



My series of somersaults was ending. With practiced ease I slapped my feet down and leaned backwards just a bit so I wouldn't fall flat on my face. Then I did the same with the other me, and slipped us both back to my body so I could see through eyes again. My hearing snapped back quickly, and I could tell from the murmur of the other bettors that I'd made my point. My eyes focused just in time to see a hand—large, suntanned, callused, and somehow competent looking—scoop the dice up.

"Harry, check these," I heard a graveled voice say. The hand with the dice swung a few inches through the air and opened over another hand, this one pale and slender, with long and delicate fingers that reminded me of a piano player I once knew. The dice dropped and I knew that I could be in a lot of trouble very soon.

I let my eyesight wander up from the dark hand to the rumbling voice. I studied the curly black hair on the back of the hand, the starched cuff of the astonishingly white shirt, the smooth silk of the black tuxedo, and the bulge at the shoulder that suggested I had best be quiet and well-mannered to this individual. Then I looked at the face. As bronzed as the hand that had taken my dice, it was flat, wrinkle-free, and—if you allow me to ignore the polite smile that everyone knew was there only for show—icily expressionless.

"Sir?" I asked inquiringly. "We would like to speak to you for a moment, Mr.—?" The voice was quiet, and as polite as the smile, but a dual air of authority and menace hung behind its soft words.

"Mr. Jones," I offered helpfully. "Mr. Irving Tecumseh Jones." I paused for a moment and became aware of the others pressed against the table. Many were curious, a few were concerned—but all were relieved that I was being removed. I smiled sadly and agreed it would be convenient to speak to him.

We stepped away from the table and I heard the now empty dice clatter their unguided way across the green felt. We said nothing to each other as we moved slowly through the crowded casino; there really was nothing to be said.

His office was quiet after the dull roar of the gaming rooms; the air was fresher, though it still

smacked of the machines that had processed it. My husky guide waved me into a soft leather chair, and moved around the broad mahogany desk to his own seat. During the short silence that followed, I glanced around the room. There were several nice paintings that I perhaps unjustly assumed to have safes behind them, and quite a few long bookcases stuffed with fat works on statistics and probability theory. The rest of the office was done in soft pastels and natural wood, a decoration scheme so carefully planned that it was difficult to notice the room had no windows. Or it would have been difficult, were I not feeling so ensnared.

The manager broke the silence at last. "Mr. Jones," he began in a confident voice, "our table man tells us that he thinks there's something a bit unusual about your—ah—performance with the dice. I'd like to ask you some questions."

"What is this?" I demanded, trying to throw him off balance. "I mean—"

"Please, Mr. Jones. First, how much have you won tonight?"

"Ten thousand dollars, but—"

"Ten thousand dollars. I see." He sounded like a jury foreman pronouncing the word "guilty."

"Now wait one minute," I protested. "That was pure luck. I won that money—"

"Mr. Jones, if our table man is correct—and he usually is—you have neither lost more than twenty dollars nor won less than a hundred dollars on any single throw."

I felt sick. I'd been afraid that they'd notice me if I just kept winning, so I'd made sure to lose frequently; however, I couldn't bring myself to throw away too much of that good green stuff. I'd tried to disguise it by continually changing the intervals and amounts, but they'd found out after all. Shit. "So what the hell does that have to do with anything except my luck?"

"Mr. Jones, it makes us very suspicious when something like that happens. The odds, you see, are highly against it." He waved his hand at the shelves of math books and leaned back in his chair. "So, Mr. Jones, we're trying to find out how you did it. Unless you'd care to tell us, and save us all that trouble?" He raised his eyebrows in query. I shook my head. He shrugged, and pressed a button on the chrome panel inserted into his desk. A muted chime sounded, and immediately a respectful voice answered: "Yes, sir?"

"Harry, what was the matter with those dice?"

"Nothing, sir."

The big man's expression became considerably less serene as he leaned forward slightly in his chair. "What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"What I said, sir. There is nothing wrong with the dice. They are the casino's own issue, and they have not been tampered with. We have been rolling them ever since you picked them up, and we are getting only the standard, expected series."

"Harry, there's gotta be *something* wrong with 'em." I smiled discreetly at the note of frustration in his voice.

