’s been trashed, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay, then.”

“What, okay? You’re not makin’ any sense, baby.”

The speakers around the room emitted a piercing alarm and then a voice boomed, drowning out all the conversation in the room.

“Visiting hours are over. All visitors must leave the room immediately. Inmates line up now.”

Liz stood.

“You got lots of time to think about stuff in here, Jimmy. You work on it. Stay out of trouble. Love ya.”

A couple of hours later, Jimmy figured that that his girl must have knocked off the pot shop. It wasn’t until their next visit, when Liz patiently laid it out for him, that he got the part about the Christmas present.