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## CHAPTER

## 6

WE WERE ALL SITTING AROUND THE JOINT THE NEXT DAY when Mr. Pender showed up. He said that if we wanted him to he would give us a financial report. Everybody said yes, which ticked me off just a little. I didn't want to be the boss or anything, but I thought I did have more of an interest in The Joint than the others. It didn't even matter to me that it was my dollar that bought the place or that the building was actually in my name, although the members of the Action Group had all signed a paper saying that we all owned The Joint. Maybe I did want to be the boss—I don't know. I did know that I was changing the way I felt about owning the place. And after Mr. Pender's report I was changing even more.

"I've broken down the costs of owning and operating the building in terms of apartments," Mr. Pender said, rubbing the corner of his mustache with his finger. "The average rent is one hundred and thirty dollars per month per apartment. There are eight apartments being rented, and one, the basement apartment, being exchanged for services.

"It takes the rents from three apartments per year to heat the building and to supply the basic utilities.

"It takes the rent of one apartment to pay the taxes and special assessments, such as sewer and water . . ."

"Sewer and water?" Bubba looked at Mr. Pender. "What sewer?"

"The wastes from the building are emptied into the sewer," Mr. Pender said. "The sewers are maintained by the city, and you have to pay a fee for their use."

"How about the water?" Bubba asked.

"Part of the services you provide when you offer a place for rental," Mr. Pender said. "Shall I go on?"

"Yeah," Bubba said, a little put out.

"Your insurance is equal to a little more than the cost of one and a half apartments. It would be foolish to try to operate a building without insurance. Normal wear and tear, if Mr. Darden does most of the minor repairs, can be kept at one half of one apartment over the cost of the apartment Mr. Darden lives in. Otherwise the cost would be closer to three and one-quarter apartments. Repairs caused by vandalism"—Mr. Pender looked up at us carefully when he said this—"comes to one apartment. That leaves a total profit of one apartment. So what you can expect to earn—that is, if you don't make any improvements in the building, nothing

major breaks down, vandalism does not increase, all the apartments are rented and the rent is paid—is the equivalent of one apartment's annual rent."

"Is that a joke?" Gloria asked.

"It's not a joke," Mr. Pender said, "I assure you. The potential for loss is far greater than the potential for profit."

"We oughta find the apartment we're making money on and dump the rest," Bubba said.

"Suppose we raise the rents?" I asked.

"Then you will probably get more people falling behind in their monthly obligations," Mr. Pender said.

"Then there's no way to make money on the building at all," Gloria said. "That's why Harley gave it to us."

"Well, there is a way to possibly make a small profit," Mr. Pender said. "If vandalism is decreased somewhat, it would help. Also, if rents were paid on time, and could be counted on to be paid on time, then some of the moneys realized could be used to make some improvements, which would justify a small raise in the rents."

"We could just double the rents and get better people in here," Bubba said.

"Yeah." Dean hadn't been saying anything, but he was writing down what Pender had said and adding up the figures. "Then we could make about two hundred and sixty a month pure profit."

"Not really—"

"Yes, we could," Dean interrupted. "Because if we're making one apartment profit, that's one thirty per month, right? Then if we doubled the rent, we could pay the same things for taxes and stuff and for the dumb sewer and proba-

bly make more money even if the apartments weren't completely filled up."

Dean showed Mr. Pender the paper he had been writing his figures on, and Mr. Pender looked them over carefully.

"The only problem, sir"—Mr. Pender put Dean's paper down—"is that what determines the rent of a building is not simply what you decide to charge. There are a lot of empty places on this block. There's a place on the other side of the street that's boarded up. If you raise the rent by the amount you mention here, people will simply not live here. They will live in an empty apartment across the street or in the next block. Of course, if you could manage to take this building down to the Murray Hill district, you could probably charge more for the apartments. If Mr. Farley could have charged more—"

"Mr. Harley," Bubba corrected.

"If Mr. Harley could have simply charged more, he would have. Your one advantage is that none of you are looking on this place as a sole means of income. You can afford to see what you can do with the building. If you were really good businessmen you would give it up."

"You mean abandon the building?"

"No, I don't," Mr. Pender said. "I don't think inhumanity is ever something that one should do, and abandoning a building is largely inhumane if there are tenants living in it. But once the building was empty you wouldn't want it as a business investment, would you?"

What Pender had said was discouraging, but the profit didn't seem so bad once you thought about it in cash money. It might not have made a lot of money as far as a business



went for adults, but for us it wasn't too bad. Only, I wanted to make improvements, and so did the others. We didn't say too much in front of Pender, but we were pretty discouraged when we talked about it among ourselves later.

"Suppose we ran a nonprofit business," Bubba said. "That way we wouldn't have to worry about it."

"You mean, like a hobby?" Dean asked.

"Sure, why not?" Bubba said, liking his own idea. "Then we can just keep it and be landlords."

"And call ourselves the Inaction Group," Gloria said. "Every person who has a house like this has the same problem, and half the people want to walk away from it or just take what little they can. We have to at least try to do better. Maybe we can do something about the people messing up the place."

"Everybody doesn't mess the place up," I said. "Just a few people."

"Yeah, like Askia Ben Kenobi," Bubba said.

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# CHAPTER

# 7

WE HAD ALWAYS KNOWN THAT DEAN WAS STRANGE. NOT stupid strange, but weird strange. You ever read about those old guys who just about invented the airplane? Or the guys who first knew about the atoms and how they would blow up the world one day, only they couldn't do anything about it because it was like three thousand years before the first calendar? Dean was one of that kind of guy. He did weird things that weren't quite weird enough to be really weird but were weird enough to be *kind* of weird. For example, he had this goldfish that he was going to try to teach to walk on the ground. So every day he would come home and take the goldfish out of water and hold it up in the air for a few seconds. He said he was speeding up the evolutionary process.

Bubba said if he did that—got the fish to walking around out of water—the fish would probably think that Dean was God and start worshiping him.

“After a while there’d be this funny-smelling church with all fish in the pews worshiping Dean,” Bubba said. He also said that he wouldn’t want any fish worshiping him.

But that’s not the main point. Because it was kind of a way-out idea, but it wasn’t that way-out. Suppose you could speed up evolution. It could just work out.

Then another time Dean painted a bottle black and put tape on it and took it outside in the sunlight. He opened the bottle so that light could get in, and then he closed it real tight. Then all of us went up to his house and sat in his room with all the lights out while he opened the bottle to see if we could see any light coming out. We tried it five times, and only once did anybody ever see anything, or think they saw something. That was Florencia. She said she saw a picture of a cowboy. Dean thought that maybe he had trapped some light from the past or something.

To make a long story short, Dean read this book about the power of the mind. He read where some guy from Israel, or some place in that part of the world, could bend nails with his mind. The whole point, the guy said, was that you could do anything you wanted to with your mind, including physical things like moving things around. So what Dean decided to do with his mind was to put an invisible shield around himself and put Askia Ben Kenobi out.

“You sure this invisible shield is going to work?” Gloria said.

“You don’t believe it, right?” Dean was rocking back and

forth and humming to himself between his words. "You don't believe it, right?"

"How come you humming?" Gloria said. "I didn't mean any harm."

"He's concentrating his powers of the mind," Bubba said. "You know that aura that Askia Ben Kenobi is always talking about?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, that's the same kind of aura that Dean's putting around himself."

We watched Dean for a while, humming and rocking back and forth. Then all of a sudden he bolted out the door and up the stairs toward Askia's apartment. We followed, but it was hard to keep up with him. By the time we had made it to the third floor, Dean was already banging on Askia Ben Kenobi's door.

"NNNNnnnnnnnnnn!" And he was humming. He banged some more and did some more humming. "NNNNNnnnnnnnnnn!"

Askia Ben Kenobi threw open the door. He was all greased up again and had a silver star hung around his neck.

"Who knocks upon the door of Askia Ben Kenobi?" Askia Ben Kenobi said. I never noticed it before, but his nose moved when he breathed just like Brock Peters' nose did.

"AAAiieeee!"

When Dean screamed, Askia Ben Kenobi jumped back and went into his karate stance. All his fingers were pointing toward Dean, and his teeth were clenched.

"AAAiieeee!" Dean said it again, except this time it

wasn't so much of a screech as it was a little noise that he made. "OOOOiiiiiii! EEeedebee-deee! Wahooooooo! Bee-wooooo!"

Each time Dean would make a new noise, he would go into another pose. They weren't exactly karate poses, but more a cross between ballet and the way you look when you follow through in bowling. Anyway, he kept making the noises, each one a little softer than the last, and then he started down the stairs. We all watched him, including Askia Ben Kenobi. But Dean went on down the stairs, making those little noises and posing. I looked up at Askia, and he shrugged and went back into his apartment.