"Sir, we just reached the 360th roll. Everything seems normal. The dice are fine." The flunky's voice was cool, tinged with a noticeable streak of triumph.

"All right. Thanks anyway." He lifted his finger from the button it had been depressing, and raised his face to me. His expression was still polite, but the cold glitter deep within his eyes warned me to press my advantage no further.

"Mr. Jones," he said at length, "our technical department says you were using honest dice. Their implicit conclusion was that you won honestly. Mr. Jones, I do not—I cannot—agree with that conclusion. I've been shooting craps, and running crap games, since I started grade school, and I can recognize a cheater when I see one in action." He put both hands flat on the desktop and bent forward some more, as if daring me to deny his accusation. I thought I might as well give it a try.

"But if the dice—"

"Damn it!" he exploded. "I don't give a damn about the dice. So *they're* honest—then you have some kind of illegal throw or something. But you shouldn't have been able to win that much money the way you won it. I don't like it, Jones, I don't like it at all!" He paused to rein in his temper, and then stood up. "Mr. Jones, I'm going to have to ask you to leave this casino. I don't know how you're cheating, but you are,

and we can't afford to have your kind around here. So—pick up what you've won at the cashier's window, then get out."

I had slipped out of the easy chair and turned for the door when he spoke again. "Mr. Jones."

I looked over my shoulder at him. "Yes?"

"I'm calling the other casino managers to warn them about you—you'll never be allowed in any casino here in Vegas again, not if I have anything to say about it."

"Thanks loads," I grunted, and made my way to the money office.

I cursed myself thoroughly as I walked through the crowded casino. Here I'd had the perfect life within reach—all play for pay and no work at all—and because I'd wanted to get it a little quicker than I knew was safe I'd gotten caught. And now the good life was being taken away from me. Idiot! All that talent and no place to use it. Fool!

As I recall, my talent—my telekinetic ability—started to show itself shortly after I hit puberty. What a mess *that* made of me. It's bad enough to go through the normal miseries of acne and voice change and unfulfillable sex drive, but to have something like this that I had to keep hidden from everyone—it's lucky I didn't suicide out around age sixteen. I guess I was a little luckier than I could have been, though—I'd been a sci-fi reader since I was ten, and I knew that I had to keep quiet about what I could do. I shudder every time I think what it would have been like if the Defense Department—or worse yet, some crazy university professor—had learned about my power and had requisitioned me.

No, I'd been cagey. I'd stayed shut up in my room, trying to develop my talent as best I could. I'd found out a lot about it too, for a kid who was teaching himself. I could use it in either of two ways: as if I had another body that I could remote control, or as if I were within the object I was TKing. The only limitations that I discovered were that I had to be in sight of what I was working on, and that I couldn't do with TK what I couldn't do with my real body—I mean, I could make an ashtray seem to fly across the room, all right, but I was only "picking it up" with my invisible body and carrying it. If I got inside that ashtray, about all I could do would be to rock it, to tilt "my" weight first this way, then that. That's what I'd been doing with the dice—I'd gotten inside them and shifted my weight so that I landed right side up—or, rather, so that the dice landed right side up.

That was a trick I learned in the Army. You see, I'd never been terribly intelligent—at least by the usual academic standards—and when I started into adolescence, my grades went to hell. Next thing I knew, I was being drafted. I went. After all, I'd figured at the time, what the hell? I mean, I had nothing else to do. So I spent two years fighting for Uncle Sam in the jungles of South Vietnam. That changed my life—and I don't mean war and killing and all that; that's pretty much part of everyone's life, in some way or another. What I mean is that in the barracks, when you're just sitting around with nothing much to do except not think about the next patrol, you shoot craps. So I shot craps. I played regularly for eight months before my stupidity hit me; I suddenly realized that I could use my talent on the dice and clean up. So I did. Took me about six months, too, to learn how to handle the damn things not only well enough, but also inconspicuously enough, to be able to win and then collect my winnings. That's why I signed up for another tour in Nam—combat infantrymen gamble higher than anybody, except maybe Marines. I left Nam and the Army on the same day, fifteen thousand dollars richer than when I went in. Then I went to Vegas and got caught my first night in town. Shit!

I collected my winnings and went out into the night.

