

DISTRACTION

"Why *that* dump, Angel?"

"Jesus, kid," the smaller man hissed. "What did I tell you about names?"

Thomas Two Bears stopped walking. "Shit, man—"

Angel did not stop. "What did I tell you?" he repeated in a prison-yard murmur, without turn-ing his head or moving his lips. "Say it back to me.

His large companion hurried to catch up, so he could reply without raising his own voice above a whisper. "From the moment you go out on a job, you don't use nobody's name, ever," he recited.

"And why not?"

A sentence was Thomas's limit of memoriza-tion; he took refuge in paraphrase. "Then you get into the habit, like, and you don't go blabbin' somebody's name when something goes wrong, and you don't gotta cool no citizens." He was puffing just a bit: the sidewalk sloped uphill.

Angel winced. "The *only* time you cool a citizen is if he's tryin' to cool you first, and you can't run away, and you can't stop him *without* chillin' him. Listen to me, stupid: the Vancouver cops or the RCMP catch you with an armful of VCRs, a good lawyer, you might do a year. You ice a citizen and it's at least a nickel. Especially an Indian kid icin' a rich white dude."

Thomas brushed aside this digression. "I still want to know why *that* shithole back there."

They had reached the big firehouse on the corner. Church across the street; a good place to pause without drawing notice; not in front of anybody's house. Besides, it was quite dark out, a usefully moonless and cloudy night. Angel stopped and lit an Export A, his round face looking like a jack-o'-lantern in the glow from his Bic lighter. "How is that place different?"

"It's a little dinky piece of shit. Peelin' paint. Dirty windows. The friggin' lawn's got herpes, for shit's sake."

"Right. In West Point Grey. You know about this neighborhood?"

"It's where the money is. What else I gotta know?"

Angel shook his head. "He doesn't know the territory. Kid, you're lucky you ran into me: you ain't got the brains to be a thief."

Thomas Two Bears could have twisted Angel's head off with one hand. He thrust both of them deep into his pockets, and whispered, "*I know that*," so loudly that he flinched himself. "So teach me like you said, okay?"

"Pay attention, then. Three or four years ago, all the houses on this block looked like that, little and short and old, only with better lawns. Big like that one, but kept up. Old retired rich people lived here. Then one morning, for no particular reason, all the real estate guys woke up with a hard-on. They all got together and announced this whole area was worth four times what it was the day before, and the citizens all bought it. Next thing you know, a plague of realty rats came through here buyin' up all the nice old wood-frame houses, and they tore 'em all down and built all these giant ugly Martian boxes out of balsa wood and slapped stucco on 'em and sold 'em to airhead yuppies for a couple of mil apiece."

Thomas looked back down the street. Most of the houses *did* look like the box a

real house had come in. "So?"

"So tell me: what kind of guy, you go to him and say, 'I'll give you three times what your house is worth,' and he says, 'Take a hike, I like it where I am?'"

"Oh." Thomas lit a Player's Light King of his own, his last, and tossed away the empty pack. "A *real* rich guy."

"Or a real rich broad, or both. Probably old. And so rich they don't give a shit what the new yuppie neighbors think of their scraggy lawn."

"And you're sure they're not in there now? For a second there I could of swore I saw somethin' move at one of the windows."

"Kid, I been casin' this block three nights running. There's no car in front of the place or in the alley behind it. There's newspapers and fliers piled on the porch and mail spillin' out of the mailbox. The only sign of life in the whole place is a light inside that goes on at sundown and goes off at dawn. So what do *you* think?"

Thomas grinned. "I think we're half a block from Fat City. How long do we wait?"

"Let's give it until two—another hour or so. A lot of these yuppie jerks stay up late doin' that on-the-line bullshit with each other on their computers."

Thomas grinned again. "Imagine payin' thousands of bucks to shoot the shit with strangers? All they gotta do is go down to Granville Street, for Christ's sake."

"Not safe enough for a yuppie. Hell, I wouldn't talk to a stranger on Granville Street."

"Unless she had a real short skirt on," Thomas said, still grinning.

Angel snorted. "Kid, you not only don't know nothin', you don't even *suspect* nothin'. You mess with a street hooker, you might as well marry Lorena Bobbit and get it over with."

Thomas's grin vanished. "Aw, Angel, I was just—"

"Goddammit, you say my name one more time, I'm gonna tattoo it on your forehead with this cigarette!"

"Not so loud! Jesus. I'm sorry, okay?" Thomas drew on his smoke to cover his embarrassment. "So where are we gonna chill for an hour in this neighborhood, Mr. Mastermind?"

Angel pointed south, to the forests of the University Endowment Land a few blocks dis-tant. "One of those hiking trails."

A boring hour later, the pair emerged from the woods onto 16th Avenue, walked north again, and turned at the firehouse.

"How do we go in?" Thomas Two Bears asked. "Front or back?"