"What happened?" I asked when we got back downstairs and found Dean sitting in the office.

"Yeah, I thought you were going to put him out," Bubba said.

"What happened to your shield?" Gloria asked.

"The shield was there," Dean said. "Only it was just around my mind. I was afraid he was going to kick my rear end. Got to figure a way to get that shield a little lower."

"You mean you chickened out?" Bubba asked.

"Would you believe I was afraid I might hurt him?" Dean asked.

"No," Bubba said, "I wouldn't. I think you chickened out!"

"That," said Dean, "is the way it be's sometime."

It seemed that we were going to have to learn to live with Askia Ben Kenobi.

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# CHAPTER

# 8

I WAS BORN IN MARCH AND I'M AN ARIES, AND BUBBA WAS born in May and he's a Taurus. I don't believe in signs or anything like that, but I thought I'd throw that out so you know, and if you believe in signs you'll know what I mean next. Also, my biorhythms are completely different than Bubba's. I'm thin, at least thinner than he is, and I think I'm better looking except for my ears, which are little and just a bit pointed at the top. Which doesn't mean a thing, no matter what anyone says. Anyway, the fact that me and Bubba are different didn't stop us both from being zapped on the same day.

Bubba got zapped first. He had contacted the Captain and

told him that he wanted to be a numbers runner. Now the Captain is the main numbers man in the neighborhood. He is very fat, with little pig eyes that are always blinking, and short little fingers that are always a little greasy, I guess from the way he eats.

When Bubba told the Captain he wanted to be a numbers runner, the Captain told him to come over to where he stayed, which was the back of a dry cleaner's store, and take the numbers runner test. He was supposed to come over at exactly three o'clock that afternoon. The Captain said that anybody else who wanted to be a numbers runner could come over, too. Bubba said that he wanted to be a numbers runner mostly because he wanted to be two things in life—rich and cool. As far as we could tell, the Captain was rich—he was always flashing a big roll of money. When he gave somebody some money, he would never look at the money. He would look right at the person's face and count the money out. First he would lick his thumb, and then he would take a bill from his roll and put it in the person's hand, and then he would lick his thumb again, and then he would take another bill from the roll. Sometimes the roll would have hundred-dollar bills and twenties and tens—still the Captain wouldn't look at it. They said he never made a mistake.

So when the Captain said for Bubba to come over and take the numbers runner test, Bubba figured he wanted to see if he could count.

"Fifty-sixty-seventy-eighty-ninety-one-oh-five—" Bubba rattled off. He was practicing counting Monopoly money in

the office. I was helping him, and Mr. Hyatt, who lives in 2A and who was now a little tipsy, was watching.

"Whose picture is on a ten-dollar bill?" Mr. Hyatt asked.

"I don't know," Bubba said.

"Well, you better find out," Mr. Hyatt said. "One time I was applying for a job in the bank across from Smilen Brothers, and they asked me whose picture was on a ten-dollar bill. I didn't know whose picture was on no ten-dollar bill and I didn't get the job."

"Whose picture is on the ten-dollar bill?" I asked.

"Thomas Jefferson's," Mr. Hyatt said. He seemed proud that he knew.

Then we tried to find out whose pictures were on all the bills, and we only got a few of them. But it was getting to be time to go over to the dry cleaner's, and me and Bubba and Dean went over.

Weasel was out front in the dry cleaner's. He just sat in a chair behind the counter and looked mean. That was his job. He was big and ugly and mean looking. When you went in to see about getting your clothes out of the cleaner, he would look at you like you had said something about his mother or something. They said that he had a gun and would shoot you if you sneezed wrong.

"We're supposed to see the Captain," Bubba said to Sally. Sally was the girl who worked behind the counter.

Sally looked over at Weasel and Weasel looked at Bubba. Bubba tried to smile, but it came out like he was making a face or something, and he looked away. Then Weasel looked at me and Dean, and we looked away, too.



Then he nodded and Sally let us go into the back where the Captain was sitting drinking coffee and listening to the radio.

"Hi!" Bubba said.

"How much is twenty-seven times nine?" the Captain asked.

"What?" Bubba looked at him.

"That ain't the right answer," the Captain said. "Try again."

"What were those numbers again?"

"Twenty-seven times nine!"

"Nine times seven is what?" Bubba scratched his head. "Is sixty-three. Nine times two is eighteen. One eighty-three, and six left over is one nine."

The Captain reached over on a shelf and pulled down a paper and pencil.

"Do it right this time."

When Bubba did it again, it came out to two hundred and three.

"Write down two hundred and three on this paper," the Captain said, giving Bubba another piece of paper.

Bubba wrote it down.

"Now here's a dollar for you to play that number for me, okay?"

"Okay." Bubba smiled.

"See, you too dumb to keep the numbers in your head and figure them out like a good numbers man, so you got to write them down on a paper. I'll tell you how to play it soon as I finish this here coffee."

The Captain kept his little pig eyes right on Bubba as he slurped down his coffee.

"Captain, here come that cop again!" It was Sally from the front.

"Ball that piece of paper up real quick!" the Captain said to Bubba.

Bubba balled the sheet of paper up as fast as he could and looked around for someplace to throw it. He started to throw it in the wastepaper basket, but the Captain stopped him.

"That'll be the first place they look," he said. "Put it in your mouth. If they find you with that paper, you'll be in jail before you turn around."

We could hear footsteps coming toward the back just as Bubba got the paper in his mouth.

"Swallow it, quick!" the Captain said.

Just then two cops, one white and the other one black, came in with Sally.

"What you doing, Mr. Lloyd?" the white cop asked.

"You call me Captain like everybody else," the Captain said.

"What these boys doing here?" the black cop asked. He poked me with his stick. "What's your name?"

"Paul Williams," I said. I tried to look over to where the Captain was sitting, to see how he was taking the whole thing, but I couldn't get my eyes to move right.

"What's your name?" the black cop asked Dean next.

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you."

"Me?" Dean's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Yeah, you are standing here, ain't you?" the cop asked.

"Dean Michaels." The voice that came out of Dean sounded completely different than the way he usually sounds.

"And how about you, my man?" The white cop tapped Bubba on the end of his nose, and Bubba made a sound like a frog.

"Hey, this one's real funny," the white cop said. "You tap him on his nose and he makes a sound like a frog."

The white cop tapped Bubba on his nose, and he made a sound like a frog again. Then I realized what he was doing. He was trying to swallow that piece of paper that the Captain had made him put in his mouth.

"We could put him on *The Gong Show*," the black cop said. "Now you let me tap his nose, because I got the most rhythm, and you kind of lead him through a tune. We might have us something here."

So the black cop started tapping Bubba on the nose, and the other cop pretended like he was leading an orchestra, and Bubba was making those frog noises, though not like he was making a tune, because you could tell that Bubba was scared. If you didn't know him and couldn't tell by the funny look in his eyes, you could probably tell by the tears running down his cheeks.

"You know"—the white cop turned to the Captain—"you got some funny people hanging out with you. Strange."

Then the two cops left. They weren't gone more than a few seconds when Bubba threw up. He threw up in the

wastepaper basket mostly, except for a little bit on his pants and on Dean's sneakers.

"How much is thirty-one times thirteen," said the Captain as Bubba was finishing throwing up in the basket.

Bubba didn't even bother trying to figure that one out. He just got up, wiped his face off on his sleeve, and headed for the door.

"You people sure you the future?" Sally asked as we went through the front.

The more I thought of what had happened, the more I thought that the Captain had set it up. The Captain was really okay, or at least he was as far as I could tell. What he was doing with Bubba was showing him that the whole idea of being a numbers runner was not so cool after all. One of the things that the Captain could have done was to play big man and try to impress us, but he didn't. Instead he just went about the business of what he was about and letting us know that we weren't going to be runners just because we liked the idea.

That's how I got into trouble with Gloria. I figured that what the Captain was doing was being a total businessman. Maybe later on I would have thought differently, but not right then. Bubba went on home and Dean and I went over to The Joint.

"You see this note that Pender left?" Gloria asked when we got to the office.

I hadn't. It said that Askia Ben Kenobi had paid a month's rent and we should think about whether we wanted to accept it or to try to evict him. It also said that Ella

Fox had not paid her rent again and had no immediate prospects.

"This dude she used to be married to came around and said that he got a job and that he needed the money to buy tools, and she like a fool let him have the money," Gloria said.

"What's the matter?" Dean asked. "Does he lie a lot?"

"Do fish swim?" Gloria replied. "Now she's four months behind in the rent, and this guy is probably going off wasting the money."