It was dark outside, even with all the neon lights glowing, and I stood by the casino entrance for a minute or two, trying to let my eyes adjust and also trying to decide what to do now. A twenty-five-thousand-dollar bank roll was nice, but it would hardly support me, not in the style to which I desperately wanted to become accustomed nor for the length of time I had planned. If the other casinos wouldn't accept me, then there was no point in staying in town; on the other hand, if they would, it was pointless to leave. I finally decided I might as well try them all, one by one, and was about to walk to the one a block away when a strong hand grasped me, a lot less firmly than it might have, on the right arm above the elbow.

"Jones?" I heard. "Let's us have a little talk."

I was about to slap the hand away when I got a good look at its owner. The guy was very big and

very black—two attributes which, separately, put me at a disadvantage; together, they're a badge of irresistible power and authority.

I mumbled something. The hand tugged meaningfully at my arm; I nodded and followed. We went around a corner, then around another; after going through an alley or three I was completely lost. We stopped, finally, in a studio apartment on the third floor of a building which looked older than it could possibly be. I slumped into a rusty lawn chair facing a new Sony portable TV and caught my breath.

The black man stood in front of me, scrutinizing me carefully. At last he smiled slightly. "You'll do jus' fine," he said, and disappeared around the corner of a tall bookcase. I heard a refrigerator snicker and glass clink. A moment later he was back with a bottle of beer in each hand. He set mine on the rickety table to my right, and dropped easily onto a torn couch on the other side of it. I hitched my chair around to face him.

"O.K., Jones," he began, "I'm gonna start by showing all my cards right off. I know 'zactly what you can do—I know jus' how you won that money tonight."

Tension ran tiny prickles down my back. "I'm afraid I really don't understand you, Mr.—?"

"Coy," he grunted, "jus' plain ole Coy." He paused. "Now, look—I don't wanna play no run-around games with you, Jones, so listen to me first, *then* argue, O.K.?"

I shrugged, but said nothing.

"Good. Now, I am what you call a `sen-sitive'. That is, when someone's using some kind of power that most people don't have and don't know about, a sen-sitive can feel it being used. Like dawgs, you know? The way those little mothers can hear a really high whistle? Well, I can do the same thing when one par-ticular power's being used. The same par-ticular power that you were using on them dice earlier this evening." He took a swig from his beer and smiled.

"Listen, Coy, I—"

"You not trying to kid me, now, are you, Jones?" Blue-green light, pumped from a nearby neon sign, flowed across his rich brown face, imbuing his smile with an air of malice that I didn't like.

"Coy, really, I—"

His voice went very, very cold. "Jones, I was standing next to that crap table all night long, just watching you pick up your money in little bits and pieces. I felt your mind moving, Jones—I felt you crawl inside them dice and make 'em jump the way you wanted. Don't tell me no different, 'cause if you do, why, I'll know you lying to me, boy, and I get mad when people lie to me."

I was cowed. "All right, Coy, all right." I lit a cigarette, sipped at my beer, and fought the crawlies inside me. "Yeah," I said, letting the smoke out in one big rush, "that's how I won. So?"

Coy relaxed and smiled again. "Good man. Nice to hear you fess up. Now we can start talking." He hunched forward across the table and spun the ashtray idly with his strong, arrogant fingers. "Now, the way I figure, Jones, you still need money. Right?" He glanced up, sympathetic amusement lighting his eyes.

"Yeah."

"Good. Man at the casino tell you you ain't gonna be allowed in no Vegas casinos at all anymore?"

"Yeah."

"Truth. You are barred—or, will be, once he gets off that phone."

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" I said impatiently. "But what the—"

He held up a large hand and lazily waved me into silence. "No sweat, Jones. Coy's got a way for you to use your power and make some coin at the same time."

"How?"

"Simple, my good man," he said expansively, "simple. Near to this very room is a big-time drug pusher—nope, that's the wrong word for him. He used to be a stand-on-the-corner, sell-you-a-nickel-bag man, back when we two was on speaking terms; but a thorough application of the traditional American virtues of industry and competitiveness, plus three business courses at night school, plus a gang of goons, so ugly that strong men are unable to look at 'em, who ran off the other pushers—all combined to make this dude the kingpin of the drug business in downtown Vegas. That man is now so high up, though, he ain't seen any junk in years; he's so rich that just thumbing through them

thousand-dollar bills gets his fingers black as mine."

