

# FRIENDS AND HELPERS

A.N.D

Peter put the article down with a sigh. They had really done it. Despite his testimony, despite the efforts of the best lawyer the Chase money could buy, Jacob Wells had been blacklisted. Merciful God, how long was this reign of terror to last?

He went to Jacob's apartment that night to help and offer sympathy - and discovered an empty room and a landlord proud to state that he had "no truck with them Commies." He went to Margaret's then, hoping that her father had unbent enough to help her husband - and interrupted Mr. Chase in his negotiations with the local bishop about annulling their marriage. Margaret herself was gone, packed off to France. And Jacob Wells was nowhere to be found.

The next couple of months were a blur. Peter buried himself in his new practice, hoping and praying. Hoping that he would find Jacob soon, hoping that Jacob was all right. Praying that he wouldn't find his friend's body in any of his nightly visits to the local morgues, praying that the House Committee wouldn't come after him too. It was a bad time, and Christmas was even worse. Throughout medical school he and Jacob had spent the holidays together. How could he celebrate now, not knowing where his friend was? There was a cold snap Christmas Eve, and Peter found his imagination stuffed not with visions of sugar plums, but horrific views of Jacob. abandoned and frozen.

How could such a promising career come to this? Peter remembered a night long ago, a night two undergraduates had spent solving all the world's problems over beer in the bar. Jacob had been full of ideals, and the more practical Peter had finally suggested that if Jacob wanted to live in the best of all possible worlds, he should open his clinic in Shangri-La.

Utopia was very far away that Christmas.

If Jacob did freeze, the body was never discovered. Peter found himself cutting his nightly trips to the morgues and flophouses back to weekly trips. then monthly. Finally he gave up altogether. Wherever Jacob was, Peter couldn't find him. In the meantime, his own life went on. His practice picked up, making him too busy to worry about the fate of his vanished friend, although he did sometimes catch himself wishing, late at night, that he could share a new discovery, or talk over an interesting complication with his old companion.

Winter turned to spring and Jacob was no more than a sad memory. Peter was just closing up his offices for the night when the hesitant knock came at the door. His secretary had already left, so the doctor was forced to open it himself and face...

"JACOB!!!" he shouted, pulling the tattered figure in from the hall. "Jacob, where have you been? I drove myself crazy looking for you!"

After an enthusiastic hug, he held his friend at arm's length, getting his first good look. Jacob's clothes were ragged and patched, and smelled slightly of cement dust and mildew. But there was a smile on his face, and pride shining from his eyes. Whatever he'd been doing, wherever he'd been, Jacob Wells had been bent but not broken.

"Peter, it's so good to see you again. I've been afraid to come, but I need your help..."

"Anything. Peter announced with decision. "I don't care what it is. You need it, you got it."

Jacob grinned back. "I was hoping you'd say that. I have a list..."

Peter took the crumpled piece of paper and glanced it over. "Sulfides, antibiotics, bandages... Jacob, what is this? Why do you need so much of these things? Are you setting up a black market pharmacy?"

"Actually, I'm opening my own practice. And it's right where you told me to open it, too."

Peter waited, but he didn't elaborate. "Jacob, what are you talking about? Please, you can tell me. Where have you been? What have you been doing? And, most importantly, what can I do to help?"

"Are you sure you want to know? A great many good people depend on my keeping that secret. Do you want the responsibility?"

Peter took a deep breath. "Jacob, we've been friends for years. I know you wouldn't get involved in anything wrong or evil. Whatever it is, I want to help. Please. let me?"

"All right. I've found Shangri-La, Peter, and it's right here in the city."

"WHAT???"

"It's true. Beneath these streets are catacombs no one remembers, warm, dry caves that are providing a safe haven for me and others like me. We're building homes down there, libraries, everything we need to create a world of our own. But we need materials. Can you help us? Will you help us get what we need?"

Peter glanced again over the list in his hands. "My pleasure, Jacob." He looked up into his friend's eyes. "Whatever you do, Jacob, whatever happens, know that I'm willing to be a helper."

END