"Then she's got to go," I said.

"How can she go find this guy when she don't even know where the turkey lives?" Gloria said.

"I didn't mean go find him," I said. "I mean go find someplace else to live."

"You mean *what*?" Gloria turned her head sideways, and her eyes were teary looking.

"Look. Gloria," I said, leaning back in the swivel chair, "this is a business. We're in the business of renting places to people. We have to take care of business or we won't be any better off than she is."

"Can't she get welfare?" Dean asked.

"No, because every time she goes down to the welfare department, they call up this guy and he starts talking about how he sends her money and stuff. Now with the city in a bind and everything, the only thing she gets is what her mother can give her."

"Let her move in with her mother," I said.

"Let her do *what*?" Gloria was really mad now. "Let her do *what*? We're supposed to be some kind of Action Group to

do something for people, and here you are talking about the same kind of things everybody else is!"

"It's different running a business than sitting around hoping that everything works out," I said. "What's the right thing to do? You tell me! You want to raise everybody else's rent so they can cover for her? You want to get some part-time jobs so we can run the whole place for nothing? That's why that guy gave us the building in the first place!"

"Right, and why did we take it?" asked Gloria. "Why did we take it? So we could put people out on the street and say what cool people we are? You explain that to her little girl, how cool you are for putting her out on the street!"

"It's not my little girl," I said.

"No, it's not yours—" Gloria was crying.

"There's no need to—"

"It's not your little girl—" Gloria said. "She did it all by herself. It's an immaculate birth so now you can go worship it! Those are the only kinds that men really dig, you know!"

Gloria left, banging her wrist into the side of the door as she did. Me and Dean just sat there for a while, and I felt like about change for two cents.

After a while Petey Darden and Mrs. Darden came in and said hello, and then Mrs. Darden said she was going to go start supper.

"You look like you just lost a friend," Mr. Darden said.

"Argument with Gloria," I said.

"I know, we saw her on the corner," he said. "You decided anything yet?"

"I guess not," I said. "I'm not sure what's right, really."

"Doesn't always make a difference if you do," Mr. Dar-

den said. "Sometimes you think something has two sides and you find out it doesn't, just two different places you can see the same side from. When that happens, right can be wrong and wrong can be right, and the worst thing in the world can be right in the middle. But you knew it wasn't going to be easy, didn't you?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't," I said.

Dean and me went over to the park and played some one-on-one. He won every game, which was nothing new because he always won one-on-one games from me. We played until it started getting dark and then we left the park.

"You think there's going to be any profit from us having this place?" Dean asked.

"You mean money?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," I said. "I thought we agreed not even to discuss it until we had the place running pretty smoothly."

"Yeah," he said, "I know. But just in case there is some profit, you could use my part for Ella Fox."

He quickly changed the subject and we talked about basketball until we hit the block. He went on home and I went to Gloria's. Her mother kidded me a little—she did that a lot because she liked me—and then she went in to get Gloria. She came out a moment later and told me that I could go into Gloria's room.

Gloria was sitting on the bed and facing away from me as I stood in the doorway. She didn't say anything and neither did I for a while. I liked it better when she was screaming at me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe we can talk about it again

some other time. Dean had an idea that might work out."

"I don't think I want to talk about it any more," she said. "I'm probably not really cut out for this kind of thing."

"You have to admit it's hard to know what's right and what's wrong," I said, thinking of what Mr. Darden had said. "On one hand you have a business to run, which could help people, and on the other hand you feel for people. I mean, even if nothing is clear one way or the other, you have to draw a line somewhere or you'll probably go wrong both places."

"Maybe I shouldn't be in business then," Gloria said, her eyes misting over. "If I have to see people different and feel about them different because I'm in some kind of a business, then I should get out of business. I don't like being wrong any more than anyone else does, but if I'm going to be wrong, then I'm going to be wrong where the people are, not with where the business is!"

I felt bad about what Gloria was saying. I didn't know what else to say to her so I just told her that I would call her in the morning. The truth was that I was beginning to wish I had never seen or heard about The Joint. It would have been easy if I could have come up with some great answer to solve everything. In a way I guess I thought I would—we all thought we would come up with something great and be heroes and all. But it wasn't that simple.

I also didn't want Gloria mad at me, because I was really beginning to like her. Now she was saying things that I knew as well as she did, and I was feeling like the bad guy on the set. If I had had to support a family by making a go of The Joint, I wouldn't have known what to do with myself. As it



was, by the time I got home I was exhausted and feeling about as sorry for myself as I ever have. I didn't want to think about how Ella Fox felt. That's true, I just didn't want to think about it at all, but it was just about the only thing I could think of as I lay in the darkness that night.

The next morning when I woke up I checked the newspaper for my horoscope. It just said that I would get along well with a female relative and not to be impatient in matters of the heart. It was silly, but no more so than my looking it up, I suppose. I was beginning to understand people believing in horoscopes or investing their money in numbers when they didn't see any other answers to their problems. But understanding didn't make things any easier.

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# CHAPTER

# 9

BUBBA CALLED ME ABOUT NINE-THIRTY IN THE MORNING. HE sounded scared.

“You better get down here right away!” he said. “There’s some people down here taking over the building. They got television and everything!”

I had one sweat sock on and couldn’t find another clean one, and then I couldn’t find my other sneaker, so I ran down as quickly as I could in one slipper and one sneaker. I could see the crowd from halfway down the block. There were two big trucks there—one looked like a half truck and half bus and the other was a Volkswagen van. There was a guy standing on the stoop, and he looked really mad about something.

“And what this is all about”—the guy on the stoop had his fist in a tight ball—“is a revolution of the people against the powers that be! Do you hear me? The POWERS that be!”

He looked around, and the people who were watching shifted a little.

“When I say REV-O-LU-TION I mean just that! REV-O-LU-TION! A revolution is a turn. A wheel turns! A wheel turns and they call it a REV-O-LU-TION! And that’s what we are here about! Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, we listening,” somebody said.

“We here to take over this building from the powers that be! From the slumlords who oppress us. We are here to turn the power! We are here to turn the power from the hands of the oppressor over to the hands of the oppressed!”

“Could some of you people move back a little?” One of the TV cameramen was laying cable along the sidewalk to one of the lights. The other TV people were setting up the stuff that was in the larger truck.

“Let them on through!” the speaker said. “We ain’t got nothing to do that we can’t let the world see us! I am an oppressed man seeking to regain my rights! To have the rights that God has given me, and which this oppressive society has taken from me and turned over to the slumlords of the ghetto, the gunlords down in the Pentagon, and the funlords in Atlantic City!”

“Go on and preach now!” somebody yelled out.

“Look at this raggedy building that our people are supposed to live in! Look at the busted-up garbage cans and dirt

in front of it! Is this where our children are supposed to play? *Is it?*”

“No!” came back the chorus.

“You bet it ain’t! But that’s where they got to play! And this raggedy building is where our people got to live while the fat landlord lives downtown in a high-rise luxury building and sends his fat wife down to Florida for a suntan!”

“That’s the truth!” a woman standing right next to me said.

“And while she’s down there soaking up the sun, he’s up here sucking up the blood of the poor! I went into this building just a few days ago and saw that the banister was gone! They tell me the banister ain’t been there for two years! I am tired to my heart and sick to my soul of these slumlords who don’t care two cents for the way we got to live! They want us to live in these ratttraps, pay them with our blood, and keep quiet!”

“We ain’t keeping quiet!” That was the guy who delivered packages in the grocery store.

“You damn right we ain’t keeping quiet!” The guy on the stoop was wiping the sweat from his face. “They want us to keep quiet, but they gonna hear me!”

“Let ’em hear you, brother!”

I couldn’t see who said that because I was backing away a little.

“The powers that be don’t want to hear my anger!” The guy was really shouting now.

“They even taking down the television stuff!” a woman said.

"Why you taking down the cameras?" the guy on the stoop said. "Does it get to you? Does it make your blood crawl and turn? Does it make you scared?"

"One of the lights is out and there's not enough light on this side of the street to use the color cameras," the TV man said.

"Not enough light?" The guy looked around. "Light is the truth of the world! Light is the truth that I will shed on the oppressor! All the oppressors are the same! Every single one of them!"

He started edging down the steps of The Joint, and then he started walking down the street.

"The revolution needs leaders and that's what I am!" he shouted from the middle of the street. "The REV-O-LUTION needs leaders who can take the fight to the street. I ain't tied to no one place! No one building! I go where the revolution calls because I do not follow—I lead!"

By that time he was on a stoop across the street and they were setting up the cameras over there. I stayed around long enough to find out that he was taking over that building, not mine. I wondered how much history was made that way.