I was intrigued. Hooked, in fact. But I tried not to let my interest show as I stubbed out my cigarette and said, "So get to the point."

"Well, the point about this dude *is*, he got a problem. A big problem. Too much cash money. If he goes putting it in the bank, why, the man from the Tax Department, he gonna come 'round and ask, 'Son, where all that money come from?' And then our boy, he's in real trouble. So—he keeps it in a shoe box, under his bed. When he gets the shoe box filled up, he takes a little trip to someplace—say, Switzerland?—where he can deposit that money without getting his ass harassed."

"O.K., O.K.—so?"

"So, Jones, that box's just about full to the top now with crinkly little thousand-dollar bills."

"Are you saying you want me to help you *rob* him, Coy?"

"Why, sure enough, brother."

We sat tensely still for a very long moment, staring at each other, measuring each other. Coy breathed deeply, evenly, the four-inch points on his collar rising up and down as his great brown chest filled and emptied. I don't believe I breathed at all. I was thinking too hard.

How much money could a shoe box hold, if it held only thousand-dollar bills? I tried to visualize that many green, oval portraits of one man and failed. A lot. Half of it could certainly keep me going for a long, long time—say, spend twenty of them a year, and twenty bills'd make a stack just about *that* high, and half a shoe box looks like it'd be about this high, and . . . damn!

Dangerous, though . . . I didn't like the sound of `goons'—sounded mean and vicious and almost efficient . . . bastards wouldn't hesitate, they'd shoot me right off, no second thoughts about pain or anything, like dogs, that's all ... wouldn't want to get in their way. I hoped Coy had some kind of good plan that would keep me as far away from them as possible.

Coy—could I trust him? Shit, I didn't know about doing something like this with a ni—a black man, even if some of the best guys back in Nam were black . . . yeah, that was it, do it just like they did there, a job. Work with him, I could trust him to do his end of this, he wouldn't let me down, but he wouldn't socialize with me. Double-cross? Maybe, but then again, if he tried it, he'd slip up and point a gun at me or something, and if he did that, I'd get him from behind just like I did to that scrawny little slopehead who caught me outside that village and wanted me as a Christmas present for Ho . . . hunh, he might try to double-cross me, but

I breathed. "O.K., Coy. The proposition sounds interesting. Two questions: How do you plan to do it? And why do you need me?"

Coy chuckled, and there was something in that rolling, rumbling sound that made me uneasy. "Simple, Jones—dig this. Every night, old Moneybox goes into his bedroom, locks the door, pulls the curtains down, opens his safe—"

"I thought you said he keeps the money under his bed, in a shoe box?" I interjected.

Coy slapped his thigh and laughed. "That's where the safe *is*, man! That dude has got to be the only miser in the whole world with a wall safe under his bed!"

"Oh—O.K., go on."

"He opens the safe, takes out this shoe box, and then sits on the bed cross-legged—you know, like a tailor?—and counts the damn money. Then he puts it away again and goes to sleep."

I chewed my lower lip for a moment. "So how are you planning to get at it? You said there're some ugly goons working for him, and—"

"Don't you worry none, Jones," he smiled.

"What do you mean?"

"O.K., listen good, now. First, Moneybox got the penthouse of a big apartment building. He figures that makes him safe, right? Goons on the stairs, private elevator, roof secured, windows barred, the whole works. He figures ain't nobody gonna get into that penthouse, but—" Coy's eyes sparkled and his finger began to jab the air, as though he were poking at my invisible chest "—but what he don't worry about is the apartment building across the street."

I shook my head in confusion. "I don't follow you."

"Now, now, let me finish, hey? Those two buildings, they about fifty feet apart. His is higher than the other one. Now, on the roof of the other is a little shed—the roof of that shed is on a direct line with Moneybox's windowsill, which lets you see right into his God-damn room when the curtains are open—which is how I know about all this, 'cause I was up there with a certain little lady one night, and I roll over and I notice folding currency being flashed in that room—he forgot to close the curtains—and I got a sharp eye for that kinda thing. So I checked up on him, and he does the same thing every night. Cool?"

