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WALTER DEAN MYERS

the young landlords

"It's a neighborhood block party!"

—THE NEW YORK TIMES



the young
landlords

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PUFFIN BOOKS

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51

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CHAPTER

1

YOU EVER HAVE AN IDEA THAT REALLY SOUNDS GOOD UNTIL you do it and find out how stupid it was? If you ever need one, just hang around with me a little, because I got lots of them. I remember one time there was this big kid in my Current Events class who used to push everybody around. Well, I read in this book that when a bully—and that's what this guy was, a bully—did something like that, he did it because he thought nobody was going to fight him back. Bullies were really cowards deep down. That's what the book said. Anyway, I got the bright idea that I was going to show everybody how this bully, whose name was James Hall, was really a coward way down deep inside. So I walked up to him in the hallway and told him I was tired of him pushing

everybody around. Then I told him that if he didn't quit right away I would have to punch him out myself.

He just stood there looking at me like I was a Martian or something. I figured the book was right. He was scared. A few kids in the class started gathering around, and somebody said there was going to be a fight.

"Ain't going to be no fight," I said, "because this guy ain't nothing but a turkey!"

Soon as he hit me I realized that the whole idea might have been wrong. When he hit me the second and third times I was *sure* it was wrong. Afterwards, when my friend Dean came over and asked me how come I started the fight, I couldn't think of an answer. Even if I could have, my lip was too swollen to talk. When I was leaving I heard another guy say, "Hey, see that guy with that busted-up lip and his hat on sideways? He's a strange dude."

I hadn't noticed that my hat was on sideways, but I wore it like that until my lip came down to normal. It's better being strange than just plain stupid.

But that was two years ago, and the Stratford Arms thing happened when I was older, and you would think I wouldn't jump into things so quick, right? Well, I still did once in a while. Nothing big, no busted lips or anything like that. But the Stratford Arms thing was almost as bad.

It all started up in Mount Morris Park at the Annual Numbers Runners' barbecue. Two years before, when they had started the State Lottery, the guys that ran the numbers racket started sending telegrams to the mayor's office about how they were being squeezed out of making a living. The mayor said that running numbers was illegal and that the

lottery was legal. Anyway, the numbers people started doing things to make themselves look more respectable. One thing they did was to pay to have some abandoned buildings boarded up so that small kids wouldn't go into them and get hurt. Another thing they did was to start the Annual Numbers Runners' barbecue. A lot of people said that numbers were still wrong, mostly because it was illegal, and some people even said that a lot of the money went into dope. But still, just about everybody from the block came, and we always had a nice time. They had barbecued chicken, barbecued spareribs, charcoal-broiled hamburgers, potato salad, coleslaw, pies, cakes, just about anything you could think of to take on a picnic. The Captain, who was the fattest guy at the barbecue, was sitting at one of the tables just looking around and eating, which was his favorite pastime. He used to eat spareribs like he was playing a harmonica. He was fat, like I said, but he had little hands and little eyes. He would get a sparerib between his palms and then run it back and forth across his mouth, twisting it with his fingers as he did, and in about two seconds it would be clean. An ant would starve to death on what he left on one of those bones. Anyway, Gloria saw him sitting there and had to go open her mouth.

"Hey, Captain," she said, "how come you ain't out there running in the races? You might win first prize!"

Everybody thought this was funny except the Captain. They say he never smiled but twice a year. Once on his birthday and once on Christmas, and that last year he didn't even smile on Christmas.

"You all can keep that running stuff to yourself," he said.

His voice came from the middle of his belly. "You can't make no money running. You can't feed no family with it, either. Not 'less you running numbers or something 'long them lines.

"I don't understand about you young people anyway," the Captain went on. "You been to school and you don't know nothing, you got you a little bit of money and you ain't got nothing, got your whole life in front of you and you ain't going to nothing.

"What I do comes from not being able to do nothing better. What you do is 'cause you don't want to do better."

Then he made a big sucking noise on a chicken bone, looked at it to make sure everything was off it, and put it down while he was reaching for another one with the other hand.

"You young today," the Captain said, "and you don't do nothing for yourself. You worsen a chicken with his head wrenched off. You take a chicken and wrench off its head, and it run around and flop around and carry on. But it ain't got nothing to do but die 'cause it ain't got no head to use. Ain't that the truth?"

When he said that, everybody started nodding and going on and saying how it was true and all. Gloria didn't say anything, and I figured that was all there was to it. Even the next day, when some of the guys we hung out with were sitting in front of the park talking about the barbecue, we didn't talk about what the Captain had said. When Gloria got there she started talking about what the Captain had said, and then she said that was true and that running was nothing and we never did anything that amounted to any-

thing. Well, that was cool, because every once in a while we talked like that. You know, Good-Doing conversations. We'd sit around and say things like, "Hey, life is rough," or "You got to work hard to get anywhere in this life." We'd talk like that for a while, and then we'd get back to the regular things we always talked about, like what was on television or what we were going to go downtown and buy when we got enough money to go downtown and buy something.

So Gloria went on about how we were throwing away our lives and how we had to start getting with it and stuff. Then she said she was going to start an action club. She asked if we wanted to belong to it, and we said, "Why not?" That was one of those ideas that I should have thought about. Gloria pulled out this piece of paper that she had typed up. On the top, in big letters, it said, "Action Group." Then, under Roman numerals, it had what we were supposed to be doing as an Action Group. Mostly stuff about doing things that had to be done and doing them right away. Then there was a place for our names. So we signed it. It was me, Gloria, Dean, Bubba, Omar, and Jeannie.

So far everything was cool. We had signed the paper and we could get on with being like we always were, right? Wrong! Gloria had another piece of paper with things that had to be done right away. On top of the list was World Peace. She thought we should write some letters to the leaders of the world and tell them what we thought about peace and stuff like that. Which was cool, too, but it was too hot to go upstairs and write, so we put World Peace off until the next day.

The next thing on the list was cleaning up the empty lot

near the corner. We put that off until the next day, too.

The third and last thing on her list was to do something about 356. That was a building on the same block that Gloria lived on. It looked like a real nightmare. If you wanted a real ghetto place you could pick that one. Funny thing about it, though, that if you stood about two blocks away and looked down the block where 356 was, it didn't look so bad. All of the buildings on the block were either dark brown or dark red, according to what they were made of, and looked about the same from a distance. But as you came closer you could see that some of the buildings were okay and some were terrible. It didn't take a lot to make a building terrible, either. All you had to do was to have a few windows broken out, some garbage out front, and enough graffiti on the walls.

The building at 356 had its share of garbage, graffiti, and grit, but it didn't have any windows broken out. Oh, yes, it was the only house on the block that had a name. It was called Stratford Arms. No one ever called it that, though. It was either just 356, the way the postman called it, or The Joint, the name we knew it by. None of the buildings on the block were really great looking. Most of them looked like old people still trying to hold themselves together. Maybe they didn't look great, but they were still trying. Some of the places, like 356, had given up completely. It was one of those places that had furnished apartments and gave out sheets and things. Some people called it a hotel, but it wasn't, because you had to live there by the month, the same as everywhere else. Gloria had gone over there and gotten the owner's name from the guy who handed out the sheets and

stuff in the renting office. She said he didn't want to give it to her at first, but she told him that she was tired of having the eyesore in the neighborhood where she lived, and he gave it to her, along with a telephone number.

So we went to the corner and called the number. The operator said that the number was not working. Then Gloria went back over to the guy who had given her the number, and he said he didn't know any other number. Gloria said she thought he was lying, and the guy just shrugged his shoulders.

We went down and sat on the stoop, and I was thinking that maybe we had better concentrate on World Peace. It seemed easier to get on the big things than the little ones. Then the laundry guy came. He was the one who brought the clean sheets and pillowcases to the place. We all knew him, too. We told him what had happened, and he said that the owner had three other places besides this one, and that the bills went to a place on 84th Street. So we got the number of the place on 84th Street, and the telephone, and Gloria called the place and asked for the owner. The owner's name was Harley, Joseph Harley, and he answered the phone himself. When he answered the phone, Gloria just asked if this was really him, and he said yes. Then she hung up. It was still only about one o'clock, and so we got the bus on Eighth Avenue and went down to 84th.

Writing a letter was cool, talking on the telephone was pretty cool, but just walking up to a guy and talking to him wasn't cool at all. We got all the way down there when Gloria started looking around and asking who was going to do the talking. Well, naturally, everybody thought she was,

since it was her idea and all. Then she started in about how we were all in this thing together and she wouldn't feel we were really on her side unless we did some of the talking. Then Dean said that was okay, we would do some of the talking, but she had to start it. That seemed fair enough, so we went into this place and asked to see Mr. Harley. This place was the same kind of place that the one on 122nd Street was, only it was clean and nice. The place was called Goree Studios. The renting office had a switchboard, and there was a Spanish girl sitting at a desk typing. Mr. Harley looked older than my father but younger than my grandfather, which probably put him about fifty something.