"See them advertising fliers there on the porch, with all the newspapers? You get caught on that porch at 2 A.M., you could always try and make like you just put a flier there. You get caught in the backyard, end of story. Besides, I can see the front-door locks from the street, and they're candy. We'll only be exposed for a matter of seconds. Just stay cool."

"Man, I'm cool," Thomas said.

Angel looked at him. "You're about as cool as Regis Philbin."

"Who?"

"Forget it. Now don't look around, all right? Try and act like you're an invited

guest, like I told you."

They left the sidewalk at the target house, climbed three cracked cement stairs, strode boldly up the walkway across the scruffy lawn, and climbed eight more stairs to the porch. The curtains behind the big picture window were translucent, and that light was on somewhere deep inside the house; it was just possible for Thomas to see into the dark living room while Angel worked on the locks. "Far out, man: looks like he's got a real nice sound system." He squinted, and frowned. "Lot of fuckin' books, too: he must be a prof from the university. I like rippin' off teachers; a lot of them ripped me off."

"Forget books—you can't fence a book for shit. Who wants 'em?"

"I was just saying."

Click. "Okay, kid, we're in. Come on."

Once they were inside, Angel almost-but-not--quite closed the door behind them, and then they simply stood there for a moment together. It was always a thrill, being inside some citizen's home. The silence of an empty house was pregnant with promise. It was like Christmas morning, or finding a woman asleep in the woods: the delicious suspense of presents received but as yet unopened, pleasures present but as yet unsampled.

"All right," Angel said at last. "Let's do it."

He spoke at normal conversational volume, for the first time since they'd entered this neighborhood; Thomas flinched slightly, and then smiled. "Yeah," he said, just as loudly. "Let's fucking *do* it."

He crossed the carpeted floor to the entertainment area. In the corner stood a massive floor-to-ceiling shelf affair packed full with CDs, cassette trays, and an enormous number of phonograph records. "Guy must be an old fart," Thomas said, indicating the records. "Look, he's got one of them antique turntable things." The turntable sat on a shelf of its own, with plenty of clearance over it.

"Yeah, well, he's got some good gear, too," Angel said. Beside the shelves was a waist-tall table, on which sat a huge, expensive-looking up-to-the-minute Personal Entertainment Center incorporating a six-disk CD player, a tuner, a double-cassette deck with both kinds of Dolby, and built-in speakers that looked like jet engine nacelles. A second pair of stand-alone speakers shaped like huge elongated pyramids stood against the opposite wall, flanking an enormous bookcase, aimed at the living room couch that sat beside the sound system. "That's at least a couple of grand worth of sound system right there. I can't wait to see the TV and VCR in his bedroom. This is great. Take that overgrown ghetto blaster and put it over by the front door; we'll make a pile and come back for it with wheels."

Thomas nodded. "You got it, man. Jeeze, this is great!"

"Let me see if he's got any music worth copping. I like some of that old shit ..."

Thomas stepped up to the music monolith. It sat on short little legs, leaving a convenient space to get his hands under it on either side. He did so. To his surprise, it felt wet under there. Slimy wet. "Huh." He tried to take his hands back out and see what he'd gotten on his fingers, and failed. "Huh." He tried again, with no better result. "Hey, Ang . . . I mean, hey, man?"

"What is it now?" Angel, with tilted neck, was studying the CDs by the light of his Bic.

"Uh . . . I'm, like, stuck."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I'm ... you know: like, stuck."

"Hey, you can leave any time you want. You losin' your nerve or what?"

"No, man, I mean I can't let go of this fuckin' thing. I'm stuck to it."

"What do you mean, you're stuck to it?" Thomas shook the heavy thing vigorously, picked it up and set it down twice. "I can't let go of it. My hands are like, stuck to it."

"What?" The Bic lighter went out.

"It felt wet when I went to pick it up . . . and now I can't let go."

"Jesus Christ, Tommy—"

"For Christ's sake, Angel, don't use *my name!*"

Angel relit the lighter, held it near and peered at Thomas's hands. "You really can't get loose? You're not shifting me?"

Thomas's big shoulders swelled, and then swelled further. "Not without ripping the skin right off 'em. I mean it, man: I'm *stuck*."

Even in the feeble light of the lighter, Thomas could see the blood draining from Angel's face. "Holy *shit*," the older man said softly.

Thomas thought as hard as he ever had in his life, an effort greater than the earlier physical effort of trying to free his hands from this technophile Tar-Baby. The results were disappointing . . . but crystal clear. "I'm screwed, ain't I? Ain't I, Angel? I'm completely screwed. I can't even change my mind and go home empty now, can I?"

"What do you mean, you can't—"

"Angel, think about it. How far is an Indian kid carrying a two thousand dollar sound system through Vancouver at two in the morning gonna get? I can't pay a bus driver, or a cabbie if I could get one to stop. Even if I make it to cover somehow, how long can I hide from the heat with *this* goddam thing on my hands? I'm screwed, right?"

Angel grimaced. "So we do what you said: bite the fuckin' bullet and rip the skin off your fin-gertips. It'll hurt, but not like a nickel will."