"Yeah, sure, Coy, but that still doesn't tell me how we're going to get his money away from him."

"A breeze, man! You and I just go up there tomorrow night." He swiveled his head to one side to check the dial of a clock radio on one of his dust-covered bookshelves. "Yeah, that man gone to bed already tonight, we have to get him tomorrow. We just go up there tomorrow," he repeated, "and you reach across with your power after he's taken out the shoe box, hit him on the head, and bring the money back across to where we are." He spread those flatiron hands of his far apart and beamed. "Simple?"

I frowned. "Not really, Coy."

"Why not?" he demanded, taken aback;

"Two problems: One, I can't get at him because of the curtains. I can't touch what I can't see. Two, I can't bring the money back."

Coy's eyes opened wide. "What's that you say, man?"

"I said, I can't bring the money back."

"I heard that. I mean—why?"

"Because—look, Coy, it's too damn complicated to explain. I can't, that's all—my power isn't that powerful."

He stared at me intently, scratching his jaw in thought. When he spoke again, there was an undercurrent of distrust deep beneath his words. "So you can't do it, huh? Hrn-m-m . . . old Coy, he didn't figure on that . . . you *can't* do it? Or you don't *want* to do it. Or is it maybe that—"

"I told you, damn it, I *cannot* do it. I don't have that kind of ability. Believe me, Coy, I—"

"All right, all right." He waved his hand like a fan and I quieted. "Let's us study some, huh, Jones? I swear, there's gotta be a way . . ."

We thought. I reached for my beer and found it warm; the condensation on the side had dried off. I drank it anyway, sipping contemplatively, trying to produce an air of careful deliberation. Coy sprawled across the couch, idly scratching the hollow where his piston neck disappeared into his collarbone. Then he stirred slowly, his eyes beginning to glow, and his teeth gleaming in the semidark room.

"I got it," he announced quietly.

"How?" I put the beer down and leaned my elbow on the table.

He cocked his head a trifle. "Can you touch the curtains?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Come on, man! Just open them damn curtains, if you can touch them! Then you go into the room and get at him!"

I felt deflated. I mean, it was *my* power, right? And here was this—this not-me—person—telling me how to use it. How the . . . Christ, how come I can't think like that? Aloud, I said, "Yeah. That'll do it, all right, but—how do I get the money back across?"

Coy rolled over onto his stomach, propped himself up on his elbows, and stared vacantly over the arm of the sofa. Silent, he lay like that for several minutes. I got impatient. "Well?" I felt vindicated, and I'll bet it showed.

"You can't just make it fly across?" he asked, twisting his neck around to stare up at me.

"I'm a human being, Coy, not a bird. No, I can't 'just make it fly across'."

We sat through a much longer silence this time. Finally, just as the quiet began to pulse in time with the neon sign that still gushed its ghastly light into the room, Coy swung into a sitting position and said lightly, "Then I guess you just have to drop it to me, down to the ground."

I didn't say a word. I don't think I had to. Coy could feel my distrust when my eyes slapped his face. For the first time that evening, he fidgeted. Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed nervously. "All

right, Jones, you win. But you got any ideas?"

I was about to respond with something glum and discouraging when an idea *did* hit me. My battered chair squeaked unhappily as I quickly straightened; I slammed my hand down on the table and said, "Yeah!"

"Well, give, baby—don't hold back on old Coy."

I held up a finger and took the roundabout explanation. "Coy, you've got the look of a man who's spent time on the football field." I giggled. Shee-yit—one lousy good idea, and I felt drunk.

Coy was puzzled, but he dutifully nodded his head. "Damn straight, man—football was the only thing I liked about school. Played every day till the Army came hunting for me."

"Ever throw the ball any?" I asked archly.

"Sure—fact, you're looking at the baddest black quarterback my home town ever did see. Why?"

"Could you throw the football fifty yards?"

"Course I can—any smart-ass quarterback can throw for fifty. Come on now, man—what you getting at?"

I sobered. "I'm getting at money retrieval, Coy. Look, if you can throw a football fifty yards, you ought to be able to put it through a window fifty feet away, right?"

The puzzled look on his face deepened, and I enjoyed seeing it. "Yeah," he eventually conceded, "easy—but why?"