"We live on 122nd Street," Gloria said after Mr. Harley had asked us what we wanted. "And we want to talk to you about that dirty, filthy place you got up there. Go on, Dean."

"Who? Me?" Dean is a tall, skinny guy, light-skinned and scared looking. When Gloria said, "Go on, Dean," he took about two steps back, and so did I. But then Omar, who hadn't been saying much, jumped up and started talking.

"Look, man," he said, "you are oppressing my people. You are making them live under conditions under which a dog should not live. And we are here to see that justice is done."

"You live in this building?" Mr. Harley said, turning red. "You live in this building?"

"No, we don't live there," Gloria said. One hand was on her hip, and she was beginning to point so we knew she was getting warmed up. "We wouldn't live in that pigpen. But

just because we don't live there don't mean we can't speak on it."

"Yeah, we're the Action Group," Dean said. He had got behind Gloria somehow, but he could easily see over her shoulder. "And we came down here to get some action."

"So let me get this straight." Mr. Harley started to calm down. "You people don't live there, but you see you don't like this place and you want me to fix it up. That's right?"

We all yeahed him, and he sat there, nodding his head.

"What are you going to do?" Omar asked.

"Suppose I do nothing," Mr. Harley said. "What are you going to do?"

"A lot," Gloria said.

"Like what?" Mr. Harley asked. He was sitting back in his chair and looking like he had just won or something. "Like what are you going to do?"

"We'll come down here and picket this place, baby!"

That's what Jeannie said, and it sounded like a good idea, but Mr. Harley was still smiling.

"You got forty-eight hours to give us some action," Gloria said, "or we'll be down here with our picket signs. And you can smile all you want to, but we'll see who'll be smiling in the end."

"Who is the spokesman for your group?" Mr. Harley asked.

"We all are," Dean said.

"Well, suppose I want to contact one of you—how can I do it if you won't give me the name of your spokesman?" Mr. Harley took a pad from his desk and a pencil and

looked at the group. "Well, who's the oldest?"

When I found out I was the oldest, I just about cried. I was fifteen and everybody else was fifteen, except for Jeannie, but I had been born in March and everybody else had either been born in the summer or the fall. That was a low blow. So I gave him my name and address, although I knew I didn't want to. But as soon as everybody else found out that I was the oldest, they jumped right on my case.

"Go on and give it to him," Omar said. "He can't do nothing."

"Now, sir, do you have a dollar?" Mr. Harley said to me.

"A dollar?"

"Surely, if you're really interested in the building and the improvements you're suggesting, you won't mind investing a dollar?"

I had a dollar and I gave it to him. He smiled and said that I would be hearing from him in a few days. Only he seemed really pleased, which made me uneasy.

The rest of the Action Group was all excited when we went over to Central Park West to get the bus back uptown. They were talking about what they had said and everything. I was thinking about one thing—he had my name and address.

"Suppose he sends out a hit man or something," I said.

"He ain't going to send out a hit man to get you, man, relax," Omar said.

"He could probably take care of you with a hit *boy*," Jeannie said.

"Remind me to laugh at that funny joke," I said.

"What we ought to do is to go down there and throw a

rock through his window," Omar said as we settled on the bus. "We must show the oppressor that we, the oppressed, can stick together and rise!"

"You're oppressing me with your breath," Jeannie said. "Why don't you rise and face the other way?"

"Sometimes violence is the only answer," Dean said.

"Shut up." I was getting mad. "Gloria starts this stupid group, Omar starts spouting his mouth off, you're talking about violence, and the only name they got is mine. It's a good thing Bubba didn't come. He probably would have called the cat a name or something."

They all cooled out a little, but I could see they were still excited. It was all right for them, but they hadn't given the guy their name and address. I told myself that I didn't have anything to be worried about. I really wasn't worried about a hit man or anything like that, but I was worried about him calling the cops and saying we did something to him or threatened him. I tried to think back on what we said to him, and I couldn't remember if somebody had said that we were going to get him or anything else that would seem like a threat.

That night I couldn't eat, and my mother asked me what was wrong, and I said nothing. Then my father asked me what was wrong. My father is one of these guys that no matter what he says he has to be right. Some of the time we get along, but a lot of the time we don't. The thing I hate most is when he's telling me what I'm thinking. That's one of his favorite little tricks.

"I know what you're thinking!" he says. "You want me to tell you what you're thinking?"

Then he'll tell me what he thinks I'm thinking, and when I say I wasn't thinking that he says I just won't admit it. Anyway, I wasn't about to tell him that I had gone down to this guy's office and sounded off at him and then given him my name and address. He'd probably go on about that until I was eighteen. So I told him I had bought a bag of French fries and ate them too fast. Then he went on for about an hour about that.

The next day they told Bubba, and Bubba wanted to go down and see the guy again and tell him that we had cut his time short from forty-eight hours to thirty-six.

"We do that, see, and we got the initiative," Bubba said. "We just sit around and wait, then he got the initiative. This is a war, see, and we got to act first."

"How old are you, Bubba?" I asked.

"You know I'm sixteen," he said. "Remember it rained on my birthday and my aunt gave me that money?"

"Good," I said. "Because I'm going to call that guy and give him your name instead of mine. You're the oldest."

"No, you can't do that, see." Bubba started licking his lips, which he always did when he was trying to think, which wasn't very often. "We got to let him know that we got a leader, see, which is you."

Naturally everybody hopped on that bandwagon. I didn't think a whole lot of the idea, anyway. He still would have my name, no matter if I gave him Bubba's or not.

We played a little ball, and then we just hung around for a while, and then I was going to go on upstairs. My father had come in my room last night and saw a crumpled-up McDonald's bag in the corner, and he had made a big thing

about it. I remembered that I hadn't picked it up, and I knew he was going to find some reason to go into my room and see if I had picked it up. I was just about to go up when I saw Florencia, who I really liked a lot and who had taught me some Spanish.

"Guess who's going to jail," she said.

"Who?" Gloria asked.

My heart dropped right in the middle of my stomach.

"Chris."

"Chris?" Omar was surprised, as was everybody else. Chris was the last guy you would think about going to jail.

"Yeah," Florencia said. "They say he stole some stuff from that store he works in."

"The hi-fi store?"

"Uh-huh. They got another guy, too. You know that guy that hangs around Eddie's all the time?"

"Tall dude walk with a limp?"

"No, that dark guy that always tries to talk Spanish."

"With the doo-rag around his head."

"Yeah," Florencia said. "Him. He got a record and everything."

We sat around for a while longer and talked about it, but we found out that Florencia didn't know anything, and when we went around the block, we found out that nobody else knew anything either. Just that the store had been robbed about a week before and that they just broke the case. Dean got really upset because he and Chris were very close. I felt almost as sorry for Dean as I did for Chris. We sat on the stoop awhile, and then we saw Chris's mother come up to the house with his uncle. She was crying. They

had come up in a cab and Chris wasn't with them, so we guessed he was in jail. His mother was crying so we didn't ask her any questions. And when Dean got up and walked away from the stoop, we all did.

"Me or your mother?" I was still thinking about Chris being arrested when I got home, and I couldn't figure out what my father was talking about. But that's another one of his little habits.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"I just wondered who you expected to pick up your garbage—me or your mother?" he said. He threw the McDonald's bag in front of me, and I bent over and picked it up. It probably meant, I figured, that I would have to hear his mouth for the rest of the night. I was right.

"You really feel that your mother is supposed to pick up your garbage, right?" he said.

"No, I don't," I said.

"You expect me to pick it up?"

"No, I don't," I said.

"You expect it to jump up off the floor when it gets tired of laying there and throw itself into the garbage?"

"No, I don't."

"Then how do you think it's going to get up off the floor?" he asked.

"I was going to pick it up later."

"Later? You mean there's a special time to pick up garbage from the place that you live? You're suppose to just wallow in your garbage until a certain time of day and then you pick it up and start living like a human being?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What are you sorry about?" he asked. "Sorry that it's time to pick up the garbage or sorry that you're the one that has to pick it up?"

I didn't say anything. If he could have heard what I was thinking, he probably would have started stuttering, the way he does sometimes when he really gets mad. Later, when I had finally escaped to my room, I figured out two things that annoyed me about my father. The first was that he was just plain annoying, and the second was that he wasn't annoying in a way that you could really jump on. If he hit me or drank a lot I could really get on that. But when he got on my case about picking up garbage, it was hard. I guess it's easier to take a person being a pain in the neck when they're wrong than it is them being a pain in the neck when they're right.

CHAPTER

2

GLORIA CALLED ME THE FIRST THING IN THE MORNING. SHE said she was calling a general meeting of the Action Group, and we were all to meet at headquarters in a half hour. Now, let me tell you about Gloria. She was a little shorter than me, which is pretty tall for a girl, and not bad looking. She would have been plain looking except for her eyes. Her eyes weren't pretty, but they were odd. They looked just a little Oriental, which was nice and which suited her. Then she had a way of looking at you that made you feel self-conscious. At least it made me feel a little self-conscious.