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## CHAPTER

# 10

I HADN'T EXACTLY MADE UP WITH GLORIA, BUT AT LEAST SHE wasn't really mad at me any more. I don't think she was so much mad at me as she was at how things were going down, anyway. When I thought about it later, I realized that what she was saying, about being for people and everything, wasn't going to solve the problems of running the building. It solved the problem of knowing how to feel and of saying something cool, but it was something else again to get the money to run things so that things would be as cool for real as they were in talk.

The next day I went to The Joint, and there was a note there from Tina Robinson. I was sitting in the office wondering what she wanted when the ambulance came. They

were coming to take Mr. Hyatt to the hospital.

Any time you saw Mr. Hyatt he was drunk or getting drunk or trying to recover from being drunk. It used to be funny, but after a while it got to be sad, mostly because he would try to make little jokes about it. You could see that he felt bad about it. I asked the ambulance driver what was wrong, and he said that Mr. Hyatt had pneumonia, or at least it looked like he did.

"Mostly when you get a drunk he's either got a bad liver, a heart attack, or pneumonia," the driver said. "I think this guy might have at least two of them."

I asked what hospital they were taking him to, and they said Metropolitan. Just as the ambulance was pulling away from the curb, Gloria came up with Dean and Bubba.

"What happened?" Bubba asked.

"That guy in 2A has pneumonia," I said, taking a look at Gloria. "He'll probably be in the hospital for a couple of weeks."

Bubba started going on about how he had an uncle who had pneumonia, and then Dean chipped in with a cousin. Gloria didn't say anything. I could have gone on about who was going to pay the rent on that apartment, but I didn't.

We went into the office, and I told Dean and Bubba about the note, and Dean went up to see Tina. Me and Bubba split a soda and talked about a track meet that was coming up soon, and Gloria said she was going out to take a walk. She came back before Dean did, with two containers of tea. She asked me if I wanted one and I said no. Dean came back and said that the doorknob on Tina's bathroom door was broken.

"How can you break a doorknob?" I asked.

"It's not really broken," Dean said. "It just doesn't turn the latch. You turn it and it just keeps turning around."

"All you got to do is tighten the screw in the doorknob, and then you can turn it."

"I know," Dean said. "I tried to turn it with a dime, but it didn't turn far enough."

"I'll take a screwdriver and go up and do it," Gloria said.

"I told Pender about Chris," I said.

"What did my man say?" Bubba asked. "Chip, chip, peerio?"

"You know, I think he's cool," Gloria said. "He's kind of funny, but he's okay in a funny kind of way."

"Anyway, he had a good idea," I said. "Let's go around and tell people that we're in the market for a stereo set. Then, if anyone knows where the stolen stuff is, maybe they'll come up and say that it's for sale."

"That was Mr. Pender's idea?" Dean asked.

I nodded.

"That's not bad, but who do we tell?" Bubba asked.

"How about A.B.?" Gloria asked.

A. B. Tucker had a real name. I think it was something like James or Joe or something like that, but he told everybody to call him A. B. He was watching a football game once between a team from Texas and a team from Arkansas, and half the players didn't have real names, just initials. One guy was named B. B. something or other, and another guy was R. D. Something or other, stuff like that. So A. B. took those initials. He would usually get mad if you called him by his first name, which I forget, and tell you to call him by



those initials. A. B. used to sell stuff. He said it was all hot stuff, but I don't think anybody could steal that much stuff. He used to brag that if you wanted something, all you had to do was to tell him where they kept it and he'd get it for you.

"Look, why don't you and Dean go over and tell A. B. that we're looking for some stereo equipment—"

"To put into the lobby to give The Joint some class," Dean said. "Then he won't think we're just trying to find out who stole it."

"Yeah," I said. Dean didn't have a lot of good ideas, but when he did have one it was really good.

So Dean and Bubba went out to find A. B. and left me and Gloria in the office. I didn't say anything, and I could tell she was getting a little nervous.

"I guess you're wondering how we're going to get money up if nobody pays their rent," she said.

I shrugged. That was one thing I was wondering. The other thing was how I got into the real-estate business in the first place.

"I have an idea," Gloria said. "You sure you don't want some tea?"

"It's too hot for tea," I said. "Since when did you start drinking tea?"

"I read in biology that if you drink warm liquids it'll cool you off more than cold liquids."

"Does it?"

"No." She smiled, and that broke the tension between us a little. "You want to hear my idea?"

"Sure."

"Let's raise some money from someplace else," she said, opening the second container of tea. "Then while Mr. Pender gets his act together with the books and everything, at least we can hang on long enough to find out the right thing to do about The Joint."

"How we going to raise the money?"

"I thought about a street fair," Gloria said. "We could have the whole block come and then maybe we could pay off some of the bills that we have, and—you know—"

"We wouldn't have to talk about putting anyone out?"

"Right."

"Well, let's think about it," I said. "You want me to go up with you to fix Tina's doorknob?"

She said okay, and we got a screwdriver and started up. On the way we joked a little about how Tina always had something wrong with her bathroom, Mrs. Jones on the first floor always had her lights blowing out, and Mr. Lowe on the top floor was always complaining about how the halls were dirty. To tell the truth, I think we were both getting a little discouraged.

"It's about time you people showed up," Tina said. She had one of those round powder puffs and was spreading powder all over her face. Tina wasn't the best-looking woman in the world without the powder—with the powder she looked as if she just died and hadn't gotten around to laying down.

"Slam the door when you leave," she said, stuffing the powder puff into a handbag as she went through the door. "And fix that doorknob right!"

I handed the screwdriver to Gloria and sat on the edge

of the tub as she tightened the screw.

"You know, the worst thing about this is that I hate to give up," Gloria said. "You know what I mean?"

"I guess so."

"People are always talking about slumlords and people deserting their buildings and everything—"

"We didn't ask for The Joint," I said. "We kind of inherited it, so to speak."

"Yes, but if we can't find a way to do something, then what can we say about the people who do just take the money and run?"

"I don't know," I said.

Gloria kept working on the doorknob, and I took a look in Tina's medicine cabinet. There were more little bottles and tubes in that cabinet than I had ever seen before. Half the bottles were so old that the labels were yellow. She had everything from hair dye to skin creams and some things that didn't look like anything I had ever seen. There was one tall jar with a thick green liquid in it and something floating around in it. I took the top off and smelled it. Horrible.

"What's this?" I asked Gloria.

She looked at it and shook her head. She was leaning against the door and really trying to get the screw tight enough. Now, I'm not against women's lib or anything like that, but I think men are better at fixing things than women. I didn't say anything to Gloria and just waited. She took a little look at me, knew what I was thinking, and really started working with the screwdriver.

"Here." She handed me the screwdriver and sat down. I looked at her, and she was looking down and sipping on

the tea, which she had brought with her.

The screw had come loose in the doorknob. There's a square rod that goes through the door itself and turns when you turn the knob. The knob goes over the square rod and the screw in the shaft of the knob fits against one of the sides of the square rod so that it turns. I took a look at it and started turning it. I gave it two or three easy turns and it turned easily. I couldn't figure why Gloria couldn't have tightened it. Then it turned a few more times, just as easily. I tried unscrewing it and it came out easily. I took a look at it and saw the problem. The threads on the screw had been stripped.

"See here," I said, showing the screw to Gloria, "the threads are stripped. You could turn it all day and you couldn't tighten it."

"Oh," she said. She sounded kind of defeated.

"Look, it's no big thing," I said. "We'll just pick up another one at the hardware store and you can put it in."

She smiled again and I felt better. I began to realize something that had been gnawing at me for a while and that I couldn't put my finger on. I was really beginning to like Gloria. I was feeling pretty good about it, too. The good feeling lasted at least fifteen seconds. Then I tried to get out of the bathroom.

The first thing I tried was just to turn the doorknob. Of course it just spun around. I got an "Oh, no," from Gloria, but I told her it wasn't going to be a problem. I would just take the knob off and turn the square rod. No way. I twisted on the rod until my fingers got sore. Then I had an inspiration. I pushed the doorknob through and tried to

turn the latch with the screwdriver. Nothing. Gloria was laughing.

I unscrewed the plate that covered the keyhole. That didn't help at all. Gloria was still laughing.

"We're stuck," I said.

Well, if I liked Gloria a few minutes ago I didn't like her now. That is, I still liked her but I hated the way she was laughing. She was really laughing, and I felt a little bit like a jackass. If I hadn't felt so high and mighty when she couldn't tighten the screw, I wouldn't have felt so low when I found out we were stuck. But we were stuck and so we just sat there.

"Did Tina say when she was coming back?" I asked.