"I know you told me leaving fingerprints don't matter as much as everybody thinks—but Jesus, man, if I leave 'em the goddam *fingertips*, they'll make me for sure."

Angel shut his lighter down again. "Kid," he said finally, "you're right: you're totally fucked." It was irritating that Thomas had thought it through faster than he had. Then again, the kid probably had a lifetime of experience in reaching the conclusion that he was screwed. "Jesus *Christ*, this pisses me off."

It didn't piss Thomas off. He was too miserable, and too confused.

"Son of a *bitch*," Angel said suddenly. "He's *here*. The bastard is here in the house, right now. He's gotta be: the kind of glue that bonds to skin don't stay wet very long. He saw us coming and he put Wonderglue on the damn stereo. He figured out the first thing we'd touch and he boobytrapped it. I'm gonna *kill* the son of a bitch!" He took a gun from his jacket—far too angry to remember his own lecture on when and when not to cool a citizen—and started to leave the living room.

"Angel, wait—maybe he's got a piece!"

"If he had a piece, he wouldn't be screwin' around with glue," Angel said, and left the room.

He found himself at once in a small foyer of sorts, presented with three choices. Right oblique, an open *doorway* that led to a dark kitchen. Left oblique, a door, slightly ajar. Far left, a dark hallway that ran back parallel to the living room he'd just left, doubtless leading to bedroom and bathroom. The light by which he had been seeing since he'd entered the building was coming out from behind the partly closed door. *That* was where the sneaky bastard was, in his goddam den, probably trying to phone the police. Angel reached for the doorknob—and paused. Tricky prick wasn't going to get Angel McKee to put his hand on any doorknob full of glue, no sir. He laughed, butted the door open with his crotch, and entered the new room.

He got a very brief look at his antagonist, barely time to register a tall skinny geek with glasses, long hair and a beard—then was distracted by a visual phenomenon much nearer and too transient to grasp.

His feet exploded.

He glanced down in shocked surprise. An extremely large, heavy book—a dictionary—had fallen from a perch on top of the door, passed before his eyes, and landed, spine downwards, on both his feet.

They *hurt*.

As he was absorbing this news, he looked back up again—and met a large, heavy cut-glass ash-tray, traveling in his direction at high speed. It impacted on the bridge of his nose, and would have hurt terribly—but he just had time to register the hideous sensation of cigarette ashes in his eyes before consciousness tactfully left him.

When it returned, his first sensation was utter disorientation—too many things to sort out. His whole face hurt, even more than his feet, the ashes still in his eyes were an intolerable annoyance, his neck ached from being in a bad position for a long time, and for some reason his feet felt unbelievably cold—but these were *not* the first things he noticed.

He was outside, and it was broad daylight. He was sitting on the porch, *barefoot*, head on his knees. Out on the sidewalk, a small boy was regarding him with grave curiosity.

"Oh shit," he croaked, sitting up straighter with considerable pain.

"You got that right," Thomas said mournfully.

He whirled his head around, sending cut glass slivers through his stiff neck muscles. Thomas Two Bears was sitting beside him, his legs spread wide—for the Personal Entertainment Center was still attached to his hands.

Figuring all this out might well prove to be impossible—but short-term tactics, at least, were easy to decide. "Let's book!" he said.

"Go for it," Thomas suggested.

He realized, in failing to get to his feet, that his soles were glued to the porch. "Aw, *shit*."

Thomas's voice had a dreamy, singsong quality. "You're so fucking smart. You figure shit out all the time, with that big brain, and explain it to me like I'm five years old. And now you got us both in this jackpot. Man, you're no smarter than me.

You're just a fancier kind of stupid."

Angel might actually have been willing to concede the point—but had more pressing things on his mind just then. "Jesus Christ, kid, what the hell *time* is it? How long we been sitting here like this, sitting fucking ducks?"

"Hours," the Indian chanted. "Hours. Lots of hours. It's almost sundown again."

"*Sundown the next day?* And that bastard didn't call the cops?"

"You're the genius. You figure it out. It's past me."

Now it was Angel's turn to think harder than he ever had in his life. His temples swelled. Finally they relaxed, as his jaw sagged. "Oh, *no*. Man, we're in *trouble*—"

"You don't know the half of it," Tommy told him. "I've had to take a shit for the last five hours."

Oh God, me too, Angel thought, and swept the thought aside. "Oh my God, kid," he moaned. "I think I know where I fucked up. He lives like a bum in a rich neighborhood. He wouldn't move if you gave him a million dollars. He stays up all night long and never goes out. You know what we did? Oh Christ, it would of been safer to tease a wolverine ..."

"What'd we do, Angel?"

"God help us, Thomas: we disturbed a writer while he was working." He frowned. "Shit, he'll just leave us here until he's made his deadline. We could fucking starve. It could be *weeks*, if he's a novelist. He might not even *remember us* by then." He turned away from his accomplice and faced the street. "Hey—kid! Go home and tell your mother to call the cops, would ya? *Please?* We want to surrender ..."