Another thing about Gloria. She had this habit of saying things to make you ask a question. She would walk up to you and say something like, "Well, I guess it had to happen

sometime." Then, naturally, you would say, "What had to happen sometime?" and then she would tell you what happened. So when she said for me to come down to "headquarters" I knew I had to ask where headquarters was.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" she said, knowing darn well she hadn't told me. "I called Reverend Glover last night, and he said we could use that room near the gym for our headquarters."

Well, that was pretty good, because the gym was in a building owned by the church and it was always warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The room had a desk in it and a telephone, but I didn't remember the telephone ever working. I told Gloria okay, that I would meet her there in a half hour.

I thought my father had left for work already. He works for the Department of Social Services, but he hadn't.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

"Good morning," I answered.

"Would you care for the morning paper, sir?" he asked in this real sarcastic voice.

"No."

He finished his breakfast without saying anything else. Mom had made some eggs for me and I ate them. Mom didn't say anything either, so I knew they must have had a fight or something. Usually Mom takes my side if he gets on my case too much. When my father had finished his breakfast, he got his coat and then gave my mother this little make-believe kiss, as if his lips were going to break or something, and then left for work. I knew I was going to be late for Gloria's meeting, but I stayed around and helped Mom

do the dishes before I left. I got all the way downstairs before I remembered that I hadn't made my bed. I went back upstairs and she was making it and I helped her finish. She said I was going to be the death of her yet. She was okay.

"This meeting is called to find out what we're going to do about Chris," Gloria said. "Because we all know he didn't steal any stereo equipment, and we all know that Willie Bobo is a thief and an ex-con so he probably did it all on his own."

"Then how come they got Chris?" Bubba said. He was eating from a bag of potato chips. Bubba was always eating, and he was so fat that he kept busting the seams from his pants legs. "If he didn't do nothing they wouldn't arrest him."

"My mother said they thought it was a inside job," Omar said. "Somebody let the crooks in. The window was busted out in the back, but it was busted out from the inside. So they figured maybe somebody had a key or something and then busted the window to make it look like a accident. And the only guy who had a key besides Mr. Reynolds was Chris."

"How about that other guy that works there?" Gloria asked.

"He don't have a key 'cause he drinks too much," Bubba said, emptying the crumbs out into his hand.

"I think he's guilty," Omar said.

"You got to be kidding," I said. "How long have we known Chris? He's not a thief, man."

"Why?" Omar asked.

"Why?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You ever see him steal anything before?"

"I never seen him hanging out with Willie Bobo before, either!" Omar said, as if he had won his point or something. "And when they got Willie Bobo with some of the stolen stuff, they asked him who let him in, and he didn't say nothing. Then they asked him if it was Chris and he said yeah it was! Don't tell me he ain't no thief! It's them quiet dudes that be going around ripping people off. You don't suspect nothing, so they can get away with it."

"I just never believed he would steal anything," Gloria said. "I just never seen him do anything wrong."

"Them the kind that be doing stuff like that," Omar came back.

"He went into the store with Willie or he was in there already?" Dean asked.

"He was in there already," Omar said. "Then Willie got a car and drove it near the side door. When nobody was looking, Chris opened the door and Willie come in and started taking stuff out to the car."

"You know, that's really weird," Gloria said. "I've known Chris ever since I was about five years old, and if you would have told me that he would steal something I just wouldn't believe it. I mean he's really a nice guy."

"Let me ask you something," Omar said. "You ever miss anything when you were around him?"

"In school I'd lose things but—"

"Yeah, you'd lose them all right," Omar said, "to him!"

"Who told you about it?" Jeannie asked.

"Who told me about what?" Omar said.

"About how it happened and everything?"

"That's the way it had to happen!" Omar said.

It turned out that nobody had told Omar anything, and he had made up the whole thing because that was the way he figured it must have happened. We were all pretty mad at him for doing that, in a way, but in another way we weren't. Because it made sense. Omar said that if we didn't believe it happened that way, tell us how it *did* happen. Of course nobody could tell how it did happen and nobody could come up with a better story than Omar. We thought Jeannie had something when she said maybe the other guy who worked there, a guy called Brownie, had stolen a set of keys and opened the door for Willie. But Omar had an answer for that, too.

"Now, you figure the police couldn't think of that, right?" he said. "They thought about it and figured out it wasn't true. They wouldn't arrest Chris for nothing. They got to have a good reason to arrest a kid."

All the pieces didn't fit together to make it sure or anything, but it certainly seemed that Chris was guilty. Anyway, we all said we would give him the benefit of the doubt, and Dean said he was innocent until he was proved guilty and that was the attitude we ought to take. Then we all said we would be his friend still if he got out on bail or anything. Omar went out to the Coke machine and got two Cokes for himself, and then he said that he would be his friend but he wouldn't hang around him too much in case Willie was going to try to bump him off and get rid of him as a witness.

"You can hang around him if you want," Omar said, "but

I don't want to end up in the newspaper as no innocent bystander."

That just about let the wind out of Gloria's sails about what we were going to do about Chris. She tried switching back to what we were going to do about picketing Mr. Harley, but the talk kept drifting back to Chris and the robbery. We probably would have sat around and talked about it all day, but Dean got us out of it by accusing Omar of really enjoying the fact that Chris was in trouble. And that really seemed what he was doing, too. He said he wasn't, but we still got on him, and it made things easier for all of us. Chris was a friend and, as far as we knew, a pretty nice guy. His father and mother were divorced, and he worked part time to help out. He wasn't the brightest guy in the world or the coolest, just a middle-of-the-road kind of guy who was pretty nice. He had been working since we knew him. In the winter he worked after school and in the summer he worked full time, as he had been this summer in Listening Land, a place where they sold record players, radios, some cameras and posters and things like that. We were all hoping—I'm not really sure about Omar, but the rest of us were hoping—that Chris wasn't really guilty, but it was hard to believe. Omar had said that the police don't arrest you for nothing. This wasn't enough by itself, but the fact that they had arrested Willie Bobo first and then Chris seemed pretty hard.

The next day was Friday and we heard that Chris was getting out on bail. His father and mother brought him home in a cab and took him upstairs. We hung around to

see if he was going to come down, but just his father came down and left.

My father asked me about what had happened when I got home, and I expected to hear one of his lectures about how kids didn't appreciate anything they were getting these days and how hard he had had it when he was a boy. If I've heard that story once I've heard it a dozen times. I could even tell how he was going to twist it, depending on how he started out. And it was all going to lead to how he went to night school, worked hard at his studies, and got a job as a clerk for the Department of Social Services. But he fooled me this time. He didn't say anything. At first I thought it was because he had had a fight with Mom the day before, but he just looked sad. I hadn't told him much, just the things I knew for sure. When I saw he looked sad, I wanted to say something else, and so I said I didn't think Chris was guilty, and he looked at me and said he hoped not. And when he said it, he was twisting his ring around his finger, the way he did sometimes when he was upset about something, and I felt that he meant it with all his heart.

Now that got me a little ticked off. It really did. I just sat there and thought about my father feeling bad for Chris and all. The television was on and we were watching the news—something about the price of oil going up—but all the time I was thinking about Chris and the way my father seemed to be affected.

"How come," I said, getting my nerve up, "you yell at me for just having a paper bag on the floor and you get all upset about the fact that Chris might get in trouble?"

He looked at me and shrugged and then looked away toward the television. The news was just about over when he spoke again.

"Chris has a hard life at home," he said. "I just hope he didn't react to it in the wrong way."

I didn't even know that he knew anything about Chris. I remembered a year or so before he had gone to Chris's house to see if Chris could go on a neighborhood trip. My father was driving one of the buses and Chris was going to be one of the guys he was going to pick up. He wanted Chris to be monitor in the bus he drove, and I was going to be the monitor in the other bus. He had asked me a lot of questions about Chris that night and had seemed really interested when I told him that Chris's parents were divorced.

Saturday and Sunday went by pretty easily. Chris came down and we talked to him about everything in the world except the robbery. I caught myself trying to figure out if he looked guilty. Sometimes I know things, like people don't *look* guilty or not guilty. But still I look at them. Like you look at some guy's picture in the paper that they caught embezzling money, and you say to yourself, "Yeah, he's just the type."

Gloria said we were going to picket Mr. Harley Monday, but then we found out that Chris was going to some kind of hearing and so we waited around for that instead. When he came back we really felt great. For some reason we had thought we would probably never see him again. Then he told us that they just had some kind of preliminary hearing

and that they were going to have a full hearing in two weeks and then set a trial date. He said he was going to have to get a lawyer.

