

Money Talks

I was talking to my handler in the back booth of a Panera Bread. I could actually smell the bathroom from where I sat.

"We're going to train you to become a hypnotist," he said. "You're going to mine pin codes off people with fat wallets. There's \$25K in it for you. Any questions?"

"Does it come with a pocket watch?" I joked. He didn't laugh.

"Just tell me where and when," I said. \$25K was a down payment on a house I wanted to buy in Key Largo. Live out my nights and days with Kate sailing around the Keys. We met at the marina where I drydock my 32' Catalina. I was getting tired of the Life, but people like me just don't have a lot of choices.

My handler's name is Robert. Don't ask me his last name, because I honestly do not know. We've been doing business for about 6 years. He has that healthy look with the good bones and all, but he whips out this sleazy smile whenever he makes a point. Robert showed up one day at Fishkill State Penitentiary, where I was living at the time. I was doing twelve years for stealing \$1.8 million from retirees. It was an income-for-life scam concerning copper mines in Argentina that I hardly understood myself. I'm pretty good with computers and I have a face that people trust.

I had no idea who the guy was when the guard told me I had a visitor. After a little back and forth, he told me he 'represents' some people in eastern Europe who are also very good with computers. They admired my work. He told me they would pay for my appeal. As I said, he looked ok, so I said what the hell. Four months and 13 days later I was bounced. These guys were connected.

My talent in life is that I can tell a story and make people want to hear the ending. I can speak very polite and proper, or I can break into a 'don't mess with me' vibe. I have this thick head of premature grey hair and I can look older and distinguished or younger and energetic, depending on what I wear. I honestly do not mean anybody any harm. My investors were all rich types who could afford to lose, but I come from a family that did ok with what they earned. My Dad had a business on the side fixing boats and charging fairly, and we all helped out. At this point, I just want to fix computers fair and square and leave people the hell alone.

After I got out of Fishkill, my job was to follow Robert's instructions and adopt any profession I was told. I was to gather whatever information required, write it down, and hand it over to him in a small black notebook whenever he asked. In the last six years, I've been a financial adviser in Atlanta, an insurance broker in Chicago, and a travel consultant in Baltimore. That last one was my favorite; we had this shing-dig that we represented a charter yacht service in the Greek Islands. When I tell you there was not a single floating vessel in the whole charade, that's what I mean. You can't believe the stream of idiots that gave up credit cards and deposits based on a good-looking website. For my efforts, Robert slipped me cash then and again. It was never that much, \$2,500 here, \$6K there, but it was consistent. *They* were making the money, trust me. Here's how it all worked: I fronted the businesses, and they found the stream of losers who believed any wacko idea coming from a guy with an honest face. The east European team handled all the websites and back-office stuff. Whenever things started to get too shaky -- a customer asking too many questions, a landlord doing a background check -- Robert would tell me to move on. He's instructed me to gain fifty pounds and move to

Atlanta, lose twenty and move to Baltimore, wear a wig in Chicago, and grow a mustache in Las Vegas. You name it, and I had to do it, but I didn't have to like it.

The hypnotist gig was all about figuring out pin codes from people with money. Robert flew me to LA and put me in training with a real-life doctor of hypnotherapy or some crap. She was a good-looking gal named Ronnie who talked with her hands, like she was a puppeteer or something. I don't think she was in on any of the money gigs with Robert -- I never asked. She was just paid to train people and keep her mouth shut. I learned everything I needed to know in about a month, including this trick about getting people to call out groups of numbers they randomly select while lying half asleep on the couch. They always say numbers that correspond to something. I had to graduate by practicing on a few clients.

I thought that getting hypnotized was all about those gypsies swinging pocket watches and telling people that they were getting sleepy. The truth is, you just relax people with piped-in music and a script, and then you ask them questions when their guard is down. One of the guys I practiced on was a businessman who came in because he kept stressing out about forgetting his computer passwords. I put on that whirly music that Ronnie gave me and asked him to close his eyes while I read the script. I wrote down everything he said. I guess I passed the test because they set me up in an office right on Sunset next to the BOA Steakhouse. It was a she-she neighborhood with lots of Italian cars and they put me on the second floor of an office building with a Japanese waterfall in the lobby. When I walked into my office on the first day, the artwork and diplomas were already on the walls and there was a nice-looking secretary booking appointments.

Overnight, I became Doctor Felix Gallagher with my own Facebook page, an Instagram presence, and hundreds of followers. My practice specialized in—get this—'unleashing creativity' for Hollywood types, and the office was busy. I didn't even know how much clients paid for the sessions. Robert took care of all that. My job was to look the part and be the part. Kate came out a few times for the weekend. She liked to go see the stars on the boulevard. I couldn't stand LA. I wanted to wear sandals all day and go bone fishing.

The hypnotist gig was all about getting patterns of numbers from clients and writing them down. You'd be amazed at how you can coax information out of people that ends up corresponding to pin codes on their investment accounts, bank accounts, and what have you.

Robert gave me a quota of 250 codes to earn the \$25K he promised me, and I hit the mark after four months. He asked to meet at Souper Salad on Sunset for a kind of job review. I had been feeding him information for months now, and apparently my efforts had been panning out. It was pretty easy for the east European team to figure out the actual pin codes when they had a freakin' playbook in front of them.

"Hungry?" he asked. He was having one of those kale salads or something. I wasn't there to eat. "Coffee," I said to the waitress when she arrived.

I handed him the latest little black book filled with all the names and probable pin codes. He reached over the table and handed me a backpack. I peeked inside. Bundles of cash in wrappers. It sure looked like \$25K.

"You don't need to count it," he said, nodding his chin toward the goods. He tapped on the little black book on the table. "Everything in here?"

"Everything I got," I said.

"Just making sure."

"What's next?" I asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"You tell me what's next." He was chewing his salad with his mouth open, green bits stuck in his teeth. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"You're a hypnotist, right Roger?" That's my real name. Roger Murphy, son of Daniel Murphy, the longshoreman family from Staten Island, Local 920. Honest guy, good family.

"Sure," I said.

"Then close your eyes and take me back to yesterday when you helped that producer guy remember his Bitcoin password while he was half asleep. Is that password in this little notebook, too, Roger?"

There was a long pause.

"I didn't write it down," I said.

"Of course, you didn't. It might only be worth \$10 million in today's dollars."

I took a deep breath.

"Maybe I should start with my name," he said.

That got my attention.

"It's Robert, that's true. Special Agent Robert Escolen of the FBI, southern district of New York."

"And I'm Dick Van Dyke," I said.

No one laughed.

I picked up my coffee and it burnt my lip, spilled on the table.

"On behalf of the Bureau, I want to thank you for all of the valuable information you've given us that helped crack an international cyber-cell over the past six years. We

made our arrests last week through Interpol, all based on the information you helped us accumulate."

He took a stack of small black notebooks and placed them on the table. They looked familiar.

"What do you want, your money back?" I asked.

"Nah. You keep the money, including the \$25K I just gave you."

"So, what do you want?"

"Think we're dumb enough not to place cameras and microphones in an office of some two-bit con man who thinks he's a doctor? We captured all of the Bitcoin codes from your sleepy client yesterday, loud and clear. This is just a little farewell lunch to remind you not to try and tap into those codes. We're good." He flashed that stupid smile.

He was on a roll. "Me and a few of my boys have always wanted to get into crypto, Roger. I guess I should thank you, since no matter how much we right the wrongs in America, we never see the paychecks. We'll be in touch about your next assignment." He tapped the stack of little black notebooks, all written in my handwriting over the years.

"So long, sailor," he said, and he got up.

"I'm done," I said. "I want to go back to Florida. I've given you enough." I put out a handshake.

He turned and put a finger in my face. "You're done when we tell you you're done."

"That so?" was all I said back.

He turned and left without paying the check.

When I heard the jingle bells of the café door opening, I reached into the pocket of my jacket and took on another black book. Not all of the sessions took place in that fancy office. I wasn't that stupid. And I also had a habit of recording my meetings with Robert on my cell phone, just to make sure I remembered everything. I hit STOP on my recorder.

A couple of the clients' sessions panned out nicely. Especially the old widow who lapped up my compliments like it was milk of magnesia. She never came back because I heard she passed away. Last week, I broke into the Navy's Tor network and siphoned \$200K from her Schwab account like I was a one-man destroyer. Her password was just as she told me, and I even had her social. It was too easy, but it made me think that Dad's life was never easy, and he did OK.

I picked up my cell phone to call Kate in Key Largo. She starts launching into 'oh Roger, hi, the weather's great here, my job sucks there, this guy's an asshole, that girl's my new friend' and stuff like that. I didn't even need to speak, she did it for both of us. After a few minutes, I interrupted her. "Hey Kate, shut up a minute, will you? Have your guys get the boat off drydock and call the real estate agent. We just came into a boatload of money. I'll call you back with the details."

Next, I called Robert on his cell phone. He answered it in a way that showed I wasn't worth his first ring.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Either I'm done, or you're done," I said, holding the recording of our conversation. We went back forth real hard for a couple of minutes. I had to hold the phone away from my ear.

The waitress brought me the check, and I handed her a bunch of cash from the backpack.

"And you owe me lunch." I said to him before hanging up.

The End