"She said something about going to a party," Gloria said. "She might not be back until one or two o'clock in the morning."

"How about her sister?"

"She's going to meet her at the party."

"You want to call for help?"

"Do *I* want to call for help?"

"I mean, do you think *we* should call for help?"

"You think it would do any good? There's no window in here and we'd have to call through the bathroom door and the outside door. The only other people on this floor is Mr. Hyatt—"

"And he's in the hospital."

"And Ella Fox, and she could be at her mother's."

We sat for a while and didn't say anything. Once in a while when our eyes met I would kind of smile, but she would smile more, almost a laugh, and I wasn't sure if she

was laughing because the situation was funny or laughing at me.

"You want to talk about something?" I asked.

"What?"

"Anything'll do."

"Suppose both Tina and Johnnie Mae come home from the party together, see—"

"Yeah."

"And they're crossing Broadway and 129th Street, see—"

"Yeah."

"And a bus pulls out and knocks them both down."

"What kind of talk is that?"

"What would happen to us?"

"What do you mean what would happen to us?"

"What would we do?"

"Somebody would come to look for us after a while," I said.

"Maybe in a month or two, right?"

"Let's change the subject."

"What do you want talk about?" she said.

"Let's talk about the problems with The Joint," I said.

"Suppose your street fair idea doesn't work, then what will we do?"

"I don't know," she said. She looked sad.

That wasn't the nicest thing for me to have said, I know, because I knew that Gloria was trying to work out something for The Joint and for the people who lived in it, but right then we were stuck in the bathroom and I was feeling pretty much like a fool and she was seeming to enjoy the whole thing. It was a case of me being uptight and sort of

knowing that I was uptight and not being able to get out of it. We didn't say anything else for a long time, and the quiet around us got to be a bit spooky. You could hear a few noises from the street but not many, and occasionally there would be the sound of a scurry in the walls that could have been plaster falling or could have been rats.

"We have another problem," Gloria said. "I didn't want to bring it up before, but now I think I have to."

"What's that?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

Now it was my turn to laugh and her turn not to like it. I stood up and tried the screwdriver in the door again, but it didn't work this time either. I looked at Gloria and I knew it was serious. She really had to go to the bathroom. That is, we were in the bathroom and she really had to use it.

"I'll turn my back," I said.

"I don't want to go while you're in here," she said.

"Oh. Then you'll have to wait," I said.

"I can't wait."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Turn the light out."

I turned the light out.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Right here."

"Near the light switch?"

"Yeah."

"Turn it back on."

I turned the light switch back on, and she told me to take the light bulb out of the socket. I unscrewed it carefully and it was dark in the room again. Then she asked me where I

was standing, and I was standing in the same place.

"This is embarrassing," she said.

"Why don't you hurry up and get it over with?" I said.

Then she asked me if I was holding the light bulb in my hand, which I was. I started to put it down and it must have fallen into the sink. From the tinkling sound it made I knew she wouldn't be worried about it any more.

"How come you broke the light bulb?"

"What do you mean, how come?" I answered. "Why don't you just finish doing whatever it is you're doing so we can try to get out of here."

"Okay, but don't look."

Don't look. I couldn't see my own hand an inch in front of my face—how was I going to look at her? I did listen, though. But I didn't hear anything.

"You finished?" I asked.

"I don't think I can go," she said.

"I thought you had to go so bad."

"I do, but I can't go with you in the room."

Neither one of us heard Tina come back in the apartment. At least, I didn't hear her anyway. In fact, I jumped a little when her voice came from the other side of the door.

"Who in there?"

"It's me and Gloria," I said. "The doorknob fell off."

"I got it," she said.

"Wait, don't open the door!" Gloria called out.

I had forgotten about Gloria, or at least what she was doing. I heard some rustling about in the dark and I guessed she was getting herself back together.

"What you people doing in there?" Tina called. "You



want me to go away and come back later?"

"No," Gloria called out.

We heard the doorknob being pushed back into the door.

"Not yet! Not yet!" Gloria called out. But the door flew open anyway just in time to catch Gloria pulling up the zipper on her dungarees.

"I didn't know you people were sweet on each other," Tina said as we emerged from the bathroom.

Gloria started stammering out an explanation, but I just left. She caught up with me on the stairs and started yelling at me for not waiting to tell Tina what really happened.

"I was so amazed I didn't even think about it," I said.

"Amazed at what?" Gloria asked, giving me about the worst look I had ever seen.

"Amazed that I could see so well in the dark!" I shouted over my shoulder as I ran down the last flight of stairs.

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# CHAPTER

# 11

I ALMOST GOT INTO A NORMAL CONVERSATION WITH MY father. Almost, because, as usual, he turned it into an argument. It started off with me sitting in the living room reading the paper, which by itself is a new thing. My father kept getting on my case about not spending time with the family. What did he say? Oh, yes, "The family is the strongest unit in civilization." One of those semi-cool things that don't make any sense. I mean, what are you going to say? That it's not as strong as a Boy Scout troop? Or a football team? You don't have anything to say, so you just nod and say, "Yeah."

So what I was doing was hanging around for an hour or so before I went to my room. I have a nice room. There were two closets in my room when we first got this apartment. My

father fixed up the smaller closet for my clothes and he fixed up the bigger one as an entertainment center. There was a shelf on the top for the television and down below I had a record player, tape recorder, and radio. Everybody who saw it thought it was just out of sight. And there was a sliding door that he built that looked like a bookshelf when you closed it. It was really nice. That's another thing I can't stand about my father. He has these things that he can do and he thinks that everybody can do them if they just tried. Like building the entertainment center out of the closet. He'd say something to me like, "Why don't you build a bird feeder?" And it would seem like a good idea, only after fooling around with some wood for a while, I'd be ready to just make a big sign for the birds telling them where they could pick up some food stamps or something. Then he would make one, and it would look like a castle or some other good-doing thing, and I would just hate it to death. Oh, well, at least I knew what I didn't like about him. Nothing vague.

So it's Friday night and I'm sitting there reading the paper and he turns to me and asks me how Bubba is doing.

"Bubba?" I said. "He's okay."

"And the building?"

"You mean The Joint," I said. "I guess it's okay."

"Are you people still running around trying to convince yourselves that Chris didn't steal anything?"

"Are we still trying to convince ourselves?" I put the paper down. "We don't have to convince ourselves because we know he didn't. Do you mean you still think he stole that stuff?"

"Let's put it this way," he said. "No one has convinced me that he hasn't had a part in it."

I looked at Mom and she had her head down, but I could see she had that little smile on her face that she always got when me and my father got into it.

"You know anything about the Inquisition?" I asked.

"Do you know anything about court costs?" he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's going to cost the State of New York thousands of dollars to bring this case to trial," my father said. "And it's not that important a case."

"The guy's whole life can be ruined, but it's not that important a trial," I said, trying to get as much sarcasm in my voice as possible.

"What I mean is that it's not that important to the State," my father went on. "If they didn't have a good case, they wouldn't even bother with bringing it to trial. Nobody was injured. There weren't any firearms involved. They got this guy dead to rights. And he's running around spending money like water. Where'd he get all that money?"

I didn't know what money he was talking about, and I let the conversation peter out.

I thought about what my father had said, which I usually did after we had an argument. He'd get all his stuff in during the argument, and then afterwards I'd think of all the things I should have told him. Only he would have his stuff before he would start the argument and then sneak up on it. That's true. He was like a snake. You would be sitting around, having a conversation, minding your own business, when he would switch it without warning. Like one time I was com-

plaining because I had the lowest allowance of anybody I had ever heard of who had ever lived. My father, besides being stubborn as a mule, is cheap. Cheap isn't even the word. He gives me four dollars a week for an allowance. Nobody in the world gets four dollars a week allowance any more. That's to begin with. Only he gives me two dollars in change (never dollar bills) and two dollars he puts into the bank with a long lecture about how I'm really going to Appreciate It One Day.

I had been complaining about this miserable way of getting my allowance once when we were going down the street near Union Square. I had my two dollars, in change, and was getting pretty ticked off about it when he stops in front of this blind guy. And he says, "Why don't you give your two dollars to this gentleman?"

Well, the whole thing was pretty embarrassing. I mean, there's this blind guy standing there listening to this, and I'm standing there feeling like a dope. I don't want to give away my two dollars, but I don't want the blind guy to feel like a dope, either. So I give this blind guy thirty-five cents. I drop it in his cup.

"That's not two dollars," my father says. And now he's holding me by the arm so I can't walk away, and other people are beginning to give us a look. What do I do? I dropped the whole two dollars in the guy's cup.

Then we walked on.