I dropped my game of goad. "Because, Coy, you are going to be throwing something—maybe a football, but I don't know yet—from that rooftop into Moneybox's room. That 'something' is going to have a string tied to it. Tied to that string will be a stronger cord. My power—when it's over in that bedroom—will catch the something, pull the string in, and grab the rope. Then it'll tie the shoe box, securely wrapped, to the rope. Then you, on the rooftop, will start pulling back the rope. My power will pay it out, which is why you pull it back, because I'll really be on the other end. What we'll have is sort of a shoe box cable car, straight across from one building to the other, high above the street. We'll just pull in all the string, and nobody—but nobody—will ever guess how we did it."

I grinned to see the rekindled fires of greed roaring in his eyes. "Like it?"

He whistled, long and low and respectful. "Yeah. I ain't too sure how it's gonna work, but I just know it's gonna." He shook his head slowly, and when he spoke again there was a note of wonder in his voice. "I just throw a football through a window, wait a few minutes, then haul in all that money. Yeah—I *like* it!"

"Good," I said, yawning and hoisting myself out of the lawn chair, "good." I yawned again, hugely. "Look, Coy—what do you say we adjourn, huh? It's late, and if I don't get my precious eight hours, my power starts to fail me. I gotta get back to the motel and rack." I walked over to the window and, leaning my forehead against the smudged glass, I looked out at the city.

In the area where I had been, casino lights were still blazing invitingly, almost as if their managers thought of gamblers as moths who could be sucked to their doom by pretty fires. I scowled, and turned to stare back into the gloom. "What time do we meet tomorrow? And where?"

Coy rose languidly from the couch, stretched his arms out wide as *he* yawned, and then beat his chest with a Tarzan drum roll. "I'll find you," he drawled, "at your motel, about six o'clock. We get something to eat first, then go play football. Good enough?"

"O.K.," I said, walking for the door. "See you then."

Outside, the night air was cool and clean. I could see a few brave, lonely stars in the sky. I buttoned up my jacket, put my hands in my pocket, and walked briskly home, watching my feet as I went.

The next morning, as I was stolidly working my way through a breakfast of six jelly doughnuts and a cup of black coffee, a full realization of what I was planning to do that evening galloped across my mind. I was going to rob someone. That night, Coy and I were going to go to the top of a building, from which I would send forth my power into the dark. Then I would stand on a narrow ledge and claw open thick, resisting curtains and knock a frightened man down and rob him.

It reared and neighed; its frightened hooves tore the barren ground and sent great dust clouds whirling.

My God, what if something went wrong? What if I couldn't do it? What if Coy couldn't hit the window? What if the rope broke? What if we got caught—Mother of Christ—caught? Prison suit, high oak bench, rocks and hammers and machine guns shrieking at night and oh, Momma, I didn't want *that!* I just wanted to cheat at craps and never get caught, that's all—I didn't want to get hurt or buried or anything. I just wanted some money, that's all . . . just some money ...

It flicked its tail and flashed away. Its hoofbeats died out quickly and the dust clouds settled and all was peaceful. I finished my last jelly doughnut, tossed back the mouthful of cold, dirty coffee left in the cup, and paid the man behind the counter. Then I left.

I was back in my room by three. Vegas is not the place to be if they won't let you into the casinos. I know—I tried a couple and was politely, firmly denied admission to each. By the time Coy's breezy knock rattled the flimsy motel door, I had emptied my ashtray twice and pulled every ball of loose wool off the cheap blanket. I was in the hallway almost before the door stopped shivering.

"Hey, man," Coy laughed, slapping me hard on the shoulder, "I got the stuff. You ready?"

He did have the stuff, all right. A reel of fishing line was crammed into his windbreaker pocket, a thick coil of nylon rope was pressed between his elbow and his chest, and a brand new football was swallowed by his massive hand. I took the rope, said, "Yeah," and we left.

Over dinner—two burgers, fries, and a shake each—at MacDonald's, we decided to attach the fishing line to the football's laces. We didn't say much else—I was pretty jumpy, and I believe Coy was too lost in the contemplation of a shoe box filled with money to use his mouth for more than chewing.