The next day we were in the church office painting signs. Things like "Unfair" and "Who Needs Slums?" and "Slumlords!" We had six signs in all. We had started out with nine, and we had really cool things to put on them, like "Roaches and Rats and Filth Really Hurt, Harley Takes the Money and Leaves Us the Dirt!" Which was made up by me. But we only got three lines on the poster before we ran out of room. The same thing happened to "Mr. Harley Unfair to Disadvantaged Minorities." The last sign that we messed up was because Bubba spelled tenant with two n's. We didn't want to look ignorant, just mad.

Anyway, we were in the church office painting the signs when Pat came by and said the mailman had just left a special-delivery letter in my mailbox. Naturally Gloria wanted us to take a break so we could all go over and see what it was. I told Gloria to mind her B-I business, but then she said it could be from Mr. Harley telling us what improvements he was going to make. I said yeah, but in the back of my mind I also knew it could be Mr. Harley telling me that he was suing me for threatening him or something.

So we all went over to my mailbox, guessing what it might be.

"Maybe it's something for your mother," Jeannie said. "When's the last time you had a special-delivery letter?"

"Never," I said, hoping it was for my mother.

Bubba said it could be from the school and maybe we all got one. His house was before mine and he stopped and

looked in his mailbox. He didn't have a key so he just looked in the slot but he didn't see anything. Then we got to my place and I opened the box. It was addressed to me! It was from somebody called Chasen & Diaz, Attorneys-at-Law. I felt slightly sick to my stomach. I opened the letter, which was jammed full of papers. They were all legal papers, and some of them had drawings on them. I took the papers upstairs and showed them to my mother. She didn't know what they were, and she called my father. He couldn't tell over the phone and told my mother to bring them right down to where he worked.

Most city buildings look terrible, and the madhouse my father worked in was no exception. The walls were a putrid green color except where the paint had chipped off and there was a putrid cream color showing through. There was a low wooden railing that separated the people who worked there from the people who came to get welfare. There was only one real office, and that was in the corner. Everything else was just desks. There were two desks, face to face, a few feet of space between them, and then two more desks. This continued along the wall until they reached the office. Altogether there were eight desks. My father's job is to check their papers when people are supposed to get emergency checks and to make sure the address and everything is right.

When we got down to his office, there was a fat lady sitting at his desk and he was looking at her papers. She was yelling at him and saying that he was a no-good Uncle Tom, and he just ignored her like she wasn't even there and kept looking over her papers. Then he told her something and she started yelling at him and looking through her pocket-

book. Finally, after pulling out about three dirty handkerchiefs and a pack of old letters in a rubber band, she found what he needed and he stamped her papers. Then she smiled and started talking nice to him, but he didn't change his face one time. When she left, he called Mom and me over and took a look at the papers. One lady got mad because she thought that we were welfare people and were getting in front of her, but then my father told her that we were his family and we would only be a minute, so she calmed down.

My father said he didn't know what the papers were for either, and he took us into another office where there was a lawyer and showed the papers to him. He was a young guy, but he had a beard, which he kept pulling the whole time he looked at the papers. Then he looked up at where we were all standing around waiting for him to finish looking at the papers.

"Who's Paul Williams?" the lawyer asked.

"That's my son," my father said, putting his arm around me.

"Well, apparently he has just purchased a building at 356 West 122nd Street for one dollar."

My father looked at me and I looked at him, and then I told him what had happened with Mr. Harley and about me giving him the dollar and everything. Then my father asked the lawyer was it all legal.

"If you sign the papers they're all legal," the lawyer said. "It sounds like your son went down and complained to the owner about the condition of the building, and the owner is saying if you don't like the way I do it, do it yourself."

"But a whole building?"

"It's common for landlords to abandon buildings," the lawyer said. "What he's doing is abandoning this building by giving title to your son. Frankly, your boy doesn't have a thing to lose by accepting it."

Now, that's how I got to be a landlord. That's right, a real honest-to-goodness landlord. The lawyer had a friend of his look over the papers just to make sure, and everything was okay. The second lawyer that looked over the papers worked for the Legal Aid Society, and he said he would be my attorney, free of charge, if I decided to accept. My father said it was okay and I was in business. That is, me and the Action Group. I decided that we would all be landlords because that's how we got into it in the first place. The Legal Aid lawyer, Charlie Turner, drew up a lease form for us to have the tenants sign, saying that they accepted the terms we set forth, and we sent them out. Everybody signed them and sent them back to us, and I called a meeting of the Action Group to decide how we were going to fix up our building.

CHAPTER

3

IT TOOK US A WEEK TO SETTLE DOWN AFTER WE DISCOVERED that we were now the owners of the building. When we first walked into the renting office on the first floor and closed the door behind us, we were all grinning like anything. Then we got serious.

"I think we should raise the rents," Omar said. "That way we can get the money to fix up the place."

"Our new lease says we can't raise the rent unless we do fix it up," I said. "It's a consumer-oriented contract. What that means is that we're not in it to make a lot of money but to run the place right."

"I think that Harley is a dirty character," Gloria said. "He's shifting all the responsibilities to us."

"The first thing we have to do," Dean said, "is to find out who we got living in the building and find out what kind of complaints they have."

That seemed like a good idea and so we called our first tenants' meeting. We were all going to meet in the lobby. Only on the day that the meeting was to be held nobody showed up in the lobby except the six of us. Then we found out that Dean, who was supposed to notify all the tenants of the meeting, had forgotten to do it. That's how come we decided to knock on people's doors. We thought it would be best if just some of us went around, and it was decided that me, Gloria, and Dean would be the ones.

We also found out that Florencia was going back to Puerto Rico to live with her grandmother. Scratch one of the Action Groupees.

The first place we went was down to the basement apartment where a guy named Petey Darden lived. Along with the papers that Mr. Harley had sent us was a letter explaining how Mr. Darden collected the garbage every day and kept the halls clean. In return for doing this he didn't have to pay any rent. Also, the letter said, sometimes he did light repairs in Mr. Harley's other houses, but he didn't do any in 356.

Mr. Darden was okay. He said he got a letter from Mr. Harley saying that we were the new owners, and he wanted to know if we wanted to have the same arrangement with him that Mr. Harley did, and we said yes. Mrs. Darden didn't say much but just kept looking at us like she thought we were going to change into something weird at any moment. None of us said too much to her. We all shook hands

with Mr. Darden and then we went up to the first floor. The renting office is on the first floor and there are only two apartments on it. The rest of the floors have three.

The apartments are labeled A, B, and C. On the first floor the renting office is the A apartment. The B apartment was rented by a lady named Lula Jones.

"You who?"

"We're the new owners of the building," Gloria said. "And we're just coming around to meet all the tenants."

"Well, why you knocking on my door?" Mrs. Jones didn't open her door all the way. She had the chain on, and you could just see one eye peeping through the crack.

"We're the new owners of the building," Gloria said again. This time her eyebrows were going up and down, and she pronounced each word slowly and carefully. "And we are going around to meet all the tenants because we think the building should be a nice place to live, and if we all co-operate perhaps—"

That's all the far she got when Mrs. Jones slammed the door shut. We all looked at each other, and then Gloria put her ear to the door to see if she could hear anything. She couldn't, so we went on to the next apartment. According to the list we got from Mr. Harley, the C apartment was rented by a Mr. Gilfond. He wasn't home, and neither was his wife, so we went up to the second floor. We didn't say much to each other, but we were getting a few doubts, at least I was getting a few doubts. Just to be different we tried the C apartment first, which was rented to a Miss Robinson.

"Who you say you was?" Miss Robinson was small and

coffee-colored. She was wearing a housecoat that went all the way down to the floor.

"We're the new owners of the building," Dean said.

"When you going to do something about my stove?" Miss Robinson said.

"Your stove?"

"Yeah." Miss Robinson moved away from the door and held it open like we were supposed to come in, and so we did. "It ain't worked right since we moved into this raggedy place. You gonna fix it?"

"Well, yes, we are," Gloria said. "Now what apartment is this again?"

"Don't be taking my apartment number down," Miss Robinson said. "Every time that Harley come over here he be taking my apartment number down and don't fix nothing! You know what my apartment is, ain't that many apartments in this raggedy building!"

"That's why we're coming around, to see what's wrong so we can arrange to have it fixed," Gloria said.

"You ain't doing nothing," Miss Robinson said, "except taking down numbers, the same as that other dude!"

"What's going on?" Another woman came out of the bedroom. She was about the same size as Miss Robinson and looked a lot like her except she was a little darker.

"These the new landlords," Miss Robinson said.

"Ain't they some children?" the other woman said.

"Don't make no difference," Miss Robinson said. "All they doing is taking numbers the same way that other dude did. Look at this stove—"

She went over to the stove and turned on all four burners and only two came on. Gloria started writing that down, mostly because she didn't know what else to do, I guess, but Dean reached over and turned something. Then he turned on the gas, and the burners that didn't come on before came on.

"Who you?" Miss Robinson asked.

"Dean."

"You a landlord, too?"