"You didn't want to give the man your two dollars," he said. "And if nobody gave him any money he would probably be forced into a training program that would teach him some trade and maybe he would make a better living for

himself. And then, again, maybe that's all wrong."

And that was the last he said about that. That's when I figured the guy must have been just a little touched. When I thought about it later there were some ways he could have been right about the blind guy, but I still didn't see any connection between that and my allowance. When I thought about Chris, I still didn't think he was guilty. But then I hadn't known about the money. Chris was a standoffish kind of guy, and even though we were all pulling for him we weren't that close to him. So we invited him over to the renting office more than we had in the past, and he started coming over. He seemed really glad to have someone on his side.

"You know how I felt when they arrested me?" he said. "I felt guilty."

"Well, you're not guilty and that's all that counts," I said.

"I wish the trial was tomorrow, though," he said. "Until they find me not guilty everyone's still going to think I am."

"Suppose they find you guilty," Bubba said.

"How can they find him guilty when he's not?" Dean spoke up. "If you're not guilty you're not guilty."

"That's not true, man," Bubba said, burying his hand wrist-deep in Gloria's almost empty potato chip bag to get the crumbs. "It don't matter if you guilty or innocent. The only thing that matters is if the jury believes you guilty or innocent. Now, take this cat I read about. They put him on trial for killing his wife and they hung his butt. Then about four years later they found another cat who killed about nine people, and he said, 'Oh, yeah, remember that guy who you hung for killing his wife? Well, I was the one that really

did it.' But it was too late then, because they hung the dude."

"That's a big help, Bubba," Gloria said. "You got any more good-doing messages of inspiration?"

"I'm just warning Chris that he might have to go to jail even if he is innocent," Bubba said, licking his fingertips and then running them along the inside crease of the potato chip bag to get the real small crumbs. "So it won't be no shock or nothing."

"That's what I'm afraid of, really," Chris said. "Sometimes it almost seems as if I am guilty."

"We're kind of looking around to see if we come up with any clues," Gloria said. "If we do we'll tell the police."

"You got a lawyer?" I asked.

"Yeah, a woman from Legal Aid."

"You got a woman lawyer?" Gloria asked.

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Go ahead." Chris looked at me.

"My father said you were spending a lot of money."

"Yeah?"

"That's it." I shrugged, not wanting to ask the next question. I didn't have to, Bubba did it for me.

"We thought there wasn't no money taken," Bubba said.

"Thanks," Chris said, standing. "It's really cool having friends in your corner."

To say that our discussion with Chris had gone over like a lead balloon would be the understatement of the year. But one thing still bothered me. He might have been disap-

pointed in us for asking about the money and all, but where did he get it?

A. B. Tucker, Bubba reported, had been interested in us buying some hi-fi equipment, but he wanted to see our money. What we didn't have, any of us, was money. Gloria's idea about the street fair was really good, I thought, but it would take a while to get it organized, and we needed some money right away. It was getting near the end of the month, and we thought we might collect some of the rents (for a change) and use some of that money to show A. B. so we could see what equipment he would turn up with. We went to Pender.

"Oh, no," Mr. Pender said. "One doesn't rob Peter to pay Paul, even if it is to save Paul who has been accused of robbing Peter!"

"Right, whatever you said," Dean said. "Does that mean we can't get no dust?"

"It means that if you're really serious about bringing the building into some sort of financial health you can't start taking money out of the operating funds for other purposes."

"What's an operating fund?" Bubba asked.

"The money you use to pay your bills and keep the building in repair," Mr. Pender said.

That all seemed right, and we just sat around for a while as Mr. Pender showed us the books and how different items were being paid up. It looked as if we might be even in another nine months, he said. He had applied for the forms for tax relief for buildings which were being repaired, and that



could help. It didn't help to get the money for A. B., and I realized that we were losing some of our enthusiasm in helping Chris and in keeping the building going, just because it was so hard.

"You got any ideas?" Dean asked Mr. Pender.

"When I was a young man struggling to be a poet—"

"You were going to be a poet?" Bubba asked.

"There is nothing so unrecognizable as a faded dream," Mr. Pender said. "Yes, I was going to be a poet. When I was going through that particular phase of my life, there were often times when I or one of my colleagues was unable to meet the obligations of our dwelling. Heaven often sent the Muse, but never the rent. At any rate, when those times came we would have rent parties. We would charge a dollar to get in, and we'd sell food and what have you. Everyone would have a fine time at the party, and we would raise enough money to pay the rent."

That's how our rent party began. At first we were going to have it in the office, but then Gloria came up with the idea of having it in Mr. Hyatt's apartment. This was a good idea, and Dean and Gloria went to see Mr. Hyatt at the hospital and ask him. Bubba wanted to go, too, but we didn't let him. He'd probably start telling Mr. Hyatt about how he knew some guy who had died in the same bed he was laying in or something. Mr. Hyatt okayed the party and was really kind of glad that we were having it in his apartment. He told us to have a drink for him, which was supposed to be funny, I guess, but wasn't really, because he still wasn't doing too good.

We sent invitations to everyone in the building, and Tina

Robinson agreed to be the hostess. We also went around the neighborhood and invited people we knew and asked if anybody wanted to donate anything. Most people didn't want to donate anything, but Chippy's, a fish-and-chip place near the corner, promised to give us twenty-five dollars' worth of fish and chips.

The party started out quietly, and a lot of people came, so it looked as if everything was going to work out. Then the screaming started and the party got out of hand. Mrs. Brown from the top floor was one of the first people to get to the party. She asked if she could help, and we said that we had everything pretty much under control, but she insisted. So Gloria decided that she would be clever, and she asked Mrs. Brown if she would keep track of how many people actually came to the party. This seemed like a good idea, and we settled Mrs. Brown in a chair near the door, and she marked off a stroke for everyone that came in. I got her some punch and she really seemed happy, watching everybody standing around or dancing. She also said that Mr. Johnson wasn't feeling well and that perhaps he would be down later, and that if he did he would be the hit of the party because everyone liked to have boxers at parties, especially when they were the champions of the world.

Mr. Pender had told us a few things about Jack Johnson. He said that he had been the first black heavyweight champion way back before the first World War. He had been a hero to many black people the same way that Muhammad Ali was a hero. It was funny, because none of us had ever heard of him or thought about people like Mrs. Brown having their own heroes.

"Mrs. Brown must have been a little girl when he was champion," he said. "And she's kept his memory alive long after he died. We all keep our delusions with us. Sometimes it's a person, sometimes an idea, sometimes even a dream that seems more real in memory than it ever did in life. Jack Johnson was the champion of the world. Not a bad choice," he said, "not a bad choice at all."

The party was going pretty good, and Tina was talking about having a dance contest just to liven things up in the middle. Now Tina was answering the door if Gloria or me weren't near. Whoever answered the door would say something like "Welcome to the party," and then run into a quick explanation of why we were having the party. Some people weren't interested, but some were, and they kind of dug the idea of having a good time and doing some good at the same time. When the Captain came to the door no one was around to answer it except Mrs. Brown, and she told him to come right on in and enjoy himself. Then she asked him if he was a prizefighter, and he didn't say nothing, he just looked at her kind of funny.

"If you need a job, you can always come around to Mr. Johnson—that's Mr. Jack Johnson, the champion of the world—he can always use young men for sparring partners."

The way she said this, sort of like a queen, waving her hand in the air and everything, was really cool.

The Captain still didn't say nothing, just looked at her for a minute, and then came on in and sat down. So far, so good.

The party was still going on when there was another

knock on the door. I started toward the door, then I saw that Mrs. Brown was going to get there before me, so I started back to the kitchen where Tina and Gloria and another girl I didn't know were making little sandwiches. That's when the screaming started.

The first scream scared me half to death. I ran into the other room, and I saw that Mrs. Brown had passed out. I started over toward her when I heard the second scream. This time it was Gladys, Mr. Gilfond's wife, from the first floor. I looked up, and she had her hand over her mouth and was pointing toward the door with the other hand. I looked to where she was pointing and saw what the screaming was all about.

Askia Ben Kenobi was standing in the doorway dressed in a turban, some little gold shorts, and a cape. That's it. Honest. He looked like some dude from the Arabian Nights or some fairytale book.

"Man, what is you doing?" The Captain looked at Askia.

"I am being me," Askia said in this real spooky voice.

"Where your clothes, sucker?" the Captain said.

"I am clothed in purity," Askia said. He was standing really tall and looking around the room real slow. "For the essence of the black man is purity."

"You better get your butt out of here and put some clothes on!" Tina said, coming out of the kitchen.

"And what you got smeared all over yourself?" the Captain asked. "Crisco?"