Our destination was close. We walked, leaving Coy's car parked in the MacDonald's lot. A nice evening—cool, gentle breeze, with the traffic noises somehow muted by the caressing air. I regretted stepping into the elevator of the apartment building.

On the rooftop, the wind changed its nature. It abandoned the loving playfulness it had had on the street and became a cold, steady pressure. Like most consistent facts and forces, it became something to be adapted to and then forgotten. I did so immediately, while standing outside the tiny structure that housed the staircase.

I looked around at empty concrete. Nothing. A three-foot wall hung to the edge of the building. Another shed was in the far corner. A huge TV antenna was in the middle.

Coy gestured wordlessly at the other shed, and we walked toward it, gravel crunching under our feet. Leaning forward slightly into the wind, I wondered about the gravel; I quickly dismissed the thought as irrelevant to our purpose. We stepped into the lee of the shed and Coy slouched against its faded brick wall.

"Now, we get up top of this here," he said, jabbing at the structure with his thumb, "and we see right down into Moneybox's bedroom. Nice angle, you can see the whole room pretty clear. Gimme a boost, man, and I pull you up after me."

I cupped my hands, Coy stepped into them, and together we vaulted him to the top. A huge black hand came over the lip immediately, and then I was next to him. We lay on the tar paper for a short moment and grinned foolishly at each other. Then we rolled gingerly to the very edge of the roof and stared out.

The sun was just setting. Between the graceless buildings swirled the first tentative patches of the murk of a city night. Headlights slashed the night coldly, the street lights had come on, and apartments in the slab of concrete across from us glowed with subtle hints of home and love. I flicked some gravel off the shed's roof and watched it disappear.

Coy told me to study the penthouse, fourth window from the left. I stared hard. The unlighted room was heavily shadowed, but I could see the window bars—crudely disguised as ornamental latticework—from fifty feet. Probing further into the room, I could make out a large bed, a desk, and a night stand, but the distance was too great and the gloom too deep for me to discern more than their outlines. I quietly cursed the binoculars I hadn't thought of bringing.

"Hey, Jones." Coy was whispering, despite our near-total isolation from the population of Las Vegas. "Can you go over there now?"

"Sure." I, too, whispered. "But why?"



"To reconnoiter, man!"

"Nope. My power can go over there, but my eyes stay here. I can't see or taste or hear through my power—only touch."

"You could go wait for Money-box, couldn't you?"

"Sure, Coy," I answered patiently, "but as soon as he closes those curtains, I'm outside again. I can't work where I can't see."

"No, man—get 'im before he closes the curtains."

"And before he opens that safe."

"Oh." Coy subsided at that, and we waited the next twenty minutes in silence.

The night got darker. At one point, after I had blinked, I saw that the room had become brightly lighted. I was surprised. There is something about waiting that makes you recoil from the unsignaled occurrence of your expectation—you assume that your alertness will tell you that something is *about* to happen, not that something has just happened. Or so it is with me. My head snapped back and I felt Coy's monstrous hand engulf my shoulder.

"Get your ass ready, Jones," he hissed. "About two minutes now, at most."

Oblivious to all else, I saw into the bedroom with stunning clarity. The bedspread was blue silk, the night stand and desk rosewood, the carpet a fine Persian. From the gentle cream walls hung three Japanese woodcuts. At the thick oak door, a pudgy little man in a bathrobe was closing and locking his ultimate security. He shot home a heavy bolt and turned, rubbing his palms together in avid anticipation. He walked to the windows, stared out at the needlepoint of steadily shining lights, then pulled the curtains decisively shut.

"Give 'im another minute, Jones, let 'im open that safe before you move."

"Yeah." Stomach clenched, hands clammy, I tensed for the leap into empty night air. Coy released my shoulder at last.

"Go, you mother! Go!"

I went, wrenching myself in two as I hurled into the darkness that part of my being capable of exerting physical force. I stayed, sprawled on the rooftop, an immobile husk that could only see and direct. I went, and I went quickly.

Over: To the drapes, part the drapes. See through my far-off eyes the funny fat man sitting Indian-style on his pretty silk bed, money box open. No time. Tear the drapes down, fat mouth gapes, fat eyes open, lips move wetly. I take two steps, he hugs money box closer, distance blurs but it looks like he's going to scream, he sees nothing as I hit him. Go to the window, damn!