"We all are," Dean said.

"Least you some good if the rest ain't. Maybe you people will be some good, I don't know."

"Now, you're Miss Robinson?" Gloria asked.

"I'm Tina and this is my sister, Johnnie Mae. We both Miss Robinson."

"How come you ain't nothing but some children?" Johnnie Mae asked. "I ain't never heard of no children landlords before."

We tried explaining a little about how we got to be the new owners of the building, but they didn't really seem to care. They asked us if we wanted anything to eat, and we said no. When we got out in the hall, me and Gloria both gave Dean five. That was our first success as landlords.

"How come you know about fixing stoves?" I asked Dean, wishing it had been me that knew.

"Well," said Dean, trying to look cool, "that valve was pointing to off, and when I see something that points to off and it don't work, I point it to on."

Nobody else was home on that floor, and Gloria made a note of that. By now I felt pretty good. At least somebody

liked us and we had got something to working. We were thinking that between all of us we could probably fix just about everything that was broken in the whole place if we had to.

"Then the things we can't fix we can get a handyman or something to come look at," Gloria said. "The thing we got to do is get things fixed right away. That way it won't get out of hand."

We all agreed to that and also talked about getting up a special repair fund. We hadn't met Askia Ben Kenobi yet. When Gloria saw the name on the list, she showed it to me and Dean, and we thought that maybe the guy was a foreigner or something. That was what he was . . . something.

"Do not speak until I have grasped the meaning of your aura!" Askia Ben Kenobi stood in the doorway with both hands in front of him. He was wearing a robe, like the kind you see in *National Geographic*, with a hood and everything. He stood there with his hands in front of him for a moment, and we stood in the hallway. We couldn't see into his apartment because it was almost dark except for some red light that came from behind the door. There was some incense burning and some music, which was as spooky as the red light and the incense.

"What is your business with Askia Ben Kenobi?" He bowed low, and this time he turned his palms up facing us. I looked at Gloria and then at Dean. Dean started laughing a little, and then he really cracked up. Quick as a shot this Askia Ben Kenobi straightened up. He stepped back into his apartment, and I thought he was going to shut the door, but

instead he did a little turn and snatched his robe off. Zip! It was off and he was standing there in nothing but these little short pants. Then he screamed and went into a karate stance.

I hopped back about three steps and Gloria stepped on my foot as she went past me. Dean jumped a little but he was still laughing. Then this guy hops out into the hallway and does a karate chop in the direction of Dean, only he misses Dean and chops right through the banister! No lie. The guy chops right through the banister! I'm not the bravest guy in the world on a good day, and this wasn't a good day. I jumped down the whole flight of stairs, and Gloria was right with me. We hit the bottom of the landing in a heap. I got up first and looked up and saw Dean coming over the side of what was left of the landing because Ben Kenobi was chopping the rest of it up. *Wham! Wham!* Every time he swung, the wood would break up and pieces of the banister would come flying down. Dean hit the stairs and on his next jump landed right where Gloria was still trying to get up, and they went down again. By this time I was halfway together and started for the first floor and the safety of the street. Gloria got up again, and Dean, holding his leg, came behind her.

By the time we got to the first floor the police were there. I figured somebody must have heard the noise. I leaned against the wall, too out of breath to talk, and pointed upstairs.

"There they are! Them's the hoodlums!" It was Mrs. Jones, the lady who had slammed the door on us on the first floor. And it was us she was pointing to.

One cop grabbed me and spun me around and twisted my hand behind my back. Another one grabbed Dean, and before I knew what was happening, me and Dean were handcuffed together. I kept looking around for Askia Ben Kenobi, but he was gone.

"They the ones! They the ones!" Mrs. Jones was in the hallway, pointing at me and Dean and Gloria. She had her finger pointed right at us, about a inch from our faces and shouting to beat the band. Some people on the street came to the door, and I heard somebody saying that they got the guys who was robbing apartments.

Then some more cops came and they brought a girl with them and asked her if we were the ones that took her pocketbook, and she said that Dean wasn't one of them but I looked a little like one of the guys.

While me and Dean was getting ourselves handcuffed, Gloria was screaming about us being the landlords, except the cops didn't get it that way and they was talking about us being the Spanish Lords or something. A minute later the three of us were in a police car. Then guess who sticks his face in the window asking what we did? Bubba!

"What did y'all do?" he said, looking into the window.

"Nothing!" Dean yelled at him.

"You must have done something or they wouldn't have you in the police car," he said.

Yeah. Right. They got us down to the precinct, and lucky for us, we had the letter from Mr. Harley and told the desk captain what was going on. He didn't believe us, naturally, and told us that he was going to book us anyway. Then he called Mr. Harley, who he couldn't get, and then Gloria's fa-

ther, who he did get. All in all we were down at the station for nearly three hours before we were released. We got a lift from Gloria's father and heard his mouth all the way home about what we should have done and what he would have done if the cops had tried to arrest him. He said he was thinking about suing, anyway.

When we got back to our place, it was almost midnight and my father was sitting on the stoop. He had his attitude on, wearing it like a straw hat or something. Then Mr. Wiggins, who is Gloria's father, started telling my father what had happened. I thought that would cool things out some, but when we got upstairs he started his act.

"Why didn't you call a lawyer?" he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know? You just give up your civil rights and you don't know why?"

He went on and on the way only he can do, and he made some sense for a change, only he thought it was cool just because he was right, and it wasn't, not as far as I was concerned, anyway. My mother came in when he had gone to bed and asked me if I wanted a sandwich, and I said okay. I had forgotten I hadn't eaten, and the sandwich was right on the money.

When I woke up the next morning, my knee was sore and my left wrist where I had been handcuffed to Dean. I was laying in bed trying to figure out if I had been a victim of police brutality when the doorbell rang and my mother came in and said that there was some white lady who wanted to see me. I didn't know who she was, but my mother said she was from some kind of city agency. I got

dressed and went into the kitchen where she was sitting. She was thin, and had those kinds of glasses that are really just half a glass and people look over the tops a lot. Her hair was pushed back and tied behind her head. Everything she wore was either black or brown except for a button that said, "Long Live The Grateful Dead." The way her mouth was fixed it seemed that she was mad or something. She was, too. Mom didn't say anything about a guy being with her, but there was one. He was heavy and sloppy looking, with chewed-up fingernails and a stain on his suit jacket.

"I don't know if this is supposed to be a joke, Mrs. Williams," the woman said, "but if it is I don't consider it very funny."

Mom looked at her as if she were crazy. And then she looked at me and I shrugged, because I didn't know what she was talking about either.

"This is typical," the guy said. "You get a slumlord and then they get somebody else to take ownership of the building."

So that was what it was all about. I went and got the papers and told them the whole story, which I was now getting pretty tired of doing. They kept giving each other looks to see if the other one believed the story, and then finally the woman turns back to me and starts her mouthing off.

"Well, if you're the owner of the building—and I still have my doubts," she said, standing up, "then we're here to register our complaints to you. We're from the City Commissioner's office, and we received a complaint that there is no banister on the top floor. Do you realize what a safety hazard that is? Do you realize that there's an old lady up

there who could fall and kill herself because you allowed that banister to get into the condition it's in?"

"We went up there to take a look," the guy said, "and what we saw is just criminal!"

I didn't believe my ears. Here a tenant karate chops the banister to little pieces, and then the very next morning somebody calls the Commissioner's office to complain about it.

"I'll get it fixed," I said. I wasn't about to explain anything more.

"When?" The woman said that with a voice so cold you could have used it to keep ice from melting. She held up a clipboard that she was going to write down my answer on.

"When I get good and ready," I said. "Now why don't you people just get out of here."

I don't know why I said that, really. I wasn't really mad at them or anything. But I was frustrated. Right, that's the word, frustrated. I didn't want to hear any of the things they had to say about the safety or about why I should have it fixed. I mean, I *knew* all those things and it didn't help a bit. Anyway, they left and said that I had sixty days in which to get the banister fixed or the city would have it done and collect rents to pay for it. Sixty days? Everybody in the building could go up there and fall off in sixty days! I was almost ready to say that, too, when I remembered I was the owner.

I called my so-called Action Group people together and told them what had happened. We came to an easy decision. We were going to have to tell Askia Ben Kenobi he had to move. I tried to be as casual as I could when I told Dean to

go up that afternoon, after one o'clock, and tell the guy he had to move. It didn't quite work.

"No way, man," Dean said. "You must be out your mind. I wouldn't go up there and talk to that guy again if I could take your body for him to beat on. You see what he did to that banister? Can you imagine if he hit me?"

"Let's get Mr. Darden to tell him," Jeannie said.

I was really beginning to like Jeannie. I took her with me when we knocked on Mr. Darden's door. It all seemed simple enough. Mr. Darden goes and says how he hates to be the one to tell him and all but he had to move right away. Only Mr. Darden didn't like the idea any more than Dean had.