"It is sacred palm oil," Askia said, bowing.

Askia Ben Kenobi was covered with something that made him shiny. It looked like that oil that body builders put on

themselves, or it could have been Crisco.

"I don't care what kind of lard you got on yourself, you better go someplace with your dumb self!" Tina was yelling. She was really mad. I didn't think she could get that mad. In fact, when she lifted the plate of cheese dip over her head I still didn't believe she was going to throw it. She threw it. It went right at Askia Ben Kenobi.

But Askia Ben Kenobi was good. I mean really good. The cheese dip came at him about waist high, and he kicked it away with one of his karate kicks.

Tina wasn't giving up that easy, and she threw a handful of the little sandwiches we had made at him, and he knocked them away, too. This time he used his hands. You could hardly see him move, he was so fast. *Whack! Whack! Whack!* And the sandwiches were all over the room. I don't know who threw the sparerib bone, but it caught him right behind the left ear. He whirled and made a step in that direction, and then everybody started throwing things at him. Spareribs, handfuls of cheese dip, and roasted peanuts. The fish and chips hadn't arrived yet.

He fought some of them off, but you could see it was a losing battle. And, although none of the stuff was hurting him, the cheese dip was sticking to the grease he had on, and after a while he looked really grimy. Then he sort of pulled his cape around himself and tried to stare everybody down, but that didn't work either because it was really fun throwing stuff at him. I knew we'd have to clean it up later, but that was later—right now the cheese dip was flying. A guy with a gold tooth who was a friend of Tina's got too close to Askia, and Askia gave him a karate kick in the stomach. The

guy doubled up with pain. Things turned from funny to really serious just like that! I remembered the banister that Askia Kenobi had torn up, and I backed away a few steps. The Captain jumped up from where he was sitting and tried to grab Askia, but every time he grabbed something Askia just slipped away. It was like trying to grab a greased pig. Only, when he would slip away he would throw a few karate punches. The Captain was bleeding from the nose. He was on one side of the room and Askia was on the other. The Captain started rushing across the floor with his short fat legs going about a mile a minute, and Askia started from his side. This time it was the Captain who slipped and went down, and Askia flew over him onto a card table where they had been playing Tonk. The card table collapsed, and Gladys Gilfond, who was still holding her hand from before the whole thing with Askia started, fell across him.

That's when they finally got Askia down. He struggled a little more, but he had hurt his foot pretty bad, so it was just about over. The Captain called a friend of his who was a cop, and he and another cop came and took Askia away in handcuffs. I found out later they just made him walk around the block and then took him up to his apartment again.

By the time we had gotten Mrs. Brown calmed down and the place cleaned up, the party was over. Mr. Pender reached the party at eleven-thirty, just as the last people were leaving. We did a quick tally and saw that we had actually made money, though. To be exact, we had made four dollars and thirty cents.

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## CHAPTER 12

"YOU SEE, YOU ARE FOLLOWING WHAT I CALL THE LINE OF the people who watch history." A. B. Tucker tilted his head all the way back, and the soda he was drinking went down in two large gulps. "I am of those who make history. Dig, you know I am what is commonly called a thief, is that correct?"

"Yeah," Bubba said.

"Okay, and you think that stealing is wrong," A. B. said. "Is that also correct?"

"That's right," Gloria said. "And there's nothing you can tell me that's going to make me change my mind, either."

"Okay, what you got to tell me about Sam, then?"

"Who's Sam?" I asked, knowing that was what I was supposed to ask.

"Sam is this cat that lives on Park Avenue, near the White Rose Bar. One day Sam went over to one of them furniture stores—you know the kind, you get three rooms of furniture for two hundred dollars plus they throws in a television set?"

"Yeah, go on."

"Well, he goes over there and they charge my man two hundred and one dollars for this living room set, see. And then he gets his old lady to go downtown when they deliver it, and he's all happy and smiling. Now, when they deliver the stuff and his old lady comes in and sees it, she's all smiling and everything because she's happy. Sam, he goes over and puts on the television and they go to sit on the couch and *blam!* the couch falls down. He looks at the couch and he sees that there's marbles and stuff on the inside of the couch. A pocket comb is in there and right away he knows it ain't new stuff. So he goes over to the store and tells the man and the man says that he never did say it was new stuff. So Sam says he don't want this stuff and the man says he don't blame him, but there's nothing he can do about it because he's done sold the contract to another guy. Sam is mad. But Sam is also a little what they call peculiar. He says that because the guy got a store he got to steal a little bit or he wouldn't make no living, see? But Sam, he got him a limit on how much you can steal from him. His limit is two hundred dollars. You remember how much I told you that set cost?"

"Two hundred and one dollars," I said.

"Right on! So Sam tells the man to give him back a dollar, and the man says he ain't gonna do no such a thing. So Sam lays for the cat outside and puts a knife up against the man's



throat and takes back his dollar so that he keep his limit. What happened after that was Sam got put in jail for stealing a dollar from the man. The man done stole two hundred dollars from Sam and everybody says that's all right, see? So when I steal, I'm just looking at things from the way the man in the store looks at it and the way the law looks at it. Which is, there ain't nothing wrong with stealing, just don't get caught breaking no laws when you do it. Sam broke the law that says you can't be putting no knife up against a man's throat and taking his dollar. There ain't no law that says you can't steal from a man if he's just stupider than you."

"That's some messed-up logic," Gloria said.

"That's the same thing that Sam said when they took him off to jail," A. B. said. "You some kin to Sam?"

"No," Gloria said. "But it's still some messed-up logic. You just want us to believe that stealing is right."

"No, I'm just telling you that you would have invited that dude that ran the store to your little party last night but you didn't invite me," A. B. said. "You probably made a whole lot of money and was afraid I was going to try to steal it or something. But in all my life I have never stole nothing from a friend."

"Well, we did make a little money," I said, nudging Gloria. "At least a couple of dollars."

"At least," Gloria said, smiling as if she knew something.

"I heard you made a lot of money," A. B. said. "I also heard you had a big fight. When there's a lot of money floating around a party, people fight in a minute. There's only two things people fight over—women and money—and

I didn't hear nobody talking about how many women you had there."

Gloria and I kept on acting like we were in on something, and A. B. told us that we should come on over to this place he knew and maybe we could see some really dynamite stereo equipment. We said we would think about it, but we weren't too anxious. A. B. said to think about it real hard because he would be around later that night and take one of us over to the place if we wanted to go.

When A. B. left we were really happy. We didn't have any money, but we were still going to see the stuff and maybe find some of the stuff that was stolen from Mr. Reynolds' store.

Chris came by a little later and said how he was sorry about being upset when we questioned him about the money. Then we said we were sorry for questioning it. He told us that Mr. Reynolds had given him his vacation pay and told him that he would try to believe in him until he was proved guilty or not guilty. That really seemed decent of Mr. Reynolds, and I felt a little worse about questioning where Chris had got the money from. Chris said that he told Mr. Reynolds how we were trying to help him, and he said that it was good but that we should be careful.

We met A. B. the next evening. He came with another guy who he said was his driver. The guy had a car, one of those gypsy cabs, and we got into it. Me and Gloria sat in the back, and A. B. and the driver sat in the front. We drove downtown for a while, and then we started back uptown. But when we started uptown, A. B. pulled down some curtains that covered the windows and a curtain that went

along the back of the front seat so we couldn't see where we were going.

"They the curtains of joy," A. B. said, "in case my man got to drive some lovebirds around, or something like that."

When we got to where we were going, we went in the back way. The only thing we could see was that we were in a backyard. I thought I heard a train pass by. It sounded like the el train. Later, when we left, it was by the same way.

The warehouse was dirty and dingy on the outside but really nice and clean on the inside. You had to walk up the stairs because the elevator didn't work. Gloria went with me, and she took my hand once we got inside. I couldn't think for a moment when she took my hand. My mind just went blank, and I looked at her and smiled and she smiled back. I was definitely going to have to do something about Gloria.

One half of the floor we stopped on had dresses and coats, rows and rows of dresses and then rows and rows of coats. It was the most stuff I had ever seen that wasn't in a store.

"This is all hot stuff?" Gloria asked.

"That's right," A. B. said.

There were some other guys there, too. Some were just hanging around and some were showing stuff to the guy who acted as if he was running the place. Then there were some girls who answered the phones.

On the other side of the floor there was all kinds of radio and television equipment. They were in two sections, an A section and a B section. Each carton was marked with an A or a B, depending on what section it was in.

