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Summer was good to him.

Morrow scored a few easy wins.

His confidence in himself was growing.

People were starting to know who he was.

The market was strong, and so was his bank account.

He felt he had decoded the mysteries of a successful short con.

He was wrong.

It was Spaghetti Haven night. The entire team was assembled in the private meeting room, and Morrow was going over every last step with them. Tomorrow was G-Day, the Gig Day of the con.

"OK, I'm liking what I'm hearing. You all sound prepared. We've spent less than five weeks setting this up, and honestly, this is a fairly easy con. Nothing complicated here. I want everyone in position by six thirty tomorrow night. The auction starts at seven, and it'll all be over by nine. Any last questions?"

Morrow looked out over the team he had created. Even though this was a simple con, he had the biggest team he'd ever assembled—with or without Edwin. Last night, he'd met with all thirty-two auction attendees and the fourteen servers, emcees, auctioneers, and event managers. Their roles were more straightforward, and only a few had speaking parts. Tonight, he gazed at his primary team made up of some regulars: Tommy and Connie, Brady, Shady, Marty Lcomb, Mel, Nate, Buddy, Rafe, and Ghost. Also in attendance were some new players: Danny the Hammer, Matias, and Lexy, along with a dozen other muscle men including Mel, Rodney, and Bubba.

"I have a question, Morrow," Matias said. "Can we talk about the money again? Seems like you got muchos muchachos on the payroll."

"I do, Matias. OK, let me go over it one more time. The Ming Vase is supposed to be worth over one-point-one mil on the open market. The mark believes it is up for auction, and bidding will start at \$450,000—the amount it sold for nine years ago when it was last purchased. We think he should win with a bid just over 850K this time."

"In fact, we're sure of it, right?" Tommy asked. "I mean, in light of the whole auction being faked and the only other bidders are our players."

Morrow nodded. "Yes, that has something to do with my confidence level. So, if he bids and gets it for, say, 860K, then that's what we have to pay expenses and ourselves. Overhead expenses are running about 52K so far and rising. Let's say 60. That leaves us 800K."

"I get seven hundred and ninety thousand of that, right?" Buddy, always the jokester, yelled out.

"Of course, we're doing this all for Buddy," Morrow said, playing along.

Matias, his anxiety already a bit too high, shot Buddy an angry look. He raised his hand unnecessarily and continued, "Morrow, I don't understand. Why are we going to let him win the bid for around 850 when it's worth over a mil?"

"It's a good question, Matias," Morrow said, knowing that others in the crowd wondered the same thing. "Here's the deal. No one knows what it's really worth on the open market. People are guessing it could be a mil or more, but there's no guarantee. If we try to raise the price too high, we might scare him away. Then one of our phony bidders could accidentally win, and we'd get nothing for our efforts. We think 850 is a reasonable amount to bet on."

As Morrow finished, Lexy spoke up, adding, "Matias, if we can get more, we will. I'll be right there at the mark's side, flirting and giving the signal to keep bidding if I sense he'll go higher."

That seemed to mollify Matias's concerns.

"OK, it's all good," Morrow said. "The other team I met with last night will get minimums. Most aren't doing anything other than milling around, faking some bids, drinking my booze, and eating my hors d'oeuvres. It's like a cheap party for them. The thirty-two extras will get a thousand apiece. More for the organizers and those with speaking parts, costing us an additional 28K. The emcee and the auctioneer are pros and pricey, but we can get everybody covered for another twenty thousand. We already spent 65K on getting the fakes made for the auction. That whole setup will run me 145K. That leaves 655K to split between you pros. I already told each of you what you'll get, and that's more than enough. If we make more than 860K, everybody will get an extra bonus."

Matias wiped his brow and said, "OK, but what if we get less than that? Or nothing at all?"

"Matias, relax. This is a sweet con that will work. On the 'How Confident Am I' scale of one to ten, I'm at twenty-nine right now. The only question in my mind is how to distribute the bonuses. Anyone else with a question?"

"When's payday?" Buddy called out.

Morrow glanced at his little friend and nodded. He'd asked Buddy to ask that question. Buddy was always happy to assist. He was five-foot-eight and 190 pounds of eagerness to please. He was also a competent actor able to fill in on bit parts. Morrow wanted this question last to help him get the team into a positive frame of mind.

"We'll be receiving the funds into an offshore account. I need to have it cleaned up a bit, and that takes a few days. The auction is tomorrow, Saturday, so I'd say by Friday next week, everyone should have their money."

Smiles abounded, and Buddy's was the biggest and brightest. Morrow noted, not for the first time, that his friend's teeth were super bright. Not always a good thing in cons. Too memorable. He filed that away in his memory banks. *If I use Buddy extensively in any con, he'll need to make himself scarce in Phoenix for a while.*

The meeting wrapped up, and before they left, Morrow reminded everyone to use their gig names. No need to take any chances here. Everyone left the room except Matias. Morrow looked at him, still sitting in the same seat. "Matias, you OK?"

"I guess I'm just a little nervous."

“You’ve done very well so far for a rookie. It’ll be fine. Tomorrow, you only have one speaking role. I know you’ll do well. Relax. Go home and get some sleep.”

“Gracias, Morrow. Thanks for giving me this chance. My wife is home with our little chico up in Washington State, and they’re strugglin’. Getting this money will help me send them something to make it better. I can’t find no other work.”

“I know, Matias. When this is over, I’ll introduce you to some folks and help ya get some steady work, OK?”

“Si! Muchísimas gracias.”

Morrow watched him leave and stared again at the tab. He needed this con to go well too. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the last of his budgeted funds. After the tip, he had a hundred and thirty left. For a moment, he mused about the full confidence he felt when he had a thousand dollars on him and how little he felt with a hundred. It was another one of those strange aspects of human nature that he noted for future use. He headed home, mentally lowering his over-the-top confidence level from twenty-nine to nine.