"Son, when you reach my age life is precious," Mr. Darden said. "You don't go around telling no crazy people they got to move. In fact, you don't go around telling crazy people they *got* to do anything. Now, if I go up there and tell that fellow he has to move and he jumps up and does bodily harm to me, who is going to take care of my wife? Who is going to feed my parakeet? Who is going to do all these things? You? No, my friend. What I suggest that you do is to get you an eviction notice form and give that to him by sliding it under his door when he is not around."

"That'll get him out?" I asked.

"No," Mr. Darden said. "Not as long as he pays his rent it won't. But it might make you feel better."

"Thanks."

"Any time, son, just call on me."

What Mr. Darden did do was to help me and Dean patch

up the banister. When we had finished, it was halfway together, but he said he really couldn't trust it.

I was still determined to get Askia Ben Kenobi out of the house, and I went down to my father's office and spoke to that lawyer again. He said he had about as much chance of putting him out as I had. I told him that didn't make any sense because he didn't live there. He said I was beginning to get the picture.

CHAPTER

4

"I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED," CHRIS SAID. "ALL I know is that one day I was sitting out on the stoop and these two guys come over and one stood and the other guy sat next to me. He asked me if I knew where he could buy any hi-fi equipment, and I told him he could come down to the store where I worked. Then he said he heard I could give him a special price."

"A special price?" Bubba repeated.

"Yeah, and he was talking like this—" Chris leaned back and started talking out of the side of his mouth. "'I heard you could give me a special price.' As if it was all hush-hush and everything. Then I got scared, because the store had been robbed over the weekend, and I thought maybe these

were the guys that did it or something. So I asked him who told him that, and then he said Willie Bobo and looked at me and winked."

"And what did you do?" I asked.

"At first I didn't do nothing," Chris said. "And then he winked again so I winked back."

"How come you winked back?" Gloria asked.

"I don't know," said Chris. "What do you do when a guy sits next to you and starts winking at you?"

"You don't be winking back," Gloria said.

"I never heard of nobody getting arrested for winking before," Chris said.

And he was right, too.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I was real nervous by that time, and the guy was saying something about when could he see some stuff. And I said I didn't know—"

"Why you say all that stupid stuff?" Bubba asked. "Here you sitting there suppose to be innocent and everything, and you running down all that stupid stuff and winking and carrying on—"

"That stuff is only stupid when you guilty," Chris said. "What would you have said?"

"I'd a said, 'I don't know what you two guys are talking about,' and then I'd a said, 'If you don't leave immediately I'll call the police.'"

"They were the police," Chris said.

"Yeah, but they wasn't acting like the police, so when you said you was going to call the police they would have thought you was innocent because you wouldn't call the po-

lice if you was guilty, see? When you didn't call the police they knew you was guilty because they was talking about the robbery and you should have been nervous."

"I was nervous."

"Yeah, but you was nervous for the wrong reason," Bubba said. "That's why they arrested you."

"You'd make a good cop," I said to Bubba. "You think everybody is guilty of something."

"So go on with the story, Chris."

"That's about it. I said I didn't have anything to show them, and they ask me if Willie Bobo had it all, and I said I didn't know, and then they pulled out their badges and arrested me."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"I don't think you're really guilty," Bubba said.

"Thanks a lot."

"Because if you was really guilty you wouldn't sound so guilty," Bubba said. "So either you're innocent and you sound guilty because you're innocent, or you're guilty and you're trying to sound guilty so everybody will think you're innocent. But I think you're innocent."

But what nobody could figure was why Willie Bobo said that Chris was in on the robbery if he wasn't. Gloria said we should hire a private detective to work on the case, and that sounded like a good idea, but when we called a few private detectives they told us that we'd have to pay a hundred dollars a day plus expenses. That was the end of that. Then Jeannie, who was beginning to look a lot smarter than I used to think she was, said that we could scout around and see

what information we could come up with in the neighborhood and then turn it over to the police. I don't know if that seemed like a good idea because it was really good or because it was cheap. Somebody asked how you should go about asking around, and we agreed to play it by ear, whatever that meant.

The first thing we found out was that not too many people cared about any of it. People would say things like, 'Ain't it a shame,' and things like that, but nobody seemed to really care. There was a cop who used to hang out in the rib joint all the time, and we asked him what he thought about it, and he said that sometimes guys like Chris get into trouble because they think they're smarter than anybody else.

After a week had passed, I called a meeting of the Action Group so that we could get a progress report. There wasn't any progress. We didn't know anything more than we had known to begin with. We also talked about hiring an accountant, and everyone was more or less for that. The main reason that we were going to hire an accountant was because the rent at Stratford Arms was due the next week. We thought it would be better if we could tell everyone to send the rent to our accountant. It would sound more official.

We were just about to break up the meeting when one of the Robinson sisters, the light-skinned one, came by and said that the water wasn't running in her toilet and that Mr. Darden wasn't around to fix it. We said okay, and she asked us if we would hurry up because she had to use the bathroom. Then we got into a women's lib argument with Gloria.

"I can fix a toilet just as well as you guys," she said. "So

don't come off telling me about what's women's work and what's men's work!"

"You can't fix no toilet," Bubba said. "You probably just learning to use one right!"

"Bubba, you're so funny," Gloria said in this real sarcastic voice. "Remind me to write a memo to myself to laugh."

Anyway, what happened was that Gloria and Jeannie were going to go fix the toilet. I went along just to see them do it. They got a plunger, a pair of pliers, and a long wire with a crank on the end called a snake. (These were all down in the basement near where the furnace was, and we had seen them when we were down there before.) So we get them and go up to the Robinson sisters' place. Tina was on her way out and told us to make sure that we close the door when we left. I said okay and we went into her bathroom.

Now, the first thing you saw when you went into the bathroom was that it was pretty messy. That was to begin with. There were bobby pins and curlers and that kind of thing all over the sink, and there were dirty clothes in the bathtub. I figured she probably was going to take them to the laundry or something. Gloria had the snake and Jeannie had the other stuff. This was supposed to be strictly a female operation, and they wouldn't even let me carry anything.

Jeannie lifted the toilet seat and saw that it was almost full of water. The water looked kind of murky, too.

"Darn it!" Gloria said. "Sometimes if you pour some hot water down the toilet it unstops it. If you pour any more in this toilet it'll be all over the floor."

Jeannie agreed, and so they put the plunger into the toilet. They pushed it in carefully so that none of the water would

spill out, and they jiggled it up and down but nothing happened. They did this for a while, and then Jeannie said that she didn't think it was going to work, so they started using the snake.

Well, the snake seemed pretty cool. You take this long piece of wire and you push it into the john, and then it pushes anything that's down there out of the way and the water goes down. Only instead of going around the bend, which is what it was supposed to do, it kept coming right back up again. When Jeannie and Gloria finally got the end of the snake under the porcelain part where the water and stuff went when you flushed it, it just came back out again.

"Well, that's not bad," Gloria said. "I saw my father fixing our toilet one day, and he said that when the snake comes right back like that, it means that whatever's stopping it up is right near the top."

"What did he do then?" Jeannie asked.

"He used to stick his hand down there and feel around," Gloria said.

"In the toilet?" Jeannie made a face.

"Yeah," Gloria said, making the same kind of face.

"Yuk!" That's what Jeannie said, and I said the same thing. Then Gloria got another idea.

"But he had real long arms so he could do it," she said, looking at me.

"You mean," I said, "that girls don't want to get their hands dirty?"

"You see any rubber gloves around?" Gloria asked. Only now her voice had gotten really small.

There were some rubber gloves on the hamper, and she

put them on. Then she took a breath and started putting her hand all the way down the john.

"Don't be making faces, Jeannie!" Gloria said as her arm went into the toilet past the elbow.

Jeannie was looking at her with her face completely screwed up, and she really looked funny.

"Suppose you find something nasty in there," said Jeannie.

"Like what?" I asked, even though I knew I shouldn't.

"Like some"—she hunched her shoulders up and held her nose—"you know."

"Will you shut up, Jeannie!" Gloria's eyes were glistening a little, like she was on the verge of crying or something, but she still fished around in the john for whatever it was that was stopping it up.

"Don't stir it up too much," Jeannie said.

I wanted to laugh because it really looked funny. There's Gloria on her knees with her hand in the john and her face screwed up one way, and Jeannie standing next to the john with her face screwed up another way. Normally I wouldn't have laughed because I didn't want her to tell me to stick *my* hand down the john. Normally, but then Jeannie had to open her mouth again.

"Say, Gloria," Jeannie said, peering into the water where Gloria's hand had disappeared. "Suppose something grabs your hand."

Well, that cracked me up, and I just about fell down laughing. I looked at Jeannie, and she was trying to keep from laughing, and the tears that Gloria had been fighting came pouring down, but she still kept her hand in the water.

All this really ticked Gloria off and she stood up and told Jeannie that it did.