"The stuff in the A section has warranty papers," A. B.

said. "That's good stuff and you can sell it anywhere. The stuff on the B side is the same kind of stuff, but it don't have warranty papers, so you can only sell it to people. You can't sell it to stores or nothing like that. Now, you just look around to see what you want. The stuff on the A side is a hundred dollars. Anything you want is a hundred dollars. The side without the warranties is fifty dollars. Anything you want over there you get for fifty dollars."

We thought it would be cool to see what A. B. Tucker had. All we would have to do is to spot the stuff from Mr. Reynolds' store, report it to the police, and Chris would be cleared. Well, it didn't work that way. We didn't know where the warehouse was, to begin with. Next, Gloria had some bad news.

"Did you see that dude standing near the door?" she asked when A. B. had let us out of the car near Riverside Drive. "The dark dude with the skullcap?"

"Yeah, I saw him," I said. "So what?"

"He had a gun sticking out of his back pocket," she said.

"A real gun?"

A real gun. I didn't have to ask. Gloria just looked at me and I looked at her, and suddenly the idea of Chris going to jail didn't seem so bad. I didn't even think about the reward money. I knew that wasn't right, to fink out on a friend just because you were a little scared. I said this to Gloria, about how it wasn't the most honorable thing in the world.

"I know what you mean, though," she said.

We got back to The Joint, and Bubba and Dean were there, playing checkers. They asked us how it went, and we told them what had happened.

"All we got to do is to tell the police," Bubba said. "Then they can get A. B. and make him tell them where the warehouse is, see. Then the police can go through the stuff and check out what belongs to Mr. Reynolds and what don't."

"Suppose they can't make him tell?" Gloria asked. "And the guy with the gun gets arrested. What are you going to say then?"

"I'm going to say the same thing I'm saying now," Bubba said. "You either got the guts to do what's right or you ain't."

I really wished that Bubba hadn't put it like that, because I wasn't sure if I had the guts to do what was right or not. Then Dean had to stick his two cents in.

"Suppose A. B. didn't steal that stuff," Dean said.

"It's still stolen stuff," Bubba said.

"Yeah, but suppose A. B. didn't steal it?"

"So?"

"Well, if A. B. didn't steal it, if he's just selling it, suppose some other guys did it?"

"If A. B. didn't steal it, then some other guys had to steal it," I said.

"Right." Dean was nodding his head. "Remember that gang that stole that money, about five million dollars, from the airport?"

"Yeah?"

"And remember how they kept finding bodies all the time?"

"They didn't steal this stuff," Bubba said.

"But suppose someone *like* them stole the stuff," Dean said, "and the stuff they said Chris took wasn't even there.

Then they would be mad at us and we wouldn't have solved anything."

"We could use a little more evidence," Bubba said. "We really don't know that stuff was even stolen stuff, really."

"It was stolen," I said.

"Would you swear to God on a stack of Bibles facing your mother's grave?" Bubba asked.

"My mother isn't dead," I said.

"Would you swear in court knowing all those guys are on the loose with a stack of bullets?" Dean said. "If we're going to be heroes, we'd at least better get some good evidence."

"What do you say, Bubba?" I asked. "You're the one with the guts."

"Maybe we'll wait until we find out for sure where the place is," Bubba said.

The idea didn't sound like it would look good on paper, but it sure felt good. We had found a new way to spell relief: C-H-I-C-K-E-N!

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# CHAPTER

# 13

WHEN I WENT TO BED I DIDN'T GET TO SLEEP EASILY, BUT I must have drifted off because the next thing I remember is waking up with a lot of commotion going on in the kitchen. It was the middle of the night and at first I just ignored it, but then I went out to see what was going on. My father was sitting at the table, and he was really upset, and there was a telegram. I looked at my mother.

"Your uncle passed away," she said.

Early the next morning there was a lot of confusion in the house. My mother was getting ready to go to work, and my father was getting ready to go to West Virginia where his brother had lived. Mom asked me if I would go with him. I didn't know my uncle, but how could I say no? If somebody

dies you're supposed to feel sorry for them even if you don't like them, or at least if you didn't like them when they were living, you were supposed to say it was okay now that they were dead. So I went with my father. He didn't say much on the way to the airport. I tried talking to him once in a while, but I didn't make a big thing of it.

We took the shuttle from New York to Washington and then rented a car and drove to Martinsburg, West Virginia. It had started raining, and one of the windshield wipers, the one on my side, wasn't working too well. I imagined the water to be a map of first one country and then another as the wiper changed the patterns on the window.

"One time"—my father's voice was hoarse as he spoke—"your uncle and me went down to the veterans' hospital on a Saturday night. We didn't have anything in mind, really—we just wandered down there. A door was open and we went in and walked down the hall until we came to an office. There was a metal box on the desk in the office. Jerry opened it and we saw that it was a money box. There wasn't a lot of money in it, maybe twenty dollars or so, not enough to amount to much now, but it was a lot then."

My father stopped talking again and continued driving. We went along a fairly wide highway for a while and then turned off onto a smaller road. The houses along the side of the road were neat but small and stood just off the edge of the road as if they were waiting for something that might never come.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Then?" My father took a quick look at me. "Well, we hadn't had what you would call a planned meal for over a



week. My father had gone over to Harrisburg looking for work and we hadn't heard from him. To make a long story short, we took the money. We didn't say anything to each other, we just took the money. He took some first and then I took some. We went out into the hall and found that the door that we had come in was locked. Somebody had left it open while they went out for something, but you had to have a key to get out. We went down the hall toward the front of the hospital. We saw a door that was open and we started toward it when we heard somebody yell out. I turned and saw the guard coming toward us. Jerry ran back down the hall toward the guard, and the guard grabbed him and I ran out the door.

"I got home that night and waited for Jerry to come home and he didn't. The next morning the sheriff came around and said that he was caught in the hospital stealing money. He told them he had been with a boy he had just met, and I never got into trouble."

"Did he get into trouble?"

"Not much," my father said. "He got two months' probation. Right after that, though, he quit school, started hanging around and drinking. Never amounted to much, really."

"How come," I asked, "if he really didn't get into any trouble?"

"Guess he was just looking for an excuse to give up," my father said, "and we found one that night."

When we got to Martinsburg we went through the center of town to a place where there was a group of houses, gray and huddled, near what looked like it had once been a

freight yard. You could still see tracks showing through in some places where the paved streets had worn down. Some of the houses were patched with tar paper, especially near the windows. We stopped at one of the places. Everybody said hello to my father, and some of the women started crying as soon as they saw him. They asked if I was his boy, and he said yes, and they said things about how I looked like him and that kind of thing. They were black, the same as me, but they were like country people.

"I was born and raised here," my father said to me. That was all he said to me in the five hours or so we were there. We went with other cars to the church, taking some of the people with us in the rented car. I guess my father knew there wouldn't be enough cars to take all the people, which was why he had rented the car in Washington. The funeral was quiet, with not too much preaching or anything—even the crying was quiet, and I felt almost as if they were trying to keep the rest of the world from knowing that one of them had died. Afterwards we ate and sat around for a while, and then my father said we had to leave.

"Y'all take care of yourselves," one woman said. She was thin, and her wrists looked as if they would break if you grabbed them too tightly. She was my Uncle Jerry's wife. She came up to my father, and they held each other for a while, and then we left. When we got into the car and my father had started it up, I began to turn around to see them one last time.

"Don't look back," my father said harshly.

But I already had, and they were standing there looking at

us getting ready to leave, and they didn't look a whole lot different than the stones in the graveyard as they stood together in the last light of the day.

We drove back to Washington and left the car. I felt glad when we got on the plane and were headed back to New York. All the way back home I thought about my father living there and being with those people. It was a part of his life that I hadn't even suspected was there, and I wondered how much more there was to him.

"Do you feel bad about your brother?" I asked. "I mean about what happened after he stole the money?"

"Yeah," he said, folding his hands, "I do."

"It wasn't your fault that he drank or anything," I said.

"I know," my father said. "It wasn't my fault that things went wrong, and I guess it's not my fault that I couldn't think of anything to do for him after things did go wrong. But I lost Jerry somewhere—long before he died, I lost him."

"I guess it's a funny feeling," I said, "kind of like a person dying even before they're dead."

He nodded, and then we stopped talking. It was early in the morning when we got back home. He came in to say good night after I got in bed. I wondered, as I lay in bed kind of sorting things out, if he thought I might not make a go of it, like his brother, and that he might lose me, too. Losing people like that, the way my father put it, was scary. I thought about who I might lose, and then I thought that maybe I didn't have anybody to lose because nobody was my responsibility, and I wasn't that close to anybody except my parents, and I didn't figure to lose them. Gloria could

lose people easier than me, I thought, because she got closer to people than I did. I didn't know if that was good or bad, and I really didn't want to think about it too much, because I didn't have any real answers.