Back: "Coy, there's a *window!*"

"Open it." Football poised, dancing lightly on long, nervous black fingers.

"No—it's big, plate glass."

"Break it."

Over: Get box, close it. Squint from rooftop to spot roll of tape. Take tape from desk, seal box tight. Pick up chair. From outside the shattered glass is a cloud of gnats.

Back: "Throw!"

Over: Watch ball come down softly, silently into waiting power fifty feet away. Detach line, drop ball carelessly to sidewalk. Reel in line, rope appears. Tie box to rope securely.

Back: "Pull!"

Over: Pay out rope, come to end of line.

Back: "Got it?"

"Ah-yup."

"Good, I—"

I didn't see Coy's arm move. It must have, though. I distinctly remember the sight—and the sound and the feel and the taste and, yes, even the smell—of a huge, solid, knotted pink and black fist slamming out of nowhere into my head.

I awoke on a bed. It was soft enough, but I was far from comfortable. My hands and feet were firmly lashed together and a blindfold was wrapped so thoroughly around my head that not even a crumb

of light dropped through. I moved experimentally, and was surprised to discover that there were no aftereffects. My head was clear and pain-free. I was dismayed, though, at my helpless vulnerability, and I grunted angrily when I realized my position.

A gentle, well-modulated voice spoke from somewhere near my right elbow. "Ah, Mr. Jones, how nice it is to hear your voice. Good morning."

"Where's Coy?" I muttered, by way of reply. "The minute I get my hands on that no-good, double-crossing, black son-of-a-bitch, I'm going to—" I cursed him colorfully and explicitly.

The voice took on a decidedly disapproving tone. "Really, Mr. Jones. You should be grateful to Mr. Coy, not angry with him. After all, he *did* save your life."

That stopped me. "How?"

"Why, you could have slipped off the roof, Mr. Jones."

The thought chilled me. "O.K.," I conceded quickly, "I won't badmouth Coy." I paused. "Uh—I know this is a standard question to ask, but—where am I?" "We brought you back to your motel room."

"Motel? Thanks—wait, *we*? Who is 'we'? Police?"

A chuckle -escaped from the throat, but it was quickly caught and punished. "Not at all, Mr. Jones. 'We' are an organization devoted to eliminating chea—that is, we try to maintain the element of chance in our Las Vegas casinos."

I shook my head. "No, I don't under—"

"We own that casino you won in, Mr. Jones."

"Uh—so?"

"You robbed us, Mr. Jones. The manager, who is not one of us, suspected, but he could not prove it. Mr. Coy, though, informed us of what had transpired and we were angered. The family had to insist on reparations."

Family? I panicked. The ropes seemed to tighten suddenly, and it was hard to breathe. "Hey, no, I didn't—look I—"

"You took ten thousand dollars from us, Mr. Jones," the voice hummed relentlessly. "We wanted it back—"

"Take it! !" I burst out. "It's in the suitcase. A check. Rip it up. It's yours. Leave me alone, please. Take your money. I didn't cheat—just go away . . ." I was very close to tears.

"—with interest," he finished. "Huh?"

He explained. "Our Mr. Coy devised a scheme that would get our money back, Mr. Jones, and allow us simultaneously to reprimand an irritating independent."

"Coy is a—"

"We are an equal opportunity employer, Mr. Jones," there was not the slightest trace of humor in the words, "and Mr. Coy is a valued operative."

"Um—so?"

"So the scheme worked and the case is closed. The independent has been chastised, you have been punished, and we have our money back. The casino check, by the way, is still in your suitcase." I felt him fumbling with the ropes on my hands. "Everything is settled, Mr. Jones. All debts have been paid."

I was confused. "You're not going to kill me?"

"Not at all, Mr. Jones. Ah, there." My hands were free. "You should be able to finish untying yourself after I leave. No, Mr. Jones, you're quite free to go."

"You're not worried about me? About my striking back, or cheating you again? About my power?"

"We were—for a while," he admitted.

"So?"

"So we took you to a doctor while you were asleep, Mr. Jones."

My fingers were scurrying, tracing the heavy pattern of bandages crisscrossed over my eyes. My voice started to tremble. "So?"

I heard the latch click shut. I was left alone in my darkness.