"Go ahead, you can help," Gloria said. "You give it a try."

Jeannie took a long look at the toilet and then her nose wrinkled up.

"I think this whole idea is ridiculous!" she said. "I'm not putting my hand in any you-know-what!"

"That's what it's all about," Gloria said. "If you're going to be part of this group you have to—"

Gloria hadn't even finished what she was saying before we lost another member of the Action Group. Jeannie slammed the Robinsons' door as she left.

Just then Tina came back and asked us what we were doing. Gloria said that we were trying to unstop the john.

"That ain't the part that's stopped up," Tina said. "It's the top part that's stopped up."

"Then how come all this water is in the bottom part?" Gloria asked.

"'Cause that's how I found that the top part didn't work," Tina said. "I poured some soapy water in there to wash it out like I do every week, and then I let it sit for a while, and then when I went to flush it it didn't flush."

I got up on the top and looked in and saw that the round ball in the box was caught up against a piece of coat hanger someone had put there before to fix something, and I just gave it a little push. When I did, it started filling up, and a moment later it flushed. Tina said thanks, and then she asked Gloria did she always play in the water like that, and

Gloria got mad even though Tina was only kidding around. It was funny, though.

We got downstairs and a few minutes later Chris's father came by. We had never met Chris's father before. As a matter of fact, we didn't know a whole lot about any of his family. They weren't well off—we knew that, but that was about all we did know. They weren't exactly standoffish, but they weren't what you would call particularly friendly, either. Chris would do things for people, though. He would help someone on the block with a package, or help you fix your bike—that kind of thing. And you would think that you were getting to know him a bit, and then he would almost disappear. Not disappear, really, just never be around the way most of us were. You saw Chris and he was always *going* someplace. He was on his way to school or to the library or to one of the jobs he always seemed to have.

I had been going to school with him for as long as I remember. We were in the third grade together and then again in the first year of junior high. After that I saw him in different classes, but we never had the same home room.

I didn't know his father, either. That is, if I saw him on the street I would speak, and if you asked me who that was I would say that it was Chris's father, but he never stopped to talk to us or anything.

So, when he showed up in front of The Joint I was surprised. I was even more surprised when he sat down. We talked about this and that, and Bubba said he was sorry about the trouble Chris was in and that he was sure every-

thing would be okay. Chris's father said he was sure it would be. Then he asked us if we knew or had heard anything about the robbery. I felt he had wanted to say that all the time but didn't know how to get around to it.

"We've decided to keep our ears and eyes open," I said. "We figure we might be able to hear something that would help."

"Yeah," Bubba said, "we're working on the case. We'll probably solve it before the police will."

"Umm! That's okay." Chris's father rubbed his knee as he spoke. "That's okay. Look, if you hear about anything, let me know. I told my boss about what happened."

He stopped talking, as if he had said something that we should know about. Bubba gave me a look and I gave him one back. I got the impression that Chris's father wasn't too bright.

"We'll let you know if we hear anything," I said.

"Um, yeah, my boss is okay. He's a white guy but he's okay." He was rubbing his knee again. I don't even think he knew he was doing it. "He saw that I was upset, you know, and he ask me what was wrong and I told him. He said it would be a good thing to go around and ask everybody if they heard anything. Then he said he'd put up a thousand dollars if anybody came up with something that would clear Chris."

"Chris is part of the block," I said. "If we hear anything that will help him, we'll let you know. We couldn't take money for helping a friend."

He thanked us and then he changed the subject for a while. Then he said he had to get home and change his

clothes. He said it as if it was something we should know about. Then he left.

"I don't think he's wrapped too tight," Bubba said after Chris's father was out of hearing range.

"He's probably just upset," I said. I didn't think he was wrapped that tight myself, but I didn't like talking about it.

"You think his boss is really going to put up a thousand dollars?" Bubba asked.

"Probably," I said. "But you don't need a reward to help a friend."

"No, that's right," Bubba said. "But if he tied me down and stuck it in my pocket against my will, I could live with it."

CHAPTER

5

THERE ARE THINGS PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE. Even if people go around saying you shouldn't judge a book by its covers and things like that, you still expect people to look a certain way. You meet a guy who teaches English and he wears glasses. Just about all guys who teach English wear glasses. You see a guy who works in a drugstore and he's usually kind of skinny and he never wears a beard. Guys who play baseball can wear beards and get by, even guys who work in construction, but never a guy who works in a drugstore, and, most important, landlords are supposed to be adults. Anyway, all that was to get into Mr. Pender. We figured that the reason we were having trouble with The Joint was that we were really young, and older people don't

know how to deal with young people. They always feel they have to tell us to do something.

So what we did was to think about getting someone to work for us who was a bona fide adult. Then Dean said we should get someone who could do something, too. That seemed like a good idea, and we thought about it for a while. Gloria said we should get someone who could do plumbing, and I thought about getting someone who could help keep the place clean. Bubba said we should get someone to keep the money straight, and that seemed to be the best idea. So we called around to a couple of places from the Yellow Pages to see about hiring an accountant. They were all either not interested or too expensive. Then we called the New York State Employment Service, and after talking to some woman for about five minutes, convincing her that it wasn't a prank call just because we were young, she said she would refer someone to us. Well, who she referred was Mr. Pender.

Mr. Pender was short and very neat. He wore a gray suit that looked very spiffy, and he carried a briefcase. Me and Gloria were in the renting office when he arrived. He didn't look like an accountant to us. In fact, he looked like an ad for tea or something.

"Mr. Williams, please," he said, as he came into the renting office.

"I'm Mr. Williams," I said.

"Pender," he said, "Jonathan Pender, and I'm here to see about the position you have available in your accounting department."

I took a look at Gloria, and she looked at me, and there

was just a little bit of a smile on her face.

"Well, the job is to be the accountant of this building," I said. I started to get up, but then I sat back down again because I thought I would look more important sitting behind the desk.

"And my duties would be?" Mr. Pender's left eyebrow went up about one inch when he asked the question.

"Mostly just accounting stuff," Gloria said. "Do you know how to do that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I'm quite good at it," Mr. Pender said. "I am experienced and have references. Am I to take it that you are the owner of this building?"

"Both of us are," I said, "plus a couple of others."

"I see," Pender said. "And who has been keeping your books to this point?"

"What books?" Gloria asked. I was going to say that I was, but Gloria spoke up first.

Mr. Pender said that he "saw" again, and I was just about ready to give up on him and the idea of hiring an accountant altogether. Then Bubba came in, which was no help, and he started in right away about how the block association had come to him and asked for a donation to beautify the block.

"I said okay, right?" Bubba went on. "Then when I gave them twenty cents, they come talking about how they weren't looking for no twenty cents and how they thought I was supposed to be some big-deal landlord."

"Humph!" Gloria tried to draw Bubba's attention to Mr. Pender, who was still standing in the middle of the floor. To me, he looked like a black Charlie Chaplin or somebody.

"So I said, 'If you don't want my twenty cents, give it on back!' And you know, they gave it back?" Bubba said.

"Hey, man, this is Mr. Pender," Gloria said, jumping in when Bubba was catching his breath. "He's an accountant."

"Quite, my friend," said Mr. Pender. "You must be one of the owners."

"Yeah," Bubba said, looking at Mr. Pender suspiciously.

"The job doesn't pay a lot," I said.

"Well, it isn't a very large building," said Mr. Pender. "So I don't imagine it will take my full time to maintain a set of books for you. But I am interested in the position if it is still available."

"You are?" Gloria asked. "I mean, that's great."

We were all smiling because we had an accountant and we were pretty sure that it would make everything a lot easier.

"Of course," Mr. Pender continued, "I imagine my hire would be subject to the approval of the other owners."

I said that I approved and so did Bubba. Mr. Pender said that he was sure that we could work out the terms, and everyone was happy. We all shook hands, and Mr. Pender said that he had some matters to attend to and would return in the morning. Gloria said that we would look forward to seeing him in the morning.

"Well," Mr. Pender said, smiling. "Peerio! Chip, chip, peerio!"

"Wha-?" Bubba looked at Mr. Pender, who was just about to leave. And then, just before he left, Mr. Pender repeated what he had said.

"Peerio! Chip, chip, peerio!" Then he was gone.

We looked at each other after he had left, and then Bubba started laughing. When Bubba laughs, he has three gears. The first gear is when he kind of shouts at you and then the shout breaks up into a laugh. The second gear is when he points at you and then starts stamping his feet. And the third gear is when he falls on the floor and starts rolling around and pointing at the ceiling. When he does this, a real high laugh comes out of him. When Mr. Pender left, Bubba went right into his third gear.

Gloria started laughing, too, and I guess I laughed a little bit.

"Maybe it's English," I said.

We got some pizza and were sitting around with nothing much to do when the phone rang and it was the lady from the employment service. She asked if Mr. Pender had shown up, and we said yes and that he was going to start work for us the next day. She seemed real surprised. I asked her if he was any good, and she said that he was but he was kind of strange, too.

Well, it didn't turn out so bad when he showed up the next day, because he didn't say anything really strange. Not right away, anyway, unless you want to consider that chip, chip, peerio kind of strange. I mean, it's a little *strange*, but it's not too bad once you get used to it. Try saying it aloud sometime, it sounds okay. Only, until you really get it down pat say it when you're by yourself.

"Who did you work for before?" Gloria asked.

"Well, now, that's quite a good question," Mr. Pender said. He was wearing the same suit he had on the day before,

and it looked like the same shirt, too, but it was really clean and everything.

"I have been employed with a number of firms as well as my own investment concern," Mr. Pender said. "I have also worked for a number of nonprofit agencies."

"You have your own investment business?" Gloria asked.

"Indeed." Mr. Pender took off his jacket, and we saw that there were rubber bands around his arms just below the elbow, as if his shirt was too long. "My company has been in operation for nearly four years."

"Have I ever heard of your company?" Gloria asked.

To tell you the truth, I was getting tired of Gloria asking all the questions. Mostly because they made her sound as if she was really smart, or at least smarter than me and Bubba. She probably was smarter than Bubba.

"I would imagine not," said Mr. Pender. He was taking yellow pads and pencils out of his briefcase. "But the assets of Financial Banana have more than doubled during its rather short existence."

"Did you say Financial Banana?"

Tina Robinson had come in just when Mr. Pender was talking, and she gave him a quick lookover. Meanwhile Bubba was cracking up again, only this time he was doing it without making any noise. He was in a silent gear three.

"Yes, yes, of course." Mr. Pender looked down at Bubba. "You must be wondering why I call it Financial Banana."

"Yeah, run it on by me," Tina said.

"Well, for the first part it's not a name that one easily forgets, therefore partially eliminating the need for extensive

advertising. Secondly, it's an apt name because I invest in fruit futures."

"And you think bananas have a future?" Tina looked real serious.

"That I do, my dear," Mr. Pender said, smiling. "That I do."

You ever find someone you want people to like? Like you find a friend who wears really thick glasses and has big ears or something like that, and right away you start telling people how smart they are or what a nice person they are? Well, for some reason that's the way I felt about Mr. Pender.

I figured if he was working with us, even part time, he couldn't be doing that well, and he seemed like a nice kind of guy. Strange, but a nice kind of guy. I didn't mind Bubba cracking up on him, because Bubba would crack up on anyone. But I didn't like Tina doing a number on him, and I could kind of tell that Mr. Pender didn't either. So I asked Tina what she wanted, and she said she wanted someone to change a light bulb, and then maybe she'd go upstairs and talk to her banana about its future. She winked at Gloria and then left.

"Don't worry about Tina," I said. "She's always shooting her mouth off."

"Oh, I'm not in the least worried," Mr. Pender said. "I've managed to get by the first two thousand years or so, and I imagine that the rest won't be as difficult."

This time even Gloria cracked up a little, but she put her arm around Mr. Pender's shoulder for a moment and gave the guy a squeeze, and then she left. She liked him, too, I thought, and that made me feel glad.

I gave Mr. Pender what records we had, including a composition book that, I assumed, was part of "the books." He started looking them over and sorting them out on the desk.

"I'm really kind of surprised you decided to take the job," I said after everyone else had left. "It's not the greatest job in the world."

"Surprised?" Mr. Pender looked up at me. "Well, yes, you would be, wouldn't you? Do you mind if I ask you whether or not you're religious?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of . . ." I started to say that I was kind of religious, but then I was afraid he was going to ask me what church I went to or something and I didn't want to get into that. "I'm not too religious, but I am a little, if you know what I mean."

"Well, even if you're just a little religious, I think you'll relate to this story," he said. "When Christ was being crucified there were two people, a father and his young son, watching as Christ was carrying the cross up the hill. The little boy asked his father why Christ carried the cross on the shoulder that he did, instead of on the other shoulder the way he had seen his father carry heavy bundles. The father said that every man has his own way of carrying his burdens.

"Now, I don't mean to say that I have a cross to bear or anything of the sort. But I've had to learn to accommodate to life, while you, as a young man, are still trying to get life to accommodate to you. And I won't say you won't be successful. But some men drink, if that is their nature. Some men accumulate wealth or power, if that becomes possible for them, and some merely suffer silently on. I have chosen a

compromise which I can tolerate without completely giving up my illusions. Some will find it silly, others amusing, or perhaps deceitful. Still others will find it simply distinctive of me. What more can a man ask for?"

He started going through the papers again, as if the conversation was over, asked a few more questions, gave out a few more "my, my's," and seemed to be really enjoying what he was doing. I left him to his work. I didn't exactly go for the story he was saying, about how everyone had to do their own thing, so to speak, but I still liked him.

I went home, and my father was there and asked me if I wanted to go fishing and I told him no and he asked me why.

"I don't know, I just don't want to go," I said.

"Do you know that you don't want to go?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, knowing the next thing he was going to say.

"Then you ought to know why you don't want to go."

"It's just not my idea of something to do," I said.

He went off in a huff and sat in the dining room and I went to my room. Mom came in with a sandwich, which I wanted to refuse to show that I was pissed, but it was a hamburger with onions so I just chewed it hard instead.

I got two calls within one minute, which was about the first time that had ever happened to me in my life. The first call was from Mr. Pender, and he said that he had put together a temporary set of books and that I could come take a look at them if I wanted to. I didn't really want to, but I figured it was expected of me, so I said I'd be right over. The other call was from Bubba—who else?—and he asked me if

I wanted to take a walk with him. He had his cousin's dog for a week while his cousin went to North Carolina, and he had to take it for a walk.

I met Bubba downstairs and told him about the call from Pender, and I could tell that he wasn't really interested in going to see the books but he felt he had to the same as I did. By now I was a little sorry about having the building. Not that I didn't like the idea, but I was afraid that if we fouled it up my father was going to stick his mouth in it.

Oh, yeah, the dog was crazy.

"His name is Blade," Bubba said. "I think he's a little nervous about being in Manhattan."

"Where's he from?"

"Brooklyn."

He wasn't nervous, he was just crazy. The first thing he did was to run up to a fire hydrant and try to bite it. No lie. He tried to bite it. Bubba pulled him off the fire hydrant, and he stood there and barked at it as if he was really pissed off. You ever see these movies on television where there's an invisible dude walking around doing people dirt, and nobody can see him, and then a dog comes up and starts barking at him? Well, that's what this looked like.

Actually I thought maybe there was some kind of weird smell on the fire hydrant until we got to the tree. He attacked the tree, too. He tried to bite it and he was growling and carrying on. He didn't bother people, but any kind of thing that couldn't move, like a tree, a fire hydrant, or a light pole, really seemed to tick him off.

We got to The Joint and found Pender waiting for us in the office. He showed us the books he set up, and it seemed

so logical that I was wondering how come I hadn't thought of it myself. Bubba headed back home, and I walked Pender to the subway station. Seemed he lived in Queens someplace, near Rego Park. He said that he was glad to be working with us.

"I don't really see why," I said. "We seem to be getting all the benefits."

"Only the more obvious ones," he said.

Then I started telling him about how we had thought about setting up books ourselves, which was not really a complete lie, because somebody had mentioned it, I forget who, and how we were sidetracked because of Chris getting arrested.

"This Christopher," Mr. Pender said, "do you think he's really innocent?"

"I'm sure of it," I said. "He's really not that kind of guy. I know it isn't evidence or anything like that, but he's just not the kind of guy to go around stealing like that."

"So," said Pender, "you have two major problems. The first is how to come to terms with Mr. Askia Ben Kenobi—"

"You saw the bill to have the banister replaced?"

"I did, and your notations about how it came to be broken."

"We couldn't think of anything else to do," I said, "so we wrote it all down."

"Not a bad idea," Mr. Pender said. "It's really not a bad idea at all. But I think I might be able to deal with him."

"I wouldn't try it," I said. Askia Ben Kenobi was a good six inches taller than Pender, besides being about twenty-five years younger and a karate expert.

"Well, we'll see," Pender said.

We had reached the subway at 125th Street and St. Nicholas when I remembered that Pender had said we had two problems. I called down the stairs after him.

"Hey, what was the other problem?"

He turned back toward me and then came back up the stairs.

"I suppose you'll be shopping around to see who has the stolen record players and what have you," Pender said. "And I would imagine that finding any kind of stolen merchandise in a city as large as this would be a problem. I imagine, though, that there is someone in the neighborhood who might know where to find a property if the price was right. Wouldn't you?"

I was about to try to stammer out some kind of an answer when Mr. Pender chip-chip-peerioed me, turned, and was gone. It did seem like a good idea. We could let it get around that we were interested in buying some hi-fi equipment and see who turned up with some. It might not work, I knew, but it was worth a try. In fact, it seemed so